

The Immigrant and the Dilemma of Identity: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

*Literature is the mirror of society that reflects the complexities of human life which arise from the constantly changing circumstances. The dilemma of identity is one such complexity that emanates from the immigrants as they step out of their familiar homeland to reach the unfamiliar overseas. This leads to compelling challenges of acclimatizing to the new cultural and psychological turmoil. Jhumpa Lahiri's **The Namesake** explores the traumatic grappling with the issue of identity and displacement encountered by the immigrants. Through the lives of the Ganguli family, the novelist vividly portrays Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli's substantial efforts to preserve their cultural heritage and to deal with the multidimensional perspectives of identity faced by their children. This paper examines the immigrant experience of the characters and their efforts to root a sense of belongingness in a foreign land.*

Keywords:

Diaspora, Alienation, Cultural Heritage, Migration, Identity, Emotional Turmoil

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Received: 16.02.2025

Approved: 20.05.2025

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Notions Jan. - June 2025,
Vol. XVI, No. 1,
pp. 001-007
Article No. 01

Similarity Check: 05%

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jan-june-2025](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/notions-vol-xvi-no1-jan-june-2025)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31995/
notions.2025v16i01.01](https://doi.org/10.31995/notions.2025v16i01.01)

Diasporic literature often focuses on the themes of identity and migration, delving deep into the struggles of individuals oscillating between their cultural legacy and their adopted homeland. Jhumpa Lahiri, a prominent voice in Diaspora fiction is acclaimed worldwide for vividly encapsulating these nuances in her acclaimed novel *The Namesake*. Through the story of the Ganguli family, the novel reflects the identity problems, cultural dichotomies, and emotional turmoils faced by the immigrants. The novel scrutinizes the varied struggles undertaken by Ashoke and Ashima, the first-generation immigrants and Gogol and Sonia, their children, the second-generation immigrants. Ashima suffers from nostalgia and is in a state of constant conflict to find her motherland, Calcutta, in America. She continually wrestles with the questions of belongingness and alienation while trying to adjust to her life in America with her husband. However, her children, Gogol and Sonia, born and brought up in America, acclimate themselves to American culture and reject their traditional Bengali culture. Jhumpa Lahiri masterfully captures this divide between the generations of immigrants and the manner in which they maneuver their way through their personal dilemmas. Jaya Dwivedi and Shalini Dube comment in this regard: "It is a book that spins out of the straw out of the ordinary lives of her characters. It pulls the readers from beginning to the end in a neat arc. She shows some of the raw experiences of her life in the novel, she has spent most of her life, traveling between the two countries and their cultures, Calcutta and America sharing the perpetual phenomena with her characters."(Khan 115). Jhumpa Lahiri's objective perspective enlivens the ordinary lives of her characters to such an extent that they attract empathy, compassion, and appreciation from the readers and critics alike.

Ashima Bhaduri tied in a wedlock with Ashoke Ganguli, moves to Cambridge, Massachusetts, from Calcutta to support the professional growth of her husband. Lahiri dwells on the physical act of migration and its resultant psychological turmoil encountered by the migrant. Ashima Ganguli finds it very difficult to adjust to the new social and cultural setup up which is a completely alien space for her. Her husband, Ashoke, perceives this migration as a bright opportunity to start afresh and rise to greater heights, but for Ashima, it becomes a source of enduring loss. Eight thousand miles away from Calcutta to Cambridge, she tries to keep her balance by performing the duties of a traditional Bengali woman trying to please her husband, cooking his favorite Bengali dishes, and following the rituals to preserve her cultural roots. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli's migration to the United States marks the beginning of their challenging journey arising from cultural displacement. Ashima, in particular, becomes the embodiment of the dilemma of alienation that accompanies migration. Her initial perception of America as an alien, remote, and desolate land

focuses on the emotional - and psychological factors of leaving behind the known cultural heritage and social relations. The novelist writes, “..for being a foreigner... Is a sort of lifelong pregnancy-a perpetual weight, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parentheses in what had once been an ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.”(TN 49-50). This complex set of emotions confuses her, makes her sad, and sometimes even depressed.

