

## **Multiculturalism and Cultural Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'**

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### **Abstract**

*Jhumpa Lahiri being an Indian American author, expose the problems of Indian immigrants adjusting in an alien land for their survival. This article interrogates the cultural identity through the selected novels of Jhumpa Lahira, as she is one of the most significant writers and excels in writing skills. Her fiction is not simply a fiction relatively it is a real documentaries of Diaspora community which deals with the real story. 'The Namesake' exemplifies such an issue of adaptation, adjustment and accommodation of the Indian people who settled in diverse part of the world. Lahiri's writing deals with simple language which enables the readers to easily understandable and her characters are often portrayed Indian migrants to America.*

*The migrated character struggles between the cultural aspects of their homeland and to the adopted place. Jhumpa's fiction is an autobiographical work and frequently draws her own experience in her novels. The narrative technique in 'The Namesake' revolves around the problems faced by Bengali couple who have come to create a new life for themselves in the University of Suburbs of Boston. Ashima celebrates the religious festivals and try to attach herself with her religions. Gogol and Sonia born and brought up totally in the West finds themselves alienated and struggle to follow the culture.*

**Key word:** *alienation, cultural dilemma, Diaspora, Identity crisis, struggles, nostalgia*

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## **Introduction**

Nilanjana Sudeshna, known as “Jhumba “Lahiri a well known author and one of the most significant writers of Indian Diaspora in the present time. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for her short story collection ‘*Interpreter of Maladies*’ in (1999) along with her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003). Jhumba Lahiri belongs to the second category among all the Indian American writers basically deals with Indian culture and tradition, believes India as an exotic land for a living at any circumstances. Her first novel reformed into a popular film by its same name explores the problems of Indian immigrants adjusting in an alien land for their survival.

## **Cultural Identity**

Indian immigrant writers in America usually express their views in Indian consciousness based on the cultural, traditional and psychological aspects. The writers emerged to be distinctive transnational communities and try to build a bridge between the nations. Cultural aspect “consists of the behaviors, beliefs, and other characteristics that are common to the members of a particular people or a society”. Most of the immigrant writers exemplify their experience on hand is almost authentic. Jhumba Lahiri’s novels reveal the cultural identity of the Indian who settled in America and balance their identity between the countries. This is being evidence in ‘*The Namesake*’ and it depicts the cultural struggles of the immigrant people.

### **Jhumba Lahiri’s ‘*The Namesake*’**

Jhumba Lahiri’s novels set in India and America establish a certain Indo-American culture. Particularly *The Namesake* depicts the themes of alienation and cultural identity of the Bengali couples who settled in America. Lahiri tries to capture the experiences and cultural dilemmas of Ganguly and his members in the family. It also states that in literature of Diaspora, the sufferings of the individuals are closely connected to the space and occupy a negotiate place. Lahiri’s fiction especially *The Namesake* explores the cultural identify and carry troupes of journey that implicate the urge of the subject to go beyond the traditional boundaries. The characters in her novel appears to be a mere tenants of the occupied space and recommends them as a temporarily beings for their survival.

The story of Gogol, born to an Indian couple in Bengali,s have come to America to create a new life of opportunities in University of Boston. The name Gogol is taken from his father’s passionate Russian novels, especially the author Nikolai Gogol. His fathers’ miracle escape from a train accident made Nikolai Gogol’s work a bulky copy brought a credit to Gongol’s father. So he decided that Gogol is the perfect name for their first born baby in the alienated country. Therefore the

cultural crisis starts to germinate as Gogol grows older. Gogol starts to hate his name when his peer's being to criticize as it is not American or not even Bengali. This made him to be separated from American friends so he changed his name to his formal name Nikhil, and he felt that sounds Western. Gogol struggles the cultural identity, though born in America, and being American unable to fit in to the cultural crisis.

Caught in the cultural identity, finds religious friends through naming her child, Ashima employs herself into hybridization, a psycho - social strategy in the state of homelessness. She feels homesickness in the apartment, and finds too cold in winter and too hot in summer. Though she knew about her fate to be alienated, she accompanies herself with all her Bengali short stories, poems, and magazines to make her feel at home. When she delivered she feels to go back to her family, and raise her child with the help of her families and relations but decided to stay back. She tries to make a circle of Bengali acquaintances, in order to deviate herself from the alienated society. Her thirst for cultural identity allows gathering Bengali families on different occasions like 'rice and name' ceremony, birthdays, marriages, deaths and other Bengali religious festivals. She tries to preserve their Bengali culture in a new land, but she cannot imbibe the social and cultural traditional of the host country.

