



**THE PURSUIT OF SELFHOOD IN
JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NOVEL, 'THE NAMESAKE'**

“That’s the thing about books; they let u travel without moving your feet”



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ABSTRACT

Indian writers have influenced an entire generation with their works over the years they have contributed to the world of literature and books in regional languages .Indian writers in English deserve a special mention as they have portrayed India and its rich culture, heritage, tradition and societal norms to the readers in the western world. Indian authors have striven to add variation to the pre-existent and chiefly dominant genres. Today the world has undergone several changes due

to science and technology and has taken shape of a global village. The search of better life has enforced man women and children to leave their homelands and settle down in foreign lands. This kind of self exile has always remained painful resulting in a catastrophe of characters, settlement, lifestyle and identity and pursuit of self-hood.

KEYWORDS

Self-hood, Diaspora, isolation, Rootlessness, cultural identity.

RESEARCH PAPER

The paper aims at the second generation of Indian Diaspora in reference to ‘The Namesake’ a novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. She was born in London and grew up in America; her parents were immigrants from India belonging to Bengal. The Lahiri’s were middle class by nature. In *The Namesake* Jhumpa Lahiri portrays her diasporic experiences as a second generation immigrant in the book. *The Namesake* was published in 2003. It’s the story of the Ganguly family comprised of parents who emigrated to the United States of America from Calcutta, their children Gogol and Sonia were raised in the US. The story follows the family over the course of thirty years in Calcutta.

The study Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* focuses to explore the construction of subjectivity and otherness and the rapture of identity and diasporic sense the immigrants lose not only their native state but also their character. The novel portrays the loss, placelessness, isolation and rootlessness of their son Gogol. Gogol and other characters struggle to maintain their identities, their parents try to maintain ties with their country India and try hard to inculcate the values of the home country. It’s here that the conflict begins as Gogol is fascinated more by his peer groups and society at large of the host country as he was a product of it, but the host country does not accept him due to skin and culture variance as Terry Eagleton writes:

“The word culture contains a tension between making and being made, they keep struggling for cultural identity which sways like a pendulum between the two countries.”

It’s through Gogol that Jhumpa presents identity crises which she herself has faced acutely. Born as Nilanjana Lahiri her pet name was ‘Jhumpa’. In school her teacher found it easy to pronounce her pet name rather than her real name as a result she was known as Jhumpa Lahiri. She struggled a lot to feel like an American but couldn’t cope. The same feeling she infuses into a novel character Gogol who as a child likes his name but when he is an adolescent he dislikes this very name Gogol. Gogol’s name is one of the prime issues which makes him indifferent from others.

“Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated.”

-The Namesake, 2006

The Gogol-Nikhil dilemma

When Gogol enters college he changes his name from Gogol to Nikhil in order to distance himself from the bindings of his family. This act is a symbol of new recognition that Gogol tries to adopt.

“Nikhil engages in a freedom that is more encompassing than he ever found Gogol to be. This name frees him in many ways. It frees him from his family which confined his pet name upon him.”

-*The Namesake*, 2006

Nikhil adopts an American lifestyle he changes the world around him and signifies a change in attitude as a result he loses his virginity and has relationships with white American women, he gets into smoking and drinking and Nikhil behaves like his American friends who have late night parties. These new found developments are kept a secret from his parents, but in his Bengal home he maintains a dignified silence a total transformation.

“Gogol is constituted as an epitome of an American-Indian hybrid who vacillates between his Indian identity and American nationality.”

-*The Namesake*, 2006

Gogol feels sandwiched between two ideologies of The United States of America and India. In India he is known as an American but in America he is known as an Indian. Conflicts arise due to different cultural practices before that child of Indian parentage in the foreign land.

Jhumpa Lahiri's parents isolated themselves from the so-called American culture. They spoke the language just for the sake of survival but were betrayed by their accent. They feel alone and keep aloof. Gogol's loneliness starts from the moment he enters the world. The names like Gogol and Nikhil indicate Indian and Russian identities instead of American. The 'Self' of the male protagonist of the novel is embedded in the Americanization and not in Indianness. Ethnic food and costumes acts as the symbol of one's ethnic identity. Gogol's preference to American cuisine rather than Indian cuisine is examined. Cultural performances between first generation and second generation Indian immigrants are seen in the present novel 'The Namesake'.

All Gogol's efforts pay him back with confusion about who he truly is? He sees himself as Nikhil striving to be an American but fails to eradicate Gogol. By the end he comes to terms with his Indian identity. The Odyssey of discovery leads Gogol from the periphery of events to the centre of his essential self, his distinctive personality, his innermost

guided secrets and thoughts. Its helps to expose and introspect himself within the self. As Karl Weintraub holds the view about confessions:

“A self reflective person asks ‘who am I ‘and ‘how did I become I am’.”

- Anderson, Linda: *Autobiography*, 2007

Conclusion:

After his father’s death Gogol collapses and starts to feel his father’s absence. The sudden demise of his father draws him towards Indian ethos and values and starts to practice ceremonies of Hindu rituals. Gogol’s marriage too ends up in a divorce. As his wife Moushumi keeps extramarital affairs with a German scholar. With these painful incidents Gogol returns home to take care of his mother. At his changed juncture he understands the importance of being an Indian and finds new found love for his motherland India. His mother decides to spend half the year in India and the other half in The United States.

Gogol discovers that in his family his father has passed away, his mother is a widow and he himself a divorcee, this makes him all alone in the new world. Gogol’s journey under the name of Nikhil is a testing of journey in search of identity and recognition. He now realizes that he belongs to both culture as locations change, so does identity. One must not be obsessed with one’s cultural legacy as its deep rooted in one’s collective psyche. Alienation is a part of experience of the Indian Diaspora. The dilemma of the character of an individual (Gogol) which is constantly affected by society is something one has to discover through the process of reflection and negotiations due to this national identities get eroded and it gets replaced by hybrid identities.

In the contemporary age issues like global migration, impure identity and cross culture elements seem to disavow the popular hearsay “*Home is where the heart lies.*”

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