
Beyond Name and Identity: Journey Towards Selfhood in *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

Nilanjana Sudeshna Jhumpa Lahiri, a British American author, is specially known for her short stories and novels. In her debut novel *Namesake*, Lahiri portrays the struggles of the first-generation immigrants in raising their family in America. The novel explores how the second-generation immigrants struggle in establishing their identity as Americans in America. A young Bengali couple, Ashima and Ashoke move to America and become parents of two children, Gogol and Sonia. For Ashoke, America is a land of opportunities whereas for Ashima it is a foreign country with different culture. They feel nostalgic about their country and try to create their own small Bengali world. Their son, Gogol, the second-generation immigrant, born and brought up in America is not satisfied with the name given to him by his father as it neither connects him to the Indian roots nor with the American. He feels culturally disoriented from his culture and tries to establish his identity by completely submerging into the American culture. He tries to bring about a balance between his Indian heritage and American upbringing. He becomes mature and realizes his faults after losing his father. Finally, he accepts his name given to him by his father and understands the significance of selfhood. He realizes that one's true identity lies not just in one's name but, beyond it, towards selfhood. The novel explores the problems and plights of immigrants in adjusting and establishing their identity in the foreign country.

Key Words: name, immigrant, culture, identity, generation.

Introduction:

The novel, *The Namesake* is a diasporic novel that explores the challenges and hardships faced by the diasporic community in the foreign land. It deals with the issues such as quest for identity, cultural difference, relationship and the challenges faced by the first and second generation of the diasporic community. It projects how different generation in the same family, who migrate to foreign land, have different experience regarding their identity, culture and relationship. A newly wed Bengali couple, Ashima Ganguli and Ashoke Ganguli, who settle in America, try to adjust themselves in the foreign land with new culture. Ashoke

Ganguli looks at America as a place for better future and opportunities. He neither resents nor regrets though, pays regular visits to his ancestral family in Calcutta with his wife, Ashima, and children, Gogol and Sonia. Ashima Ganguli, born and brought up in a Bengali family in India tries to adjust herself and establish her identity in a foreign land, America, carrying her own culture. Whereas, her son Gogol, born and brought up in America tries to establish his identity in America and in this journey, he not only escapes from his own culture but also distances himself from his family. Sonia conveniently reconciles herself with the American culture and her Indian root.

The very title of the novel suggests that the character Gogol shares his name with a Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol. It also draws our attention to the fact that the moment a child is born in this world, the task of giving a name to the new born begins. Naming a child is an important ceremony in almost all the religions and cultures. The naming ceremony is known by different names in different religions. For example, it is known as the Namakarana Samskara in Hinduism; in Christianity, it is popularly referred to as Christening that takes place through the baptism ceremony; in Islam, Aquiqah takes place on the seventh day of the child's birth; the naming ceremony in Sikhism is traditionally performed at a Gurudwara where the hukamnama is randomly read from *Guru Granth Sahib*, their holy scripture, to decide the first letter of the baby's name and so on. Thus, assigning a name to the baby officially, is celebrated as a ceremony in almost all religions and cultures. During his infancy, a child gets a name either by his family or sometimes by others. As he grows up with the name given to him, he gradually accepts it to be his identity. With the passage of time, however, he realizes that the name is not enough to establish his identity in the society and then begins his struggle and hard work to make a place for himself in the social structure. Finally, he realizes and analyses his level of contentment and if he doesn't feel content then finally starts his quest for self-identity or, to be precise, begins his journey towards his final destination. To put it in different words, he indeed comprehends the true nature of identity, that is, probably the continuous journey of accepting the dynamic self. This has been vividly projected by the novelist through the protagonist Gogol, who is not able to relate himself with his name and decides to change it in order to establish his social identity, but ultimately realizes the importance of selfhood and then begins his final journey towards exploring it.

