

The Namesake: A Paradigm of Cultural Estrangement

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ABSTRACT

In the recent times globalization has created a new trend in migration and almost deleted from our thinking the concept of global geographical boundaries. Now people are moving out of their native countries to go to other nations with the desire for a better lifestyle and opportunities. However, under the influence of globalization, contemporary man is losing the sense of attachment to any person, or even his country of origin. Jhumpa Lahiri's, The Namesake, traces the perplexities that Asians face when challenged with a foreign culture. The novel addresses various issues like cultural shock, displacement, identity crisis, and isolation.

The Namesake is a novel that narrates the story of a middle-class Hindu Bengali family and their traditions, cultural beliefs, and social setups. There is a continual struggle between an insider and outsider as the self is not able to withstand the two cultures and lifestyle of the host nation. The novelist through her work has shown the journey of her characters towards home and self-realization, being seen as disturbing race through alienation, cultural clash, and hybrid culture. The paper will highlight the issue of identity crisis arising from cultural estrangement.

Literature has been widely recognized as a cultural product that arouses us about a world, which is global and multicultural. Various literary works have captivated the eyes and enlightened the minds of readers across the world. The present novel, *The Namesake*, highlights the perplexities that Indians come face to face when provoked with a culture different from their culture. The novel depicts the characters that are culturally, socially, and psychologically isolated and segregated. They are detached from their roots. The cultural estrangement governs their social behaviour, as they feel oppressed, denied rights and are subjected to a poor treatment on foreign land. The title of the novel throws light on the ongoing ordeal of the culturally displaced characters of Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol. Gogol like other characters is faced with the grave issues of identity crisis in a host culture. Lahiri explains the feeling of rootlessness by saying that, "No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile" (1).

The novel showcases the story of a young Brahmin Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli who moves to the US soon after Ashoke completes his doctoral studies in engineering at the MIT. Ashoke and Ashima belong to the category of first generation of immigrants who undertake a long journey to America to find better opportunities and in between all this their son is born. His father hurriedly names the baby Gogol so that he can be discharged from hospital. After a time span of five years the couple gets blessed with a daughter, and she is named Sonali (Sonia). Motherhood for Ashima does not bring only happiness but also the struggle of raising the children all alone in a country of strangers. The feeling of isolation and displacement in a foreign land makes her feel that:

Being a foreigner is a sort of life-long pregnancy...A perpetual wait, a constant burden, a

continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an on-going responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding like pregnancy. Being a foreigner Ashima believes is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49-50)

Ashima feels sad, nostalgic and huffs alone in her apartment. She feels completely perturbed from the comfort of her home in her native country. However, she gradually gets attuned to the new environment. She starts embracing the American ways of living but longing for her home country persists in the form of Indian traditions and customs. Both Ashoke and Ashima created a sense of Indianness for themselves, by socializing with all the Bengali families living in their neighborhood. The paranoia of losing one's identity in a host country is transferred on to the next generation also. Ashoke and Ashima's son Gogol is seen as the symbolic example of this phenomenon. He from his parents inherited not only their looks but also the pain of being lost in the midst of an alien culture. He is disgruntled with his name and loathes it for being deficient in self-respect. Gogol's life is full of paradoxes, where he is baffled with the question of identity in an alien culture. According to Lahiri, names hold a prominent position in giving a shape to our identity. She accentuates:

For ancient peoples, all proper nouns were originally meaningful. The name showed a road and could thus have a bearing on the child's fate. Hence, the care dedicated to its choice is understandable. There was nothing childish or absurd about this as long as the name held a meaning inherent to it, since each person's name was associated with his future and could influence

his fate....The name serves not only to identify an individual, it also confers existence. (22)

Lahiri very adeptly brings out the elements of cultural alienation in her character Ashima, who until late in her life is emotionally disengaged and detached from her child. After twenty-eight years in the US, she finally takes her first job at a public library after her husband's death in Cleveland. It took her forty-eight years to break the shackles of domesticity. Ashoke's sudden death makes her more isolated. But for the first time in life, "Ashima had no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he had died" (183). This brings a new change in her where she is able to assimilate with foreign culture. As she juggles between the two cultures, she was ripped between the feelings of happiness and melancholy. Edward Said opines that:

Culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Mathew Arnold put it in the 1860's. Arnold believed that, culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralizes, the ravage of a modern, aggressive, mercantile and brutalizing urban experience...in time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state. (Xii)

The narrative delves deep into Gogol's life. He embarks on a forlorn journey with a profound sense of estrangement throughout his life. He revolts against the socio-cultural pressures. He comes face to face with manifold challenges and hurdles, which he attempts to overcome in order to establish his identity. He makes rigorous efforts to fit into American culture and thus disassociates himself from his parents. At another occasion, right after graduating from high school, Gogol finds himself in an awkward position at a party when he introduces himself to Kim, "But he does not want to tell Kim his name" (95). Thus, name becomes an important source of disaffection in the novel, which is evident from the title. In *The Namesake*, characters have good names, and pet names, used by families. Even the novelist when talks about this Bengali tradition speak that, "Bengalis I know personally, especially those living in India, have two names, one public, one private" (9). The novel represents a shift from 'Gogol-identity' to the 'Nikhil-identity'. The name Gogol creates uneasiness and pain whereas "Nikhil is the embodiment of all the cultural values that America has given to Gogol" (11).

Towards the close of the novel, Gogol realizes that changing a name doesn't mean that he can run away from his roots and culture. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* emphasizes regarding migrant's identity that, "Migrants history of their parents and grandparents. The Orientals continue to be looked down upon the 'Occidentals'" (69). Thus, Lahiri has very nicely explained the identity crisis resulting from cultural estrangement faced by the characters and their attempts to belong to the new place.

- [2] Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. New York: Mariner Books, 2004. Print.
- [3] Mcload, John. *Beginning Post-Colonialism*. London: Manchester UP, 2000. Print.
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- [5] *Orientalism*. London: London UP, 1985. Print.

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- [1] Jain, J. ed. *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. Jaipur: Rawat, 1998. Print.