



A Thematic Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'

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Jhumpa Lahiri is an immigrant novelist who belongs to the school of writers of the 'Indian Diaspora' who do not fully comprehend what it means to overlap the line between two cultures. Lahiri writes of her own condition as a diasporic person in the following words.

When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another.¹

Trapped between two worlds with an increasing multiplicity of identities, Jhumpa Lahiri scrutinizes and outlines the conditions of the diasporic societies. Lahiri explores the ideas of cultural and personal isolations and identities through her various characters, whose cultural isolation results in the personal. Her stories draw upon different aspects of Lahiri's Indian background and project the life of second generation Indian Americans like Lahiri herself. *The Namesake* contains themes of conflict in relationships between couples, families, and friends. Through these relationships she explores ideas of isolation and identity, both individual and cultural. The characters in the novel frequently encounter crisis of identity, which are tied to their inability to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity. As a result, her work gives us a rather bleak outlook on the future of her characters reflecting some of Lahiri's concerns about their real-life analogues. She often correlates her characters' cultural isolation with extreme personal isolation, suggesting that the cultural isolation causes the personal. Addressing the themes of immigration, clash of cultures and the importance of names, the novel *The Namesake* portrays the struggle of immigration and the issues of identity. *The Namesake* has been analysed here with respect to the above mentioned themes.

In *The Namesake*, everybody is just a little bit lost. Everyone is longing for identity. Practically every character struggles with his or her identity, because practically every character feels the tug and pull of different cultures, different traditions, and different dreams. Gogol, in particular, is torn between two cultures – the Indian traditions of his parents and the mainstream American culture in which he grows up. His struggle starts with the very moment he was born.

An infant doesn't really need a name. 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. In India parents take their time. It wasn't unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name, was determined.²

His struggle is the same one that his sister Sonia goes through, and his wife Moushumi, too. It's also related to the struggle his parents undergo as immigrants. Each character faces a choice: should I assimilate into American culture? If so, how much? Will I be betraying my roots if I do? Characters wrestle with these questions through their relationships with their names, their relationships with their families, and their choices about the future. This is what Ashoke means by family,

*Being rescued from that shattered train had been the first miracle of his life.
But here, now, reposing in his arms, weighing next to nothing but changing
everything, is the second.*³

Ashoke is delighted with the birth of his son, which he associates with his miraculous rescue from a train wreck. For Ashoke, family will continue to be a source of happiness, no matter how much Gogol tries to muck it up in the future. Since the main character of *The Namesake* is named after a Russian novelist, we'll take the liberty of recalling something that the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy writes in *Anna Karenina* that happy families are all alike but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

We're not sure whether *The Namesake* agrees, but it certainly does explore many different types of families: the extended Bengali family and its customs; American families; smaller nuclear families; families with divorced parents; families with mixed race parents; young parents and their children. Each generation has its own way of being happy or unhappy, with each succeeding generation deciding whether to stick with their parents' customs, or to come up with a few of their own. The story of immigrants coming to America in search of the American dream of wealth and success is a familiar one. In *The Namesake*, another layer is added to the story: class. The main Indian-American characters grow up with parents who are educated professionals; they graduate from Ivy League universities and enter similarly elite careers such as architecture and academia. But these characters often envy the lifestyle of their Anglo-American peers, who come from well-to-do families, who have never had to pull themselves up by their bootstraps the way their Indian parents have. Many of the characters (we're looking at you, Gogol) are acutely conscious of how possessions and property reflect class status.

How do I get home? That's one question Gogol can't seem to answer. He is never quite at home – not at Maxine's, not at his house on Pemberton Road, and not in Calcutta, either. And he's not the only one who's having trouble finding a place to put his feet up. The characters of *The Namesake* all seek to create homes for themselves, and the houses they live in reflect their personalities. The rich Ratliffs live in a lavish mansion. Gogol's bachelor pad is spare and, frankly, depressing. The Gangulis' first apartment is small and cramped, but filled with love. If a home reflects identity, it's no wonder Gogol has trouble finding and creating a lasting one. Plus, it makes it all the more fitting that he chooses to be an architect. If he can't find a home, he might as well build one.

The Namesake journeys India, America, Paris and Venice with the best of them. Each region is described in great detail, so much so that you might feel like you're reading a travel guide. In addition to giving us a sense of what life is like in each of these countries, each country also stands for different things to different characters – escape, home, freedom, failure. The list goes on. For most of the Indian and Indian-American characters, India embodies tradition, custom, and heritage. Ashima describes an Indian tradition of naming a child.

*This tradition doesn't exist for Bengalis, naming a son after father or grandfather, a daughter after mother or grandmother. This sign of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India. Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared.*⁴

To the children of Indian immigrants, though, their parents' homeland often appears backward and unfamiliar. The United States is an uneasy no-man's land for the Indian and Indian-American characters, since their lives are a patchwork of both American and Indian customs. Finally, Europe offers complete break from both Indian and American identities, a place where characters can totally remake themselves and cut their ties to the past. *The Namesake* is full of love making, even if some of it is a bit dysfunctional. We see everything from one-night stands to steadfast marriages, and Gogol alone runs the gamut. We see love gone right and love gone terribly wrong. When it does go wrong, it

usually has to do with the cultural identity issues of the romantic partners. Their ethnic identities do not seem to matter so much as their *attitudes* towards those identities. How each character feels about his or her identity as an Indian, American, or Indian-American affects their romantic decision-making. Gogol's love choices in particular often reflect his own love-hate relationship with his Indian heritage, while other characters who are more at ease in their Indian-American identities (such as his sister, Sonia) seem to have better luck in love. A source of unhappiness for Ashima is her children's desire for independence, particularly since she comes from a culture in which extended families are part of your everyday life. The more independent they become, the farther away they grow from their Bengali roots.

*Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their distance from her, is something she will never understand.*⁵

Happiness is elusive for the characters in *The Namesake*. Often, the characters' discontent is caused by the difference between their dreams and the reality they live in. For some, like Ashima, the primary source of unhappiness is homesickness, as they constantly compare life in the United States to life back in India. For others, like Gogol, unhappiness stems from not fitting in, about the cultural differences that set them apart from everybody else. These characters feel isolated, and alienated from both Indian and mainstream American cultures. These feelings of alienation seep into their relationships with their family and their lovers and cause all kinds of dissatisfaction. In short, the author focuses on the problem of representation of ethnicity and identity by offering a critical but also emotionally stirring examination of the contemporary implications of being culturally dislocated and rising up in two worlds instantaneously. She summarizes with unique intuition and concern how two generations of a migrant Bengali family, the Gangulis, endeavour to find an identity connection with each other, over thirty years and in two continents, against resistance and alienation

References

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2. _____.(2006). The Namesake, (London: HarperCollins Publishers), p-25.
3. Ibid., p-24.
4. Ibid., p-28.
5. Ibid., p-166.