Gogol after his birth, while being discharged from the American hospital, required a name as Mr. Wilcox, compiler of hospital birth certificates, informs the couple that they must choose a name for the baby Ganguly who could not be released from the hospital without a birth certificate which needs a name. Naming their baby at such short notice became a daunting task for Ashoke and Ashima as in their religious culture, the baby's grandmother had to suggest it. As the couple had no idea about this as a mandatory requirement in the American hospitals to release the baby with the birth certificate which needs a name. Mr. Wilcox gives them some suggestions regarding the name for baby Ganguli and goes out

asking them to think about it. Let us see how the name ‘Gogol’ strucks Ashoke for his baby in the novel:

The door shuts, which is when, with a slight quiver of recognition, as if he’d known it all along, the perfect pet name for his son occurs to Ashoke. He remembers the page crumpled tightly in his fingers, the sudden shock of the lantern’s glare in his eyes. But for the first time he thinks of that moment not with terror, but with gratitude... “Gogol,” he repeats, satisfied... Ashima approves, aware that the name stands not only for her son’s life, but her husband’s. She knows the story of the accident... (Lahiri 28)

So, the name that struck in Ashoke’s mind was Gogol, after a Russian author, Nikolai Gogol who had a deep impact on his mind after his train accident. Thus, the boy’s name, Gogol Ganguli gets registered in the hospital files, though the parents decide that they would later change the name officially following the naming ceremony.

As Gogol grows up, he is admitted to an elementary school where his parents fill ‘Nikhil’ as his name in the registration form. Ashoke had thought of this name as it is artfully connected to the old one. “Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name,...but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol” (Lahiri 56). Though Gogol doesn’t want a new name for him and doesn’t respond to his principal, Mrs. Lapidus, when she asks him his age. He responds only when she addresses him as Gogol. So, it is decided by the principal to retain the name Gogol instead of Nikhil as his parents had decided. As a young boy, Gogol doesn’t find a problem with his name. When he is eleven years, in the sixth grade, Gogol goes on a school trip where, the students are also taken to the grave of a writer. Here Gogol, unlike other students who get busy in finding out some similarity with their own names to claim some kind of connectivity with the graves, realizes that he would not find any Ganguli because in their religion, they are burned, not buried. “He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life” (Lahiri 69). As the story progresses, Gogol gradually learns the difference between his ancestral culture and the American culture. Though Ashima is not happy with these kinds of school trips and feels, “only in America are children taken to cemeteries in the name of art. What’s next, she demands to know, a trip to the morgue? In Calcutta the burning ghats are the most forbidden places, she tells Gogol” (Lahiri 70). Further, she rejects his painting that are related to Death; however, Gogol takes these things casually like any other American child.

Lahiri has very well presented the clash and cultural conflict between the two generations of the immigrant community through Ashima and Ashoke as the first generation and Gogol and his sister, Sonia as the second generation of the immigrant community. In the novel, Ashima and Ashoke represent the first-generation immigrants who try to preserve their own culture assimilating into the new. Ashima and Ashoke are physically present in

America but are emotionally connected to India. On the other hand, Gogol and his sister, Sonia, represent the second-generation immigrant community who try to reconcile their Indian heritage with their American upbringing but are left somewhere in between the two worlds. For Ashima and Ashoke, India, where they have been born and brought up, is the home that provides them comfort, and they feel nostalgic about it. On the other hand, Gogol and Sonia, born and brought up in America, find America as their home, where they feel more comfortable with its culture and customs. Ashima and Ashoke relentlessly try to preserve their Bengali culture, customs and traditions by celebrating their festivals in the foreign land with Bengali friends and relatives. Though they also celebrate American festivals such as Christmas for the sake of their children's happiness. Gogol and Sonia could not connect to their parents' customs and traditions and often find it boring and burdensome. Ashoke and Ashima have created a small world with their Bengali acquaintances and culture in America. They even want their children to marry within the Bengali community but their children, on growing up, start making American friends and dating them. Ashoke and Ashima feel nostalgic about their homeland, Calcutta, and their happiness and contentment becomes apparent when they visit India. While Gogol and Sonia find Calcutta to be a foreign place and feel nostalgic about their home in America.

Another prominent theme in the novel is the quest for identity in the foreign land. On his fourteenth birthday, Gogol receives *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* as a gift from his father. Ashoke had suggested him to read it though Gogol never had any inclination to read Gogol or any other Russian writer. Gogol was never informed about the story behind his name. By this time, Gogol had developed a certain hatred for his name. He feels "that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second" (Lahiri 76). Gogol is not satisfied with this name as a child because this name could neither relate him with the American name nor with the traditional Indian name, he feels torned between two cultures and could not connect to either of them. This kind of identity crisis is common in case of the second-generation diasporic community. Let us see how Gogol registers his resentment regarding his name during his adolescence:

