

ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

May 2015 Vol. 4. Issue III

www.galaxyimrj.com

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>

Redefining Identity: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Preeti Puri

Research Scholar

Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla

Abstract:

In *Kathopanishad*, Nachiketha asks Yama, the God of Dharma: “What is that is called soul that the learned say is the true identity of a being? Is body a mere abode of one’s identity or is it an identity by itself?” (Komalesha 2008: 13). Nachiketha’s questions reveal the perennial human quest to possess the knowledge that can define the essence of a being –Identity. Today an individual lives in a world where identity matters both as a theoretical concept and as a contested fact of contemporary political life. Stuart Hall opines, “Identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within ... Identity is formed with various points of identification, the unstable points of suture that are made within the discourses of history and culture. Hence there is always a politics of Identity and politics of position.” (Hall 1993: 392)

The purpose of this article is to explore identity formation of culturally displaced immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake*. Identity formation in *The Namesake* encompasses the development of one’s distinctive personality due to specific reasons like new environment, new culture and conflicts. For clarity this article will be divided into two parts. The first part will deal with personal identity from two standpoints i.e. Name and ABCD (American Born Confused Desi), and the second part will deal with cultural identity from the standpoint of food, dress, language and marriage.

Keywords: Identity, Quest, Consciousness, Acculturation.

I

The *Namesake* introduces people who leave behind their families and the familiar heat of India to build a new life in America- a cold and a bleak land of strangers. Jhumpa Lahiri weaves a story spanning three decades of geographically and culturally displaced Bengali family, comprising the parents Ashoke and Ashima first generation immigrants who had migrated to the

U.S.A. from Calcutta in search of greener pastures and their children Gogol and Sonia the second generation immigrants.

Personal identity is what makes one the person he/she is. It is the way one sees himself and the network of values and convictions that structure his/her life. At the beginning of *The Namesake* the issue of name as a matter of identity is presented. As Ashima's water breaks she calls out to Ashoke, but does not use his name. "It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or a caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over" (Lahiri 2003: 2). Bengali nomenclature grants every single person two names, a pet name *daknam* and a good name *bhalonam*. Friends and family at home use the former. While the latter is used for identification in the outside world and represents dignified and enlightened qualities. Lahiri used Gogol's struggle over his name as jumping off point to explore large issues of integration, assimilation and cultural identity. Gogol was so named because his father Ashoke believed that sitting up in a train reading Nikolai Gogol's "*The Overcoat*" saved him.

In U.S.A. children are often ashamed of their differences from others. Children teased Gogol and teachers mispronounced his name, and Gogol started suffering from the uniqueness of his name. He hated his name for being neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. The name became a burden, as it was a symbol of identity that he could not relate to. After learning the biography of Nikolai Gogol from Mr. Lawson he baptized himself to Nikhil. He entered his college as Nikhil and rejected his identity as Gogol completely. He dreaded to visit his home where he was known as Gogol. It was not just a name to him but signified all his discomfort to fit into two cultures. Lahiri always referred to her main character as Gogol. Her stubborn insistence on calling Gogol by his original name symbolized that a simple change in name does not alter the fabric of a person. Indeed, her refusal to acknowledge Gogol's new name was not an act of disrespect. Rather, it was a symbol of something that Gogol must one day learn for himself that the past cannot be erased; the past is woven into the fabric of our beings.

Gogol's first passionate affair was with Ruth, and he entered in the relationship as Nikhil. He never revealed his inner struggle between Gogol and Nikhil. When this bond ended Gogol hid himself even more behind his exterior of Nikhil. Moushmi was the first girl who knew him by both names and he married her as Gogole. But Moushmi found solace in Dimitri and their

marriage crumbled. After Ashima's departure to India he would hear Gogol once or twice over the wires. At the farewell party thrown by Ashima on Christmas, Gogol for the first time valued his father's gift, "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (Lahiri 2003: 288). Thus he finally learnt that the answer was not to fully abandon or attempt to diminish either culture, but to mesh the two together.

