

The panorama of cultures reflected in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri, a renowned Pulitzer prize-winning immigrant writer born to the Bengali parentage in London in 1967. Her first novel, *The Namesake* was published in 2003 that reflects the immigrant life experiences and identities concerning the ties and clashes between the families.

The study elaborates on the issues of displacement reverberated in the lives of the characters of the novel, *The Namesake*, and this tendency is shown inherent in the central character Gogol Ganguli. To live and settle in America, he assimilates the culture, nationality, and belongingness, and in due course of finding a new self- identity, otherwise called putting on fake personalities, he loses himself. Moreover, he started realizing that running away from reality will only improvise his agitations of both the Indian heritage and the American lifestyle.

The study connects extensively with the transnational world to the world of cultures and identities where the people have a choice of their own to live and settle in their lives. The people

in post-colonial times opt their own life the way they want to live or abandon their home for any reason. They are truly not forced by war or colonization to aspire to live under any hegemonic condition. However, this freedom leads to the later consequences and could not possibly be controlled while they adapt an unknown culture and the new identities where the experiences are often predictable. These cultural experiences, displacement, and even diasporic communities are turned out to be the international obligation that is welcomed. The quest for identity is the fundamental question that involves the self with its interlining factors of cultures, especially for immigrants

Jhumpa Lahiri, a renowned Pulitzer prize-winning immigrant writer born to the Bengali parentage in London in 1967. She along with her parents later relocated to the United States where she pursued her studies. Her extensive knowledge of her parents' land, however, she never lived or settled there, forced her to write on the themes of Indian – American identities and Diasporas. The central idea of which is remarkably noted in her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of nine stories published in 1999. As observed by Ann Marie Alfonso Ferero's work, 'Immigrant motherhood and transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri 's fiction, "[n] early all of these stories deal with the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States, rendering the difficulties of making personal connections across cultural boundaries and sometimes even within families palpable to readers"(852)

Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake* was published in 2003 that reflects the immigrant life experiences and identities concerning the ties and clashes between the families. Apart from these, yet another most noted work, *Unaccustomed Earth*, published in 2008 brings in the thematic content of immigration and the depth driven glimpses of the lives of different characters. Generally in all her works, the experiences of living in exile, with no

communications, no belongingness to anywhere, the stressed relationships, and different perspectives of society especially the Indian immigrants who settle in the United States are brought to light.

Natalie Friedman has written in " From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* that scholars and critics have dubbed her [Lahiri] a documentalist of the immigrant experience"(111)

Lahiri's prose work is filled with poignant anxiety, an ability to build the mesmerizing effect of emotions linked to the different characters. In one of the 2012 interviews with *The New York Times* about her writing process. Lahiri has said, " I hear sentences as I'm staring out the window or chopping vegetables, or waiting on a subway platform alone". She further stated, " they are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, handed to me in no particular order, with no discernible logic, I only sense that they are part of the thing".

The study elaborates on the issues of displacement reverberated in the lives of the characters of the novel, *The Namesake*, and this tendency is shown inherent in the central character, Gogol Ganguli. To live and settle in America, he assimilates the culture, nationality, and belongingness, and in due course of finding a new self- identity, otherwise called putting on fake personalities, he loses himself. Moreover, he started realizing that running away from reality will only improvise his agitations of both the Indian heritage and the American lifestyle.

It has been a great consideration since human migration evolved and with it, the changes brought in with every aspect of life have paved the way for different experiences discussed in the contemporary world through the academic platform. The diversified fields that have taken large

consideration to its rampant effect are politics and economy, sociology, identity and subjectivity, language, gender and sexuality, and literary studies.

The study connects extensively with the transnational world to the world of cultures and identities where the people have a choice of their own to live and settle in their lives. The people in post-colonial times opt their own life the way they want to live or abandon their home for any reason. They are truly not forced by war or colonization to aspire to live under any hegemonic condition. However, this freedom leads to the later consequences and could not possibly be controlled while they adapt an unknown culture and the new identities where the experiences are often predictable. These cultural experiences, displacement, and even diasporic communities are turned out to be the international obligation that is welcomed. There has been rapid progress in the field of tourism, the globalization, the internet facilities, the international cultural festivals and sports events besides the mingling of the people in the overseas education that have played out a distinctive role in the prominent transnational development. Transnational literature or criticism constitutes different trends that are discussed in contemporary times. The novel theories like the inter and cross-cultural understanding get originated as the new discourse targeting the eating and living habits that do not comply with the national behavior due to the global technology and fastest available network around the world. Concerning this, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen stated in his introduction to *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literature*: "As most people have experienced in one way or another, globalization is no illusion but real, and propelled by strong forces-particularly those of economies and the media and for better and for worse"(1)