From the little he knows about Russian writers, it dismayed him that his parents chose the weirdest namesake. Leo or Anton, he could have lived with. Alexander, shortened to Alex, he would have greatly preferred. But Gogol sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity or gravity. What dismayed him most is the irrelevance of it all. Gogol, he's been tempted to tell his father on more than one occasion, was his father's favourite author, not his. Then again, it's his own fault. He could have been known, at school at least, as Nikhil. That one day, that first day of kindergarten, which he no longer remembers, could have changed everything. He could have been Gogol only fifty percent of the time. Like his

parents when they went to Calcutta, he could have had an alternate identity, a B-side to the self. (Lahiri 76)

Gogol tries to blend into the American culture but finds it very challenging as it infuses in him a sense of alienation and isolation. This is one of the major issues faced by the diasporic or the immigrant community as they continuously struggle for their identity trying to connect to the either culture, which sometimes hinders their integration into the mainstream society of the foreign country. Ashoke gave him this name as it reminds him of getting a new life after the train accident but Gogol does not understand it and decides to change it somewhere rejecting his father's world of perception and asserting or creating his own new world with his own identity. This is how the two generations within the diasporic community find it difficult to maintain the emotional balance which further widens the gap between them. Gogol gradually moves away from them and didn't want to go to his father's almamater and "live in an apartment in Central Square as his parents once had, and revisit the streets about which parents speak nostalgically" (Lahiri 126). He had no will to visit his home on the weekends and did not want "to go with them to pujas and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world" (Lahiri 126).

The novel explores the struggles and challenges faced by the second-generation immigrants in establishing their identity in the foreign land through the character, Gogol, who desires to fit into the American culture. In his endeavor to fit into the mainstream American society, Gogol starts dating American women and gets drifted away from his family. He, in fact, shifts to his girlfriend, Maxine's house and shares her home with her parents, and within six months, he even gets the keys of the house. From the very beginning, Gogol feels effortlessly a part of their lives. Like her parents, Gogol starts addressing Maxine as Max. He tries to get completely immersed into the culture and customs of Max, though he is reminded of the cultural difference between his parents' and that of Maxine's family. He closely observes Maxine and feels amazed to notice how she emulates her parents and respects their tastes and ways. She also argues with her parents on certain issues as friends do. He finds that "there is none of the exasperation he feels with his own parents, no sense of obligation" (Lahiri 138). He also realizes that "unlike his parents, they pressure her to do nothing, and yet she lives faithfully, happily at their side" (Lahiri 138). Lahiri crafts her sentences meticulously to project the cultural difference between the immigrant families and the native ones. Gogol's mother, Ashima wears a sari and puts bindi on her forehead unlike the American women. Gogol is also reminded of the fact that unlike Maxine's parents, "he has never witnessed a single moment of physical affection between his parents" (Lahiri 138). He further tells Maxine that whatever love or affection exists between his parents is their private and uncelebrated affair. As he gets absorbed in the family of Maxine, he is also conscious of the fact that he is somewhere betraying his family by deliberately keeping a distance in order to establish his own identity. Let us see what he feels about it and how he tries to justify it being with the family of Maxine:

At times, as the laughter at Gerald and Lydia's table swells, and another bottle of wine is opened, and Gogol raises his glass to be filled yet again, he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own. It isn't simply the fact that his parents don't know about Maxine, that they have no idea how much time he spends with her and Gerald and Lydia. Instead it is his knowledge that apart from their affluence, Gerald and Lydia are secure in a way his parents will never be. He cannot imagine his parents sitting at Lydia and Gerald's table, enjoying Lydia's cooking, appreciating Gerald's selection of wine. He cannot imagine them contributing to one of their dinner party conversations. And yet here he is, night after night, a welcome addition to the Ratliffs' universe, doing just that. (Lahiri 141)

While comparing Lydia and Gerald's yearly visit to their parents at New Hampshire with his own parents' trip to Calcutta, he is aware that it was an obligation or a sense of duty that drew his parents whereas for Maxine's parents, it was just a call for pleasure.

Lahiri has indeed very candidly presented the fact that the second-generation diasporic community face comparatively more challenges in assimilating them with the foreign culture. Despite being born and brought up in the foreign country and naturally acquiring its citizenship, they are not easily acceptable in the mainstream community. The novelist mentions an incident in the novel where Pamela, a neighbour of Lydia, while talking to Gogol, mