

# Abstruseness of Identities and Belongingness in Jhumpa Lahiri' S Namesake

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## ABSTRACT

*The novel deals with the dilemma of an immigrant's sense of identity and belongingness in a foreign land. With the increase in globalization, more and more Indians are drifting towards developed nations like United States and various other countries on account of greater progress and various lucrative accomplishments. But, there they are overpowered with the feeling of alienation and marginalization in context of adjustment and assimilation of new culture which is completely different from their own. Thus, they are in constant dilemma of sticking to their old values with least interaction with the majority or to break the barriers and get assimilated with the overwhelming new one. The novel probes into the inner psyche of characters and tries to bring out stirring and teasing sense of identity by clash of cultures. In the flat world, multiculturalism results in "the Melting Pot" and "Salad Bowl". To conclude, the novel is a diasporic work unraveling the journey of a Bengali family of Indian origin in USA in the light of cultural dilemma.*

## KEYWORDS:

**Diaspora, Abstruseness of identities, Globalization, Multi-Culturalism, Cultural dilemma, Alienation**

## Biographical Sketch:

Jhumpa Lahiri (born as name Nilanjana Sudeshna) was born in 1967, in London, and raised in Rhode Island. She is a graduate of Barnard College, did her M.A. at Boston University, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. Her debut collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003), a major national best seller, was named the New York Magazine Book of the year. *Unaccustomed Earth*, published in 2008, is her latest collection of short stories.

Jhumpa Lahiri largely writes about the human condition of Indian Diaspora in the U.S.A. In the novel she delves deep to explain the labyrinths of her characters, to explore, psychologically the intricacies and complexities of human relationships particularly of a class of characters who live in the west but with parents born and raised in India.

### Namesake

Literature, as a product of culture and society becomes the source which brings into light the global scenario and multi-culturalism. The paper focuses on the dilemma of identity and belongingness in the world of globalization. It is a diasporic work which explores the identity crisis, racial and cultural conflicts, ethnicity, sense

of belongingness, loneliness and alienation among the immigrants.

### Aspects of Diasporic writing:

Diasporic literature, quite like Immigrant literature, mirrors a 'double vision', at once of 'yearning backward' and looking forward. Dr. N.F. Salat rightly says, "The Diaspora as belonging to everywhere and nowhere at the same time, just like an "unanchored soul" (Pal, 2004). Regarding the diasporic experience, Adesh Pal says:

The first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From the second generation onward ties with the homeland gradually gets replaced by those with the adopted country. Food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs of individual community etc become the markers of identity. These are retained, discarded and adopted differently at different times and places. (Pal, 2004)

Literature should remain the faithful representation of contemporary society. Majority of diaspora writers write about their own experiences, the problems that they have to face while settling on the new land. The writers of the Indian Diaspora like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vasanji, Bapsi Sidhwa, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri have explored the identity crisis, racial and cultural conflicts, ethnicity, sense of belongingness, loneliness and alienation among the immigrants. Diasporic writing, a post- colonial scenario, elaborate issues such as marginalization, cultural insularity, social disparity, racism, ethnicity etc. Oscillating between the attractions of home and those from the new, the migrants wage a constant psychic battle:

The old world is replete with myth and tradition; the new order is proliferate with

thirst for freedom and independence. They are in a dilemma as to whether they should remain in a ghetto of old values with least interaction with the majority or break the barriers and get assimilated with the overwhelming new culture.(Pal,2004)

### Cultural Identity and Globalization:

Identity literally means a set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.

Before globalization, cultural identity was something people simply had as an undisturbed existential possession, an inheritance, a benefit of traditional long dwelling, of continuity with the past. Identity, then, like language, was not just a description of cultural belonging; it was a sort of collective treasure of local communities. It was fragile and something which needed to be protected and preserved. Into this world of manifold, discrete, but to various degrees vulnerable, cultural identities there suddenly burst the corrosive power of globalization. Globalization has swept like a flood tide through the world's diverse cultures, destroying stable localities-traditions, customs and thus identities, displacing people, bringing a market driven, branded and homogenization of cultural experience thus obliterating the differences between, locality defined cultures which had constituted our identities. In this process, the strong Capitalist cultures of developed nations like those in the West and specifically, the United States - saw a sort of standardized version of their cultures exported worldwide. It was the weaker cultures of the developing world that have been most threatened.

## Plot and various Aspects of Novel:

The novel deals with the story of two generations of an Indian Bengali family and their struggle to acculturate themselves in the Immigrant country. It revolves around the life of Ashima and Ashok Ganguli a young couple, each born & brought up in Calcutta and immigrated to the United States and their children, Gogol and Sonia who are born and brought up in America. Much of the tension in the novel is dependent upon the generation and cultural gap between the parents and children. It is through the experience of each character as an immigrant that the readers come to know about the major difficulties which a person undergoes when he finds himself in an alien country. Besides this, the novel deals with the issue of the loss of traditions, customs and conventions which new hybrid generation is gradually undergoing with the overpowering influences of new culture surrounding them.

