

**NAMES CAN WAIT-NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES IN JHUMPA  
LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE***

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“Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the Baby’s birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true... He needs to be fed and blessed, to be given some gold and silver, to be patted on the back after feedings and held carefully behind the neck. Names can wait”.

-Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*

A new class of Indian expatriate writers has emerged post-independence in 1947. These writers are the ones who left India as adults or those who grew up at a foreign landscape. Their work spread over their memories of colonial India, post-independent India and the memories of their childhood spent in India. It will not be farfetched to say that most Indian writing in English fits this description, yet they have nothing in common except for a thread of common decent which binds them together.

I would like to begin this paper by tracing the meaning of ‘diaspora’, which means “to disperse’ in Greek. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define ‘diaspora’ as “the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions...’ (68). India is also characteristic of various diasporas or cultural displacement and hyper mobility of populations within and across borders. The location and dislocation of vast populations, especially in the wake of globalization has made Diaspora a lived reality in contemporary times. Already a celebrated author when her first novel appeared. The *New Yorker* named Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the 20 most important young American Writers of the new century. Her short story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ made its way for The Best American Short Stories, while the book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer prize in literature. Having been born in London to Bengali parents and grown up in the USA, Lahiri authentically delineates the experience of culturally displaced immigrant protagonists in her writings. This paper attempts to examine the nexus which is formed between essentialized and constructed notions of Identity as the characters oscillate between the two worlds and are inflicted with the janufaced identity-crisis in her debut novel, *The Namesake* (2003). It further corroborates the assumption that people in Diaspora have transnational lives, where they live in one place, and not only are connected to their homelands but also to other diaporic communities. Diasporas thus live in one country and at the same time try to look across time and space to the one they left behind. Which is why, it results more often than not in fragmentation and hyphenated identities. Lahiri delves deeper into

the notion of constituting diasporic identities and includes the notions of ethnicity and culture. *The Namesake* (2003) is about a Ganguli family from Calcutta, as the newlyweds Ashima and Ashoke come to settle in Boston, USA but constantly attempt to belong and transform into an American while retaining their Indian roots at the same time. In her novel Lahiri authentically exemplifies this immigrant angst of ‘yearning backwards’ and the nostalgia it brings along with the ever present desire to ‘belong’ and ‘looking forward’. I would argue that the issues of identity, hybridity and authenticity remain at the heart of diaspora literature, yet the current diaspora seem to have surpassed the suffocating divide between the two worlds. This crisis of dual identity faced by the diasporic communities is strongly felt by Ashima Ganguli and then in a more intensified manner by her son Gogol.

The novel introduces us to Ashima while she is experiencing her first pregnancy and the uneasiness and anxiety that an alien culture brings to her. She is quick to gauge the difference as the realisation of being pregnant and a foreigner enables her to view the irony of her situation and as soon as the doctor says that all is “perfectly normal,” she thinks: “For the past eighteenth months, ever since she’s arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all.. Its not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It’s the consequence : motherhood in a foreign land” (Lahiri 6). Through the character of Ashima, Lahiri affirms her Bengali cultural identity and substantiates it as a reality in multicultural America by first incorporating and then by imposing Bengali culture on the American platform. On the other hand, Gogol as the second-generation protagonist becomes an extension of writer’s own sense of dual identity as he struggles with a sense of namelessness. The different naming process in India and America leads to an utter chaos. Interestingly, the name is to come from India, in a letter sent by Ashima’s grandmother, which paradoxically enough gets lost in the transit. After a failed attempt at a Bengali naming ceremony-Ashoke’s fondness for the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, leads him to nickname his infant son ‘Gogol’ as a kind of stopgap name until they figure out a more suitable and Indian “good name’ for him. The problem of naming seems to sum up the ambivalence of identity. Gogol, in the novel, embodies the anxiety and awkwardness experienced by second generation migrants. Gogol’s name makes him feel alienated. Gogol grows up with a name that is neither Bengali nor American. As a child, he has to either choose assimilation into American culture or choose an allegiance to his parents’ Bengali culture that can be as complex as what it seeks to supersede. Gogol struggles with identity crisis, experimenting with possible identities. For Maxine (his white American girlfriend) he is Nick. At the age of 18, unable to bear the jokes cracked at his name, he tries changing his name to Nikhil. However, he does share the history of his two names with his second girlfriend, Moushumi who happens to be Bengali herself. The issues related to naming, un-naming and renaming remain crucial to diasporic narratives. Gogol is made to jostle between two names. Whereas Nikhil resembles his American name, yet ‘Gogol’ and his past follow him everywhere.

Thus, the naming crisis of Gogol is inextricably linked with his identity crisis as the name Gogol hinders his uninterrupted connection with America. Towards the end, we can discern the significance of this novella to the story of Gogol’s identity as He is seen to be reading the copy of “The Overcoat” That his father gifted him years ago. Primarily through these two characters, namely, Ashima and Gogol, Lahiri explores and problematizes the area between two cultures, locations and two generations. However, it gives way to an ‘in-between’ condition, a constant yearning for “home”, for “the lost origin” and “imaginary homelands” (Rushdie 9-21) are constructed from the scattered, disjointed, incoherent memories of homelands. Although Gogol

and Sonia enjoy better settlement in the US, but their sense of identity is influenced by the past migrant history of their parents.

The deep rooted desire to belong to America is expressed in an article by Bharati Mukherjee (Indian American Writer). In ‘Two Ways To Belong in America’, she writes; “This is a tale of two sisters from Calcutta, Mira and Bharati, who have lived in the United States for some 35 years, but who find themselves on different sides in the current debate on the status of immigrants. I am an American citizen and she is not... she is here to maintain an identity, not to transform it... The price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation”. (New York Times, September 22, 1996)

In response to this quotation, I wish to suggest that a generational shift in perspective has taken place. There are the usual intergenerational struggles of parents trying to keep their children within the folds of Bengali Convention while at the same time negotiating the vast opportunities offered by an American education. Avtar Brah defines Diaspora as, “The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings.” (Brah 193). It is this hopes that, Lahiri tries to explore, regardless of nationality and upbringing, which define our compartmentalized selves. Lahiri has been able to render a world that not only projects the specific variation of the Bengali expatriate and first-generation experience in the US but also portrays the complexity of their allegiance to the Bengali culture. Ashima is truly a personification of the duality that faces the migrant in a diaspora: on an alien landscape, she must keep intact her Bengali heritage while simultaneously rendering an Americanized upbringing for her children.

This paper has attempted to bring together the two core issues of reconstruction of identity and community as separate identities and the notion of an identity within a community. Lahiri, in her essay “My Two Lives” calls this “shuttling between two dimension that [have] nothing to do with one another”. It is suggested that identity remains a matter of choice, this view is supported by Bhabha, who posits that to avoid the “fixity and fetishism of identities”, and issues of identity construction should be addressed by intersecting concepts like race, class, nation and gender. “Being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been an ordinary life, onlu to discover that the previous life has 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.” (Lahiri 50)

In the end, the author is able to convey that the construction of identity and the need to assimilate into a new culture vary from first generation immigrant parents to their second generation children thereafter. However the destinies of these two generation immigrants remain entangled despite their different aspirations. The arrangement made by Ashima towards the end of the novel to divide her time between America and India symbolizes her mutual identification with both the countries.

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