Ashima, in order to preserve her children, she taught them Bengali literature, exposed the history which followed the rituals, religious, customs, tradition, food habits and social mannerism. She helped her children to memorize Tagore's poem and the myths involved in the Indian traditions. At the same time she trained her children to accommodate with the new culture and social customs. She guide her children to watch the television show "The Electric Company" , "Sesame Street" and get used the way of speaking American language. Ashima struggles a lot to imbibe the cultural and traditional customs in the deserted world and fails in her attempt, because she is unable to inculcate the customs in Western Culture. Though the family of Bengali, expose their unity and retain by wearing the Bengali dresses, as women wear Bengali sari, gold ornaments, and men with dhoti, always find something is missing in their dish as well as in their life. Ashmi and Ashoke loves the Indian food, their children relish the American food than the Indian food.

When Ashima is in the hospital, admitted for her labor, finds strangers around her. The American seconds that ticks, she tries to calculate the Indian time on her hand. She also compares the situation in India thousand miles away from home and visualize her home in Calcutta were the rituals followed after delivery. Feeling lonely Ashima begins to feel that: "Being a Foreigner is a sort of life – long pregnancy – A

perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an on – going responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding like pregnancy being a foreigner Ashima believes, is something that elicit the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect” (N 49 – 50).

#### Nostalgia

*The Namesake* – depicts the nostalgia sense throughout the novel, it is deep and retains the Indian magazine in which the letters are printed in Bengali made Ashima’s asset in the America. She maintains an address book, in which recorded all the names of Indian she came across and feels proud enough of each entry. This made her to feel fortunate to have such a book and also to share rice with her neighbours. Her discomfort life in the alienated place and the people around her represents the incomprehensible world of America immigrants. She feels that people born in one country but squander their life gracefully or completely drowned in the civilization of another people. Ashima collected the envelopes and greeting cards received from Bengali, who reside in America as well as India, titled it safely. Her accent in the beginning was in plural form and feels embarrassing. She compares this embarrassing with her last contraction during pregnancy labour. She feel coward when she speaks and her language become her first hindrance.

Even the title *The Namesake* conveys dual meaning, first it suggest that the first generation immigrants are not accustomed to the world of their children, and the second suggest the immigrants children who often look up to the associative life which they share with their parents are no longer connect emotionally and psychologically with them. Nostalgia, for alienation, which search the native land and mental agony results recurrently exposed in the story. Feeling of loss runs all through her stories, and that stories establish interpersonal bond without bondage.

*The Namesake* reflects the struggles of Gogol Ganguli, who goes through the identity of his unusual name. His struggle becomes burden for him to be an individualist, and it does not give him an identity instead puts him into a dilemma, regarding to his name identity. As child of immigrant parents Gogol fights with conflicts as if sinf due to his sense of belongingness. Gogol, hates his name and takes an independent choice and decide to change as Nikhil, sound as Western. But he finds it too complicated to acknowledge that Gogol and Nikhil are the part of his own individuals, and torn between this struggles. Having two aspects, Gogol, son of Indian parents- behave and act accordingly to the Indian culture, and with the name of

Nikhil, on the other hand has free open minded person has nothing to do with Gogol. His sense of nostalgia spends his immigrant life as if he is on a river a foot in two different boats, and each boat pulls him in separate direction. Gogol realizes that he needs an identity that is not based on his root. As Salman Rushdie says “..... straddle two cultures... fall in between two stools” Then they will suffer “A triple disruption” comprising the loss of roots, the linguistic and social dislocation and actually are not said that they belong to which place because they have mixtures of cultures of both the places”.

Even in the great epic Ramayana the character Trishanku, from the Indian epic, went to reside in to heaven although he needed to settle at a place midway between the earth and the paradise, serves as a metaphor for the modern expatriate inhabiting the contested global local space and set an example for this generation so that the present generation are aware of it. The dilemma that Gogol experience is the symbol of wretchedness, which every immigrants face and has to respond any query based on their identity.

### **Conclusion**

Jhumba Lahari herself as well born into a family of immigrants experienced the emotional adherence to one’s cultural background in the foreign environment. The first immigrant’s Indian author to win Pulitzer Prize in the USA and a second generation Indian writer whose caliber as a Diasporic writer is excellent. Lahiri’s stories are perceptive critique of human relationships, bonds as well as commitments that one has to make with homeland along with the migrated land. The immigrants per-occupies the hearts of the people from cultural perspective and geographical condition of their homeland. Longiness runs through her novels and portrays excellently the lives of the people who are living in ‘in-between’ the space. *The Namesake* is the slice of real life, and exposes the middle class society of Calcutta. It is straight forward plots, which encompass the progress of successive generations of the Ganguly family towards civilization in America. The lengthy story, and day-to-day life’s situation underscore the frustration and cultural identity of the second generation and its compromises become a part of mainstream society.

Ashima’s struggles pretend to be satisfied along with their achieved identity, and newly accomplished religious friends. Though she suffers deep in her heart for knowing the fact in the host land, she also negotiates with American’s ethnic, cultural background that she wishes to preserve or modify it. The experiences at the alienated place lead the immigrant women to feel at an intense loss of their culture, language, relationships, religion, heritage as well as roots. This feeling of intense loss is

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strengthened when she returns to the motherland.

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