All the characters in the novel deal with these problems differently. The novel begins in 1968 with the birth of a son to Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, whom they name Gogol. For Ashima, motherhood in a foreign land is much difficult, where everybody is a stranger and there is nobody to take care of her. She could not forget her relatives in India and continuously longs for them. Her love for her family and motherland, influences her to create a close-knit web of immigrant friends. This group practices Indian customs, speaks the Bengali language, and in many respects, becomes a substitute family for the vast collection of relatives back in India. But for Ashima, the close relations between the immigrants become an excuse to avoid the customs of American life. For Ashima and Ashoke, the question of disregarding their elder's wishes is impossible whereas the situation reverses after a few years when their children follow the American

tradition. Ashima is reluctant to drive, she insists on wearing Indian clothing and eating Indian food, and for many years she lives without American friends. To a large degree, her life is consumed by recreating Indian culture in America. After the death of her husband, after the divorce of Gogol and after Sonia decides to marry Ben, she decides to stay for six months in Calcutta and six months in America. Though gradually, she tries to imbibe certain western tendencies in her character but could not drag them to completion. She tries her best to lead an undisturbed life in her husband's absence as he plans to spend nine months at a small University somewhere outside Cleveland. She tries her best to keep herself engrossed in various things like reading out all the old letters which her parents had written to her, starts working at a public library, grows up friendship with American women, who work at library, watches television and leafs through books and makes cards for her children and husband and other relatives in her spare time:

At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind. "It's not such a big deal," her children tell her. "Everyone should live on their own at some point." But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill she hates returning in the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking upon another. (Jhumpa Lahiri, 161)

She feels the pangs of loneliness, despite of keeping herself so busy she fails to shed this kind of feeling:

From time to time, she looks out the window, at the lilac sky of early evening, vividly tinged with two parallel stripes of pink. She looks up at the phone on the wall, wishing it would ring..... She continues to work in the silent house, in the wandering

light, not bothering to rest, though her wrist has begun to ache, not bothering to get up and turn on the lamp over the table, or the lights on the lawn or in any of the other rooms, until the telephone rings. (167)

Thus, even after spending so many years in an alien country, she could not shed her Indianness in other words, her wifely dependence upon her husband:

Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their need to keep their distancing from her; is something she will never understand. (166)

She fails to adapt herself to a culture which is devoid of true feelings and emotions. Now that after the death of her husband, she has decided to go back to her native land, she is not able to detach herself completely from that place where she has spend so much years of her life:

For thirty three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together to see old movies at the Brattle, teaching her to cook the food Sonia had complained of eating as a child. She will miss the opportunity to drive, as she sometimes does on her way home from library, to the University, past the engineering building where her husband once worked. She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (279)

Ashoke: wanted to provide a better life for his newly born son by earning a doctorate degree from a prestigious American

University. In naming his son, he pays the greatest homage to Western culture because Gogol is a representative of European high culture. As a University Professor, he was readily accepted in the academic community. But at home, he behaves like a typical Indian husband, fastidious about his clothing and food. For him, memories of life in India are less peaceful. The memories of that fateful night when he met a train accident and nearly escaped death, influenced him to leave India and ultimately lead him to choose an unusual name for his son. Still, Ashok, like his faithful wife, embraces his past in India and recognizes that it plays a significant role in his life as a father and an American.

Gogol: Gogol spends much of the time in the novel, attempting to eradicate his heritage. This first becomes evident when Lahiri describes how Gogol and Sonia resent childhood trips to India during which they are forced to interact with family and give up the comforts of American life. Just like Ashima and Ashoke could not assimilate the culture of America, at the same time their children Gogol and Sonia could not adjust themselves during their visits to India. As Gogol grows older, his desire to escape his own past becomes for pronounced. When it comes to apply for college, for instance, Gogol turns his back on his father's alma mater and accepts a position at Yale. While in college, meanwhile, he refuses to study an "acceptable" immigrant subjects like chemistry, engineering or biology, preferring instead to pursue an interest in architecture. Further, he hates the name 'Gogol' given by his father. He was named 'Gogol' by his father due to certain deeply personal and emotional reasons which he decides to change to 'Nikhil' because he feels his name as awkward, weird, irrelevant and ludicrous to his ears, "At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a

shirt he was been forced permanently to wear". (J.L,76)

He moves away from his family, his mother and father because somewhere deep inside his heart he does not want himself to be a part of that old, traditional culture which his parents constantly reminds him off. He wanted to enjoy his life just like his other American friends. He was in a way attached to their culture, their way of living where children are free to take decisions regarding anything in their life. He had developed a kind of fascination for their style of living dating with girls, going to late night parties, drinking, smoking, listening to Jazz etc. When he meets Maxine's family the Ratliffs, he comes in contact with this kind of life. He observes the kind of frankness that exists between the children and the parents which he never witnessed with his parents. He comes to know of Maxine's past her stayings with her boyfriend without marriage and that also within the knowledge of her parents. The free expression of love between Gerald and Lydia in front of everyone including their daughter:

Gogol is reminded that in all his life he has never witnessed a single moment of physical affection between his parents. Whatever love exists between them is an utterly private, uncelebrated thing. (138)

Further, Maxine's parents do not express objection regarding Gogol's staying at their house and sleeping in their daughter's room, without marriage. This kind of life, Gogol could only dream of had he continued to live with his parents. Therefore, he decides to move away from his parents. But at certain point in the novel he finds himself in a state of dilemma. He wanted to be a part of that culture which he has always cherished and felt with pride but at the same time, he failed to detach himself completely from that culture which he had inherited from his parents. Though he tried his best to get away with it but was not

successful. When he develops an affair with a girl named Ruth, he does not dare reveal this thing to his parents. He cannot imagine that his parents will entertain any such type of relationship with a girl like her:

As much as he longs to see her, he cannot picture her at the kitchen table on Pemberton Road, in her jeans and her bulky sweater, politely eating his mother's food. He cannot imagine being with her in the house where he is still Gogol. (115)

Further, his very concept of being a part of this free culture shocks when he comes to know about his wife's infidelity:

He felt the chill of her secrecy, numbing him, like a poison spreading quickly through his veins. He'd felt this way on only one other occasion, the night he had sat in the car with his father and learned the reason for his name. That night he'd experienced the same bewilderment, was sickened in the same way. But he felt none of the tenderness that he had felt for his father, only the anger, the humiliation of having been deceived. (282)

Up to the point of having affairs with those women who were already engaged before with various men, he was indifferent but when the question is regarding his wife he retracts to that very orthodox religion of his parents. Similarly, for his wife Moushumi also the thing which is more painful is not that she is having an extramarital affair but the thing that if she is the only woman in her family ever to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful.

Even with all his efforts to the contrary, he failed to ignore the memories of his past, his name, his parents, and his Indian heritage. As these are the things that have shaped his individual being, his identity. The title of the novel *The Namesake* reflects the struggle Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his

unusual name. Earlier, he couldn't understand his father's sentiments behind the name 'Gogol'. On his 14th birthday his father presents him the book 'The short stories of Nikolai Gogol', but does not tell him about the train accident and his narrow escape from death. Later on, when he comes to know about the truth of him being named so. It had a profound effect on Gogol. When the dynamics of his own family change after the death of his father, Gogol slowly begins to realize that he cannot simply walk away from who he is. He opens towards a new understanding of his own rich culture which till now he did not try to understand. The novel is a portrayal of the conflict in his mind regarding the two cultures which ultimately broadens his cultural horizon and make him see his parents culture with love and respect. Towards the end he realizes the value of his Indian identity.

Thus, all the protagonists in the novel feel themselves to be entrapped in an enigma. Though they are savaged by an alien culture threatening to change their identity yet they remain attached to their roots somewhere. They try their level best to imbibe the alien culture in order to become a part of it but they fail in detaching themselves from their native culture, with which they are born with. Question of identity has remained a source of conflict not only in today's global world of hybrid cultures but in past also leading to battles and wars. The process of globalization has not only unsettled people and cultures but has given birth to a new breed of people with rootless identities. The children of the immigrants are called "ABCD" – American Born Confused Desi. They are totally confused and this in-between-ness can leave them with uncertainty about their own role in society neither Indian nor American. As they try to adopt foreign culture it becomes a threat to their native culture and identity. They are treated as Indian on foreign land and as foreigner on their motherland. They try to

erect a false wall between the new culture and their native culture, just like the protagonists in the novel.

The novel deals with the clashes between the two different worlds that Ganguli family simultaneously inhabits. This incorporation of new culture among the diasporic people is not based on the principle of harmony or unity in diversity but it is mostly based on the false notions of confusing identities. No doubt, the thought of 'Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam' is ingrained in Indian Philosophy. So multi culturalism should not be regarded as a threat but a part and parcel of the life of all human beings living on the earth, reaching the great ideals of world peace, harmony, and universal fraternity. As Gandhiji said:

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. (Gandhi, 1921)

For diasporic people home is a very, fluid concept which changes its meaning along with the prevailing mindset of the person but in any case they should not forget their real identity and culture which are the base and foundation of his being, his true self. Thus, culture is inseparable from a person and one should never think of getting rid of it by considering it as something inferior after coming in contact with a newer and advanced culture. The identity of an individual is constantly affected by society. So he cannot be opaque for newer influences. He should be selective in his choices as identity is something one has to discover through a process of reflections and negotiations. Let the fresh breeze sway and touch the blooms of a garden and enjoy its bliss and freshness. In other words, people belonging to one culture or land should learn and enjoy the good aspects of new culture without the fear of getting lost in it.

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