In elaboration with the transnational and cross-cultural studies, the themes of migration and displacement are considered as the new perspectives in this constantly and rigorously

changing world. Adapting to change with the new ideologies, embracing the peculiar eccentricities and differences, the immigrants have taken up to live with the new situations as they started to inadvertently neglect the ethnic past over some time. With the new lease of life, finding themselves in a different country with diverse people, the immigrants undergo a lot of turmoil and stressed experiences in their relationship with the people and society.

The chosen novel for study, *The Namesake* contributes to every day and the tangible experiences of real life. The quest for identity is the fundamental question that involves the self with its interlining factors of cultures, especially for immigrants. In 'Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity', Jola Skulj affirms, "The problem of cultural identity involves the question of the self and culture. In other words, this means reflecting on the essence of culture itself and the implication that there is a reasonable motive of self-questioning ". Here, the self implies the sole governing body that is subjected to one's self.

She reiterates further as given:

Understanding of identity was a result of the romantic interpretation of the self as the inner reality of a given subject. It revealed in itself the concept of the subject as an absolute and autonomous being and denied any decisive or obligatory references outside oneself and identified itself only with its imminent reality or with its immanent validity. (2)

The value of self, however, dominates the opposing force that is so-called; other' that suggests the implied existence in a comprehensible manner. Just as stated by Michael Bakhtin: "the self is the gift of the other" (qtd. In Skulj3) As Skulj puts it: "No cultural identity can be identified or analyzed only on its national ground.... 'other ness' is an irrevocably cultural reality. The other does not necessarily endanger its selfness or its principles of identity"(2). Of this, the

Indian immigrants seen in *The Namesake* struggle with the ethnic and the foreign culture. Those who were born out of Indian parents and clubbed to live in the American household are facing turmoils differently and strangely. Just as Natalie Friedman discusses on the immigrant children in her renowned work, "From Hybrids to Tourists: children of immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," they can only define home as the place where their two cultures merge the literal and the metaphysical location is in their parent's house... Their behavior is akin to that of tourists in their home countries."(115)

The so-called identity is perhaps termed as cultural identification. The first-generation Asian Americans who complied with 2 cultures are disjointed and distorted as they are unable to comprehend where they belong to, who they are and this consciousness or the conventional wisdom taking them nowhere and it is denoted as a kind of curse. The confusion arises not only due to the acceptance of multiple, cultural identity of the modern American elite but also the viewpoint tends to be affected. The sole cause for the unhappiness arising from identifying oneself while happiness is assured with the lack of identity and this ideology is changed when the question is put forth as given, "Do you realize, sir, who you are talking to?" (Gogol 263). This is seemingly the non-American idea that claims for the identity.

The novel is engaged with the mental attributes, perceptions, and the experiences of the four major characters; Ashima, Ashoke, and their son Gogol Ganguli and his wife, Moushumi. Among everyone, Ashoke has a balanced character that empowers him to adapt the life and culture in a foreign country while his children experience it in a quite different way. The study probes the idea of cultural displacement shared by the characters of the novel as it is unique in its treatment.

Further, the explicit ambiguity is elaborated while drawing the train incident that becomes a turning point in the life of Ashoke Gonguli, Gogol's father. He decides to move to America after he met a stranger on the train who influenced him with his experience of living in England who said, "Do yourself a favor....pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will never regret it. One day it will be too late" (Lahiri16). Although it was a very short period, he met him as the man met with the tragic train accident and died. However, the suggestion instilled in his mind until he left for America with his wife is quite significant. It was a remarkable incident as the book he was holding at the time of rescue from the train incident was of a Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol. Due to the strong memory it holds, he later decided to name his son by the name, Gogol as it featured a fond relic of his personal life. Apart from holding this past as worth noting, the displacement began since he could not move from his bed for 2 years due to the tragic train incident. He aspired to move out of India not because he wanted to obtain wealth but to escape. As the lines say: he imagined not only walking but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he had nearly died. (Lahiri20) His death brought a turning point in the lives of the other characters in the novel in both physical and emotional terms. On his loss, Ashima and Gogol learned to become more concerned about his family and became more obsessed with Indian identity. He readily agreed to marry Moushami as per his mother's advice as this girl belonged to the Indian network of his parents settled in America. Yet another remarkable incident that holds the crux of the story is his waiting to receive the Indian name from his Indian family when his son was born newly in America. This shows that how particular he is to follow and abide by the Indian tradition and culture as the new name they would keep, must be chosen by the eldest of the family, the grandmother in India. As the idea reflects here in these lines:

[T]o his grandfather who told him to read the Russian writer, and whom he is going to see at the time of the train wreck. There is an identity here that transcends culture, as generations of Indians find a sense of life's essence in an English translation of Russian work. (109)

Meanwhile, he suggests the name, Gogol that acted as a savior for Ashoke out of the tragic incident. The implied meaning of Ashoke in Indian is "he who transcends grief" (Lahiri 26) subsequently, the grief is transcended from Ashoke to his son Gogol. He later changes the name of his son Gogol to Nikhil, this act further improvises the identity of his son's to transcultural identity. Ashoke recapitulates the idea of his journey in America with Gogol as "[r]emember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go." (Lahiri 187)

Ashoke meets his fatal death in the middle of the story narration. This is explicit that the train experience has given a strong impact throughout his life and that lingers even after his death. Just as Akaky Akakievich, the protagonist of Nikolai Gogol's, 'The Overcoat', who relatively acted as a savior emblem of activities and displacement, Ashoke also shares the same affiliations as given in these lines: " Just as Akaky's ghost haunted the final pages, so did it haunt a place deep in Ashoke's soul, shedding light on all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world." (Lahiri 14)

Gogol's girlfriends, Maxine and Moushami play a significant role in defining the identity of Gogol while the characteristic of Maxine, an American girl lacks the dual game of identity and has the contrasting nature in terms of the multiple identities. However, Gogol's wife, Moushami is the whole spectrum of likeness to Gogol himself, as a successor to Indian immigrants but dissimilar in her practical outlook of identity. Nevertheless, all the characters

share the inherent bond of networking with Gogol, and the trajectory on the theme of the displacement is well treated in the novel.

The story projects with Ashima, not until later the reader realizes that the central focus is on Gogol and namesake, Ashima's pregnancy is affected on her arrival to America. Her roots in India are inexplicable and unconvincing but she forces herself to adapt to the unfamiliar severity that the foreign land would offer her. As stated here: "American seconds tick on top of her pulse point...she calculates the Indian time on her hands." (Lahiri 4) Ashima recounts Gogol's birth and her struggle: "motherhood in a foreign land" (6) in the absence of any relative's care and adaptability of a strange land. Nevertheless, the contradictory line is drawn between the meaning of her name in local that is "she who's limitless, without borders" (26) and her general idea prescribed in the commencing of the novel. She alone assimilates the new transcultural behavior noticed at the end of the novel. As Alfonso-Ferero speculated, "the uncertain young woman we encounter in the novel's opening pages attempting unsuccessfully to recreate a favorite Indian snack in her Massachusetts kitchen is transformed through her role as an immigrant mother and wife into a transnational figure" (852)

Ashima's displacement with American society is distinguished by 2 different cultures: America and India: quite differently and equally independent are men and women found in America, on the other hand, India is enriched with cultures and customs that are quite peculiar in its way and eventually effects the Indian ideology with it. Most specifically the different role the sexes play in society is distinctly enumerated and by and large the whole Indian cultural system is quite engaging and open to discussion. Ashima's exceptional spirituality and Indianness is well-established when she throws numerous parties and invites Indian families in America. Her Indian attributes of culture and customs as Alfonso-Ferero puts it here:

The distinction between the material and the spiritual in the domain of culture is essential to how nationalism attempts to resolve the women's question... The division between ghar- the home, an inherently spiritual and female space-and bahir- the outside world, which is inherently male and dominated by material pursuits-determines not only the division of labor in terms of how the Indian home is run but more importantly it positions women as the guardians and propagations of Indian culture. In this manner, Indian nationalism elevates the condition of the middle-class women to a goddess-like status... (853-4)

Ashima starts living the way a typical American woman lives. This further strengthens when she finds a job as a librarian and gets in touch with the American colleagues and eventually assimilates every bit of their lives and she is more confident, independent, and an experienced woman. She even discharges all her husband's duties except that changing house which she could only do after his death. She realizes that she is not just an Indian but also an American. When her husband dies, she decides to live both in India and America. Hence Ashima's process of transformation made her transnational too, "[t]rue to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri 276)

Yet again Alfonso- Forero shares the same view: "Ashima's conception of what constitutes homeland has been altered to take into account the role the United States has played in shaping her family's identity and by definition, her own" (857)

Moushumi, the wife of Gogol acts as the most influential and substantial character in the story in terms of the identities she owns. Although she was born to the Indian parents, her diverse background and nationalities were closely connected with her life to that of her parents' past living and settling in different countries like England, America, and France. Her complex

attributes of nature and personality are in a way dealt in the quest for self-identity which is not constant due to her nature of living diversified habits.

