

The Name Sake: A Story of the fight for Identity

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Abstract

Identity represents the smaller, ‘more micro’ meaning we have as individuals. The Namesake describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they are accustomed to. It explores the concepts of cultural identity, of rootlessness, of tradition and family expectations in a lucid and elegant prose. In the fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri, memory, nostalgia, loss and longing are some of the prominent themes. Her stories tell of people who have moved countries in the hope of a better life, but past remains there as a shadow to remind them of their original roots. The novel *The Namesake* is a documentary of such experiences, a glowing miniature of a tiny family making the voyage between two worlds. This article looks into the predicament of identity and belongingness of the characters of the Indian origin and immigrants in the U.S.A in *The Namesake*, the novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Keywords: Immigrants, Identity Crisis, Predicament, Cultural Dilemma.

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to Indian parent’s in 1967. She later moved to the United States to continue her higher education. Though she is an Indian by birth, majority of her life was spent in U.S only. *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s debut novel, was much awaited by her readership after her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001. Lahiri is emblematic of a new flourishing generation of Indian American writers which seems to be taking over from pioneering figures such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni or Bharati

Mukherjee and broadening the experience of migration to that of the second-generation members of the “desi” community, who are caught between their Indian descent and their American birth. *The Namesake* shows cultural dilemmas faced by the immigrants in the foreign system. Lahiri has tried to answer all the questions in her own poise through the quest of identity of her characters. *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel was published in 2003. It deals with the themes of immigrants experience, identity and displacement, and ties and clashes between the generations.

Major Thrust

The Namesake is a novel of identities. It begins with the migration in the first generation and follows with its specific concerns to the second generation. Alienation is a part of the experience of the Indian diaspora and even if people are at home in any part of the world it does not mean that they will not become victims of the sense of alienation. The novel depicts how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system. The second generation diaspora finds their roots only after undergoing cultural imbalance. Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities. Gogol grows up perplexed by his pet name. He feels it is not his own, and it is not until college, after he has legally changed it to Nikhil, that his father tells him the story that lies behind it. In *The Namesake*, identity is illustrated by intensely examining the importance of one’s background, name and culture. The main characters in the story try to uncover the reasoning behind their lineage, which they believe will lead to the discovery of their self with respect to the society they are born and raised. The novel describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they are accustomed to. The story begins when Ashoke and Ashima leave Calcutta to settle in America. When the novel opens we find that Ashima is pregnant and has two weeks left for her due delivery. She is struggling with abdomen sensations and pain. She calls her husband Ashoke, a doctoral candidate in electrical engineering at MIT. She does not say his name instead utters interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as “*Are you listening to me?*” (Lahiri, 2). The tone of the novel is set in very first chapter that the kind of social customs and habits which were part of their cultural heritage in India would directly come in contrast with the customs and rituals of the foreign land. *Ashima never thinks of her husband’s name, when she*

thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She does not utter his name because it is not the type of thing Bengali wives do. (Lahiri, 2). When Ashima is admitted in the hospital, her inherent ties with mother country still remain visible. She thinks that “*it is strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die*” (Lahiri, 4). It was the first time in her life that she slept alone surrounded by strangers. She struggles to negotiate her acquired cultural identity as she is not yet accustomed with an alien culture. *She is lost in her conservative views, and wishes she could have been in Calcutta, where women go home to their parents to give birth away from husband and in-laws* (Lahiri, 3). Through a series of events finally Ashima gives birth to a son. The traditional naming process in their families is to have an elder who will give the new baby a name. They write a letter to Ashima’s grandmother back in India. The letter never arrives, and soon after, the grandmother dies. As per Bengali culture Ashoke suggests the name of Gogol, in honour of the famous Russian author Nikolai Gogol, to be the baby’s pet name, never intended to be used by anyone other than family. Entering kindergarten, the Ganguli’s inform their son that he will be known as Nikhil at school. The five-year old objects and with the intervention of school administration he was admitted in the school as Gogol. Gogol is often unhappy because it is difficult for him to reconcile the different cultures, countries, and people that define him. For Gogol, the universal difficulties of adolescence are compounded because he is the son of first generation immigrants. This was the beginning of his conflict within and outside.

Conclusion

The theme of immigration, identity, collision of cultures, and the importance of names in *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates how much of a struggle immigration can be. The novel takes the readers deep into the Ganguli’s immigrant experience: their puzzlement at and isolation from an alien culture, their loss of connection with families in India, where births and deaths occur apart from them; their seeking old ties in a circle of other Bengali immigrants, several of whom become substitute aunts and uncles to Gogol and his sister, Sonia. This is 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. The novel also

shows how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system. She has tried to answer all these questions in her own poise through the quest of identity of her characters. The never-ending search for identity has been an increasing issue for many in today's society, particularly among those who have recently migrated to the country.

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