During the difficult times of pregnancy, Ashima feels isolated and alienated. She finds “motherhood in a foreign land”, quite difficult because “it was happening so far from home , unmonitored and unobserved by those who loved... But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one where she knows so little where life seems to be tentative and spare.”(TN 6). She is constantly haunted by the thoughts that if she had been in Calcutta at the time of the delivery of child, she would have been surrounded by elderly family women to comfort her, but here in America ,she feels pathetic that she does not have her family by her side at the time of baby’s birth. Her anxiety is reflected in these words, “She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived”(TN 25). She feels frustrated and wants to go back to India after the completion of Ashok’s doctorate, but this plan does not materialize. Ashoke realizes the plight of Ashima, he finds “her face leaner, her features sharper than they had been at their wedding, aware that her life in Cambridge , as a wife has already taken a toll , he has come home from university to find her morose in bed , rereading her senses that she’s crying... but can think of nothing to say” (TN 33). Ashima grapples with homesickness and suffers from an acute sense of dislocation. Again, Ashoke and Ashima find themselves confounded that they cannot leave the hospital without giving a legal name to their son. They had wanted Ashima’s grandmother to name the boy, but in the absence of her response, Ashoke names his son as Gogol based on his favorite Russian author, Nikolai Gogol whose book had turned out to be a source of rescue for Ashoke in a train accident.

Ashima finds it difficult to manage with a child in a foreign land, “I don’t want to raise Gogol in this country... I want to go back .”(TN 33). She oscillates between the two cultures trying to create a mini Calcutta in America celebrating with ‘Bangali’ friends, and preparing the Bengali dishes and snacks like Jhalmudi(a very famous snack sold in Calcutta with the American dishes like rice crispies and planter peanuts. Ashima and Ashoke try to assimilate new culture, but they find something missing in their life. Somdatta Mandal observes, “In her novel, *The*

Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri takes recourse to a lot of Bengaliness . Ashima Ganguli ,the mother, is not only a Bengali by birth, her Calcutta lineage constantly haunts her and makes her a sojourner in America. Her home is a meta-American home from the outside, but typically Bangali from inside.” (Vinoda and Shailja 165) . Ashima is dressed up in “the cavalcade of Matrimony bracelets on both arms: iron, gold coral , conch” (TN 4). She maintains herself as a typical Bengali in the new homeland of Massachusetts . She celebrates the *Annaprasan* -the rice ceremony of Gogol- with her Bengali friends in US. She wants to inculcate Bengali values in her children, trying to bring them up in a Bengali environment in a new country. Her mental anguish to be with her own people is clearly visible,” Ashima’s eyes filled with tears as Gogol’s mouth eagerly invites the spoon. She can’t help wishing her own brother were here to feed him, her own parents to bless him with their hands on his head.”(TN 40).The writer gives a realistic account of the struggle and conflict of displaced people to survive in a foreign land. Lahiri ‘does not fail to mention the typical immigrant phenomenon of belonging nowhere”(Vinoda 164). Ashima can neither leave her roots in India, nor can she adjust herself to the American environment; she is neither fully connected to her homeland nor entirely integrated into her adopted country.

The writer has skillfully depicted the intergenerational conflicts in *The Namesake*. It is rooted in the different perspectives of identity and belonging between the Ganguli parents and their children. Ashoke and Ashima make strong efforts to preserve their Bengali traditions, celebrating Bengali festivals. The emphasis on family gatherings symbolizes their attempts to maintain cultural continuity. However, Gogol and Sonia’s unwillingness to merge and accept these traditions highlights the generational gap in the diasporic experience. Gogol suffers acutely from an identity crisis due to his name. Although he is named after the famous Russian author, Nikolai Gogol, he despises his name which becomes a source of embarrassment and discomfort for him. His name represents the intellectual aspirations of his father and his diasporic condition and it reminds him of his otherness in the American society. He is tormented by constant internal conflict between his Bengali lineage and his American upbringing. Again, even if the parents want to change his name from Gogol to Nikhil ‘a perfectly respectable Bengali good name’(TN 56),he ‘doesn’t want a new name..... he is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn’t know’(TN 57). However, his eventual decision to legally change his name to Nikhil epitomizes his attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture. He and his sister Sonali become the carriers of American culture in the house. Both of them, steeped in modernity, socialize in the American school system, and enjoy American food habits, whereas

Ashima and Ashoke take them to regular get-togethers with their Bengali friends in America. They send Gogol to Bangali classes in the third standard, visit Calcutta many times and at one point, they stay in Calcutta with their relatives for eight months, but their children feel like outsiders there.