She prefers to identify herself as an Indian as she takes a decision to break up with Graham, her former fiancé and she feels she can't withstand him "reject[ing] her family heritage (Lahiri 217) subsequently she criticizes the India way of thinking and living while she notices the people around. As discussed in these lines "she hated the way they would talk of the details of her wedding, the menu and the different colors of saris would wear for the different ceremonies as if it were a fixed certainty in her life." (Lahiri 213)

Moushami recalls her England life in America as her identity is distinguished as an English person. Just as the lines express the idea: "she speaks with nostalgia of the years her family had spent in England... She tells him [Gogol] that she hated moving to America, that she had held on to her British accent for as long as she could". (Lahiri 212)

After which in America, she failed to maintain the identity and finally settled in Paris: "Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge. She approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever." (Lahiri214)

When she becomes Gogol's wife, she is reluctant to change her identity as she feels changing her name would only make her somebody and thus she retains the same. She is fond of what she is and her identity is and does not desire to change it.

While her past relationship ruined her completely, she, at last, took refuge in one of the camps by settling in Paris and this solely was her mother's advice to marry Gogol, thus her

refuge ends with having an affair with Gogol. Just as this line describes, "The affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day." (Lahiri 266)

Conclusion:

The characters in Lahiri's story culminates in multiple complex identities. Further, the alarming tension gets created due to the coalescing nationalities and eventually, each character is quite obsessed with finding its unique self, in other words, the question of their identity. The characters live in their different world but share distinctly with one another, like the experience, struggles, and the vast identity-related issue for the Indian culture and the American culture, and the adaptability of the unfamiliar and quite new identity is well elaborated in the whole novel.

"The kaleidoscopic quality of the world geography, its conditional elasticity and flexibility, leave the contemporary subject at a loss on shaky ground and struggling to find his or her bearings in a world where new territorialities have emerged at the crossroads between the actual and the virtual." (Kral75)

Francois Kral elaborates on the matter of displacement as the result of the migrant's struggle of identity. The quest for identity ends no whereas this act is further chased one behind the other leading to the other aggressive alternative and is displaced by being trapped between 2 cultures. Kral states that The Namesake opens its virtual being as the lines described here: "us to envisage the long -term consequences of the virtual everywhere... which may well result in a tragic nowhere."(75)

The protagonist, Gogol Ganguli is never free from the name, the namesake, and the identity. The title of the novel aptly justifies its attribute. As Victor Brombert posits, "[b]y implication one is never totally free of an overcoat, there is no such thing as a pristine and

authentic identity which might then be covered by a free choice of cultural, personal attire, habits norms." (qtd in Heinze 197-98)

Gogol's troubled identity and displacement during his lifetime elicit his yearning for freedom. His self seemingly suffers due to the cultural captivity that is deep-rooted by the intricacies of his parent's origin and his failure to seek peace in the American culture is indiscriminately associated with his inborn innate desire for freedom. Being fully responsible to adapt the change of culture and become the so-called American does not rescue him from the distress it causes to his psychology and neither he is rescued by the Indian identity of his parents as he is extensively imprisoned from the either of the sides. The parallel trajectory would only lead to the contrary and opposite facet to the theme of displacement. While in the pursuit of fixed identity, the boundaries created in the surrounding is collaterally opposed by its nature and the fixed identity becomes quite restrictive due to the lack of it.

The theory irrevocably elaborates on the binary opposites, like the 'self' and the 'other'. From this perspective for Gogol, the self is India and the other represents America but due to the distorted identity, his self-representing India stays apart or in better words outside of him. However, the adaptability of these different identities is unsustainable and not fixed. As Charles Altieri puts it, "the effort to construct identity gets transformed into a celebration of participating in multiple identities and sophisticated theory provides a self-congratulatory alternative to the kind of cultural work that requires aligning the self with specific roles and fealties" (qtd. In Heinze 199)

The displacement sustains multiple choices. However, the restricting of one choice arose another problem, and with it the choice that again leads to the limitation. Thus the whole concept

of emancipation evokes from the sense of displacement, well features in the novel, *The Namesake*, magnificent artwork of defining identities.

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