Moushmi was ashamed of her name too, and considered it as a curse when her friends at school shortened it to Moose or pronounced it as Moosoomi. As per Indian tradition a girl's surname changes after her marriage which signifies her assimilation into the family ways and culture of her in laws. But Moushmi, being a rebellious American kid detested this practice. She never adopted the surname Ganguli, not even with a hyphen. Thus Jhumpa Lahiri gives different dimensions to what a name can mean. It is not only a way of knowing oneself, but also how one perceives himself and other perceives us.

The acronym ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) has taciturnly developed into a discourse about South Asian Identity in the West. "Confused" here refers to a hypothetical confusion regarding identity. These ABCD's are either born in America or have lived there since childhood due to which they are closer to American culture than their ancestor's native culture. They observe both American and Indian cultural traditions, but usually don't know enough about either to fit in fully. The second generation immigrants in *The Namesake* are the victims of this label.

Gogol takes no pride in having an Indian background and never considers India as his *Desh*. He thinks of India as Americans do. He cannot read or write his mother tongue with even modest proficiency. At Durga pujo Gogol he was made to "throw marigold petals at a cardboard effigy of a goddess" (Lahiri 2003: 64) but he could not compare it to Christmas, "when they hang stockings on the fireplace mantel, and set out cookies and milk for Santa Claus, and receive heaps of presents, and stay home from school" (Lahiri 2003: 64). He has to sacrifice his drawing classes in his third grade for the Bengali language class where he is taught about Bengali Renaissance and Subash Chandra Bose in which he and other ABCD's are least interested. The dilemma of ABCD is that in host country they are considered as outsiders and in India they are hailed as foreigners. Gogol and Sonia face the same situation in Calcutta. In their expensive sneakers, American haircut they become the centre of attraction. Their uncle and aunts shake

their heads in disbelief when they converse in American accent. A fuss is created at their mild constipation with everyone remarking that they were not made to survive in a poor country. In spite of his yearly sojourns to Calcutta he does not feel bound to India like his parents. He would rather listen to the Beatle than to admire a Kathakali dance performance at the Memorial Hall. Like his American friends Gogol drinks, smokes, has more than one romantic relationship and is able to disassociate himself from the memories of his girlfriends. Unlike his parents' Gogol does not see himself as a stranger living in a foreign land.

Moushmi is an ultra sophisticated Indian academic with little interest in the Bengali culture. She is a candidate for Ph.D. in French literature but barely knows to write her name in Bengali. She feels out of place at Durga pujos though dressed in sari carefully pinned to the top of her shoulder. Her childhood dwindles under the burden of two cultures. Though ridiculed for her British accent, she holds it up and reads *Pride and Prejudice*. At the age of five her inner consciousness knew that she would marry in a gown. She desperately wanted to overcome her social awkwardness to push the frontiers of her personality and to gain exposure. For this she immersed herself in a third culture and third language, French. She is flattered when mistaken for French but becomes victim of freedom syndrome by being promiscuous. Her fairy tale engagement comes to an end when Graham finds Bengali culture taxing and repressed.

These two ABCD's (Gogol and Moushmi) tie up the marital knot mainly due to their shared cultural background but Moushmi along with the Sanskrit vows had privately vowed that she would never be fully dependent on her husband like her mother. Their marriage was not based on mutual understanding but to seek comfort in each other and in their shared world. She is comfortable with Dmitri, her German lover, but betraying one's husband is not the way of an Indian woman, so they finally got divorced.

II

Throughout *The Namesake* Jhumpa Lahiri has used food, clothing and rituals to explore cultural transitions. The Namesake opens with Ashima trying to make *Jhal Muri* a spicy Indian snack from American ingredients- "Rice Krispies" and "Planters peanuts" but as usual there is something missing, the mustard oil, which reminds her what, she's left behind in Calcutta. Being an Indian she is reluctant to eat beef but for Gogol she makes sandwiches with roast beef and

