

## IDENTITY CRISIS IN JHUMPALAHIRI'S; THE NAMESAKE NOVEL

SAHELEH KHEIRABADI

PhD Researcher of Pune University, India

### ABSTRACT

#### Kheirabadi 1

JhumpaLahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* established this young writer as one the most brilliant of her generation. *The Namesake* (2004) is the first novel by JhumpaLahiri. It was originally a novella published in *The New Yorker* and was later expanded to a full-length novel. Her stories are one of the very few debut works -- and only a handful of collections -- to have won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The story of the Ganguli family whose move from Calcutta to New York evokes a lifelong balancing act to meld to a new world without forgetting the old.

Gogol is the son of Ashima and Ashoke in the novel. They gave Gogol name to their son. He is given the name by his father who, before he came to America to study at MIT, was almost killed in a train wreck in India. Rescuers caught sight of the volume of Nikolai Gogol's short stories that he held, and hauled him from the train. Gogol changes his name to Nikhil because he doesn't like Gogol name. He beliefs that Nikhil is a Bengali name, and Gogol is an old Russian dude's last name. Gogol is torn between finding his own unique identity without losing his heritage. The major theme in the novel is searching for *identity*. So, *the Namesake novel considers identity, culture and post-colonial literature*

**KEYWORDS:** Culture, Identity, New Name, Post-Colonial, Immigration

### INTRODUCTION

JhumpaLahiri moved with her family to the United States when she was three years old. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island and earned a B.A. in English literature from Barnard College in 1989. She went on to earn an M.A. in English, an M.F.A. in Creative

#### Kheirabadi 2

Writing, an M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University

In 1999, Lahiri published her first short story collection entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*. It dealt with the issues of Indians or Indian immigrants, including their generation gaps in understanding and values. She followed up in 2003 with her first novel, *The Namesake*, and returned to short stories.

It is the story of the Ganguli family, comprised of parents who immigrated to the United States from Calcutta and of their children, Gogol and Sonia, raised in the USA. The story follows the family over the course of thirty years in Calcutta, Boston, and New York.

#### New Name, New Person

A boy, born in the late 1960s to Indian parents living in the American suburbs, far from their native Calcutta

Gogol is the son of Ashima and Ashoke, named after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol. He changes his name to Nikhil the summer before starting college. The tension between Bengali culture and American culture is revealed in Ashoke's words to Gogol when Gogol tells him he wishes to change his name.

When Gogol changes his name legally to Nikhil at first, the name change is confusing because everyone who knows him still calls him Gogol. However, when he goes to Yale, nobody knows him as Gogol and he can *become* Nikhil. It takes a while for him to really *feel* like Nikhil, since it is not just a new name but represents a new identity.

This novel considers cultural identity on the first character of the novel. Despite the fact that Nikhil is a Bengali name, and Gogol is an Old Russian dude's last name, Nikhil is the name that, at this point, feels foreign to Gogol. After all, up until this point, he has only really interacted with his family, who has always called him Gogol. In fact, the only real difference is that, as Nikhil, he has oodles more confidence, and suddenly finds himself doing well with the ladies.

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Our hero's father is only a young man when he survives a near-fatal train crash. He is pulled from the wreckage with a much-loved copy of Gogol's *The Overcoat* in his pocket. In the months of pain and injury that follow, both author and book take on a peculiar significance. So, the tension between life and death comes to the forefront when Ashoke finally tells Gogol about the train accident that made him decide to name his son after the Russian author whose book he was reading at the time. Gogol is upset and asks his father if he reminds him of that night he almost died. His father says, "Not at all... have you reminded me of everything that followed." His son represents new life to him, the new life that followed his recovery.

### **Searching for Identity's Gogol**

*The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri, is a story of culture, race, and inheritance, and how these factors mold our attitudes and direct our lives in a society that is ever-changing. The novel tells of the lives of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli and how they leave behind a life in India that they had grown to know and love to live the American dream and provide the best life for themselves and their children. Gogol, their only son, and the carrier of their family name, struggle incessantly to find his identity while attempting to mold his family's expectations with the expectations he feels in American Society. The major theme portrayed in the novel is *identity*, vividly illustrated by examining the importance of one's name as the definition of patriarchal lineage, background, and gender as a means by which one's destiny in life is dictated. Such factors that contribute to problems with identity are not only recognizable in Indian cultures, but can become hindrances for many immigrants who enter the United States each year.

There can be a great sense of identity in one's name and there can be great significance in the maintenance of a good family name.

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Ashima and Ashoke want to give their son a name that will add meaning and purpose to his life. One chosen by his maternal great-grandmother would have been sacred and perfect in every way. When this was not possible, Ashoke gave his son a name that represented hope for a better life and second chances - but it also represented tragedy.

In essence, the names that the protagonists carry in *The Namesake* not only add meaning and direction to their lives, but give them a sense of cultural identity and belonging among other Bengalis. However, their Bengali names and

heritage provide distress and discontent as they try to find their place in American society. Though named after a famous Russian writer, Gogol's name is a representation of his being bound to a backward Bengali heritage of which he longs to break free.

Cultural differences also give rise to the identity crises that the protagonists encounter. *The Namesake* follows the lives of Ashoke and Gogol, father and son living in two different times. Though they are both of Indian ancestry and both live under the strict statutes of the Indian culture, Gogol's cultural identity is bombarded by intense consumerism, materialism, and the open-mindedness that was characteristic of American society during the 1970's. He considers his parents' homeland in India to be backward and wishes not to be associated with the traditions that many of his family.

So he decides to conform to their wishes to not deviate from Bengali customs.

This leads to much confusion for Gogol as he tries to meet what is expected of him as an American and an Indian. Though *The Namesake* focuses primarily on name, culture, and inheritance as a way of establishing one's identity, it also sheds light on the ways in which gender helps to define a person's life. So, *The Namesake* is an

### **Kheirabadi 5**

Example of post-colonial literature because Doobie further defines post-colonialism literature as "marked by its concern for the ambiguity or loss of identity" (Doobie 187).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Thus, Gogol is frustrated with his family for giving him the name Gogol. Gogol sees the name as all of the walls stopping him from integrating into American society. His father explains about why he was named Gogol; Gogol looks at how the namekeeping pulling him back to his Indian heritage. Gogol doesn't accept his name until he finally learns what it means. When Gogol's father finally does tell Gogol why it is so important, Gogol feels ashamed.

The fact that Nikhil is a Bengali name, and Gogol is an Old Russian dude's last name, Nikhil is the name that, at this point, feels foreign to Gogol. At the end of the novel, though, Gogol's not so anti-Gogol anymore. He has started to come to terms with his Indian-American identity. He doesn't try to ignore Bengali custom, and he doesn't envy the American ways of his ex-girlfriends.

So, one of the faulty characteristics of *The Namesake* in complying with the postmodern literary period, is ironically one of the signature techniques for illustrating Gogol's identity crisis in the novel. Needless to say, since Lahiri presents such a definite model of expedition within her novel, she also offers a conclusion to Gogol's journey. During his life, Gogol seeks fulfillment in all the possible paradigms of determining one's identity: through heritage and culture.

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