At the age of eighteen, when Gogol moves to Yale for his higher education, he changes his name to Nikhil. His escape from Gogol is still incomplete as he is again divided between the two selves-Gogol and Nikhil. He expresses “I hate the name Gogol I’ve always hated it,” (TN 102) but “there is one complication: He doesn’t feel like Nikhil, not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past.”(TN 105). He is greatly perturbed at the idea of having dual identities, “At times, he still feels as if he has cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different”(TN 105). When his parents call him Nikhil, he feels “he is not related to them, not their child.”(TN 106). He feels helpless and gets annoyed when his mother calls him Gogol. His struggle continues when he falls in love with Maxine Ratliff. He is fascinated by the liberal approach of Ratliffs who have brought up their daughter in ease, comfort, security, and solidity that Gogol has never experienced at his home because he always felt divided between two cultures. Later he marries Moushumi because of their common cultural background, but this relationship ends in disillusionment, and they get divorced. Lahiri skillfully captures Gogol’s cultural dilemma that leads to a fluid and multifaceted identity. His relationship with Maxine represents his desire to adapt to the new liberal culture whereas Moushumi fulfills the parental expectations of Bengali traditions and community. But Moushumi also has her own sense of identity and autonomy as a second-generation Asian-American. Through the failure of their marriage, Lahiri thus underlines the limitations of cultural compatibility in maintaining relationship.

Gogol finally accepts his name and his heritage after the demise of his father and his own marital struggles. He realizes his mistakes ; he now understands what were the expectations of his parents, and he understands the value of their relatives at Calcutta. When his mother is leaving for India, he wonders “how his parents had done it , leaving their respective families behind, seeing them so seldom , dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing. All those trips to Calcutta he had once resented- how could they have been enough ? They were not enough ... He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins ; his parents , in bridging that distance as best as they could.” (TN 281). Having come to terms with the duality of his identity, Gogol eventually reads a book of stories by his namesake, Nikolai

Gogol. This drives him to reflect on his newfound connection to his past and his family's legacy. The novelist effectively encapsulates the intertwining of identity, heritage, and acceptance. Gogol, who had initially rejected his name and cultural heritage, ultimately acknowledges his past. This also reflects on the cyclical nature of life. Gogol's final act of reading his namesake's book suggests a renewed connection to his family history and the legacy of his father. Gogol continues his career as an architect and finds comfort in his family and the memory of his father

Ashima, after her husband's death, decides to return to Calcutta, to sell the family home. The sale of the family home and Ashima's return to Calcutta mark a new beginning for the family, while also acknowledging the changes and losses they have experienced throughout their lives. At this juncture we find a drastic change in the attitude of Ashima. She had always missed Calcutta, but now when she is about to move to Calcutta, "She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live, for something tells her she will not go as quickly as her husband did. 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, and the surprising companionship they had formed.... 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 he will continue to dwell in her mind." (TN 278-279) This emotional experience of Ashima exhibits the masterful strokes of Jhumpa Lahiri that are employed to draw well-rounded characters.

Lahiri brings an enticing narrative to the readers as she puts the spotlight on the immigrant experience. While Ashok is amused and fascinated by the world around him in America, Ashima terribly misses her life in India and often regrets her cold and lonely existence in Massachusetts. Her feeling of penetrating remoteness demonstrates the difficulty that underlines the experience of those who struggle to fit into an entirely new culture while trying to retain one's own cultural heritage. The experience of the Ganguli children, Gogol and Sonia, and other second-generation immigrants, Moushmi, depicts that the process of assimilation comes much more naturally when one is raised amid an alien culture. Unlike their parents, they speak English fluently and are keenly interested in American food and pop culture. To them, India is alien. They become homesick during their visits to Calcutta and get confused by common Indian rituals. They too experience alienation and identity crisis which stems from their divided loyalties. Overall, the novel provides

insightful perspectives on the poignant issue of the dilemma of identity faced by the different generations of the immigrants.

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