American dinner once a week as a treat. Thus she adopts the role of Annapurna to strengthen her ties with her husband and children. Though Gogol makes a conscious effort to be different from his parents but experiences the cultural dilemma and identity crisis on a number of occasions. While staying with Maxine in her parents' home he feels effortlessly incorporated into their lives and makes constant comparisons between their way of life and of his parents'. The Ratliffes were not at all formal with Gogol on the dinner table at their first meeting. They served him whatever little they had with Lydia paying no attention to Gogol's plate. Gogol instantly felt that his mother would have never served few dishes to a guest, and she proved him right at her first meeting with Maxine by first offering samosas, flavored pink lassi and then a heavy lunch. Her hospitality indicated that she is brought up in a culture where it is ingrained "*Athithi Devo Bhava*". In India it is generally believed that one should not talk while eating. Thus Gogol's parents were accustomed to eat their meals in silence but Maxien's parents on the contrary were vociferous at the table. Gerald and Lydia were the centre of attraction of the dinner parties organized at their home. Candlelit tables, wine accompanied with intelligent talk filled the atmosphere with elegance while Ashima and Ashoke behaved like caterers in their own home.

Jhumpa Lahiri has shown that first generation immigrants try to stick to the traditional dress code of India, while their children adopt the dressing ways of the host country. Sari, is the traditional dress of Bengali women and Ashima carries it up to Boston. The six slippery yards of her Murshidabad silk sari became an unmanageable affair for the hospital nurse. She is completely puzzled to fold it and finally stuffs it in Ashima's blue suitcase. Sonia is a product of cultural hybridism, and she cannot associate herself with the traditional ways of dressing. She chopped her shoulder length hair asymmetrically and in order to look similar with her friends at school she wanted to color her hair blond and pierce additional holes in her earlobes.

Edward Said in his *Orientalism* said that the Orientals continue to be look down upon by the occidentals. In *The Namesake* it occurs mainly due to the language and pronunciation of Orientals. Before Gogol's birth Patty asks Ashima "Hoping for a boy or a girl?" she replied "as long as there are ten finger and ten toe," but at Patty's ironical smile she realized her mistake to say "fingers" and "toes". In Bengali a finger can also mean fingers, a toe toes. This mistake "pains her almost as much her last contraction" (Lahiri 2003: 7). Gogol realized this discrimination at the American departmental store when his parents are not properly attended

and the cashier's smirk at his parents' accent. The salesman prefers to direct his conversation to Gogol as if Ashima and Ashoke were incompetent or deaf.

Marriage forms an integral fabric of our society. Jhumpa Lahiri has portrayed the upheaval in this relationship very elegantly. Like majority of couples in India Ashima and Ashoke met for the first time on the heels of arranged marriage. When Ashima's would be father –in- law asked whether she would be able to live in a city of severe and snowy winters alone, she instantly replied, "Won't he be there?" pointing at Ashoke. This is how an Indian girl is, ready to forsake everything, in Ashima's case even her country for a man who was a minute before stranger for her. Gogol is a product of multiculturalism and concept of arranged marriage is entirely unthinkable and absurd to him. His romantic encounters are very different from what his parents experienced or expected for their son. He believes in dating, live-in relationship and sleeps with every random girl he meets, a complete utopian relationship for his parents. His marriage with Moushmi failed as both of them were not willing to settle something less than their ideal of happiness.

To construct a new identity in a foreign country is an arduous task. The first generation immigrant faces problems when they try to hold their cultural values by sticking to the conventional ways. When their children adopt the ways of the host country it leads to tangled ties between generations. Similarly when the second generation immigrants try to adopt the culture of the host country it compels them to make a frantic search for their personal and psychological identity. The dilemma of such immigrants has been portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri in a palpable manner. In the novel Gogol is not fully in tune with his identity until he realizes that it is embellished by both cultures. Sonia overcomes her divided identity by completely adopting American culture. She decides to get married with Ben, a half-Chinese boy raised in Newton. Moushmi immersed herself in third culture and language, French. Thus at the culmination of this article I feel that identity is not a given, rather an open question.

Works Cited:

- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and PostColonial Theory* Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. Print
- Komalesha, H.S. *Issues of Identity in Indian English Fiction: A Close Reading of Canonical Indian English Novels*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008. Print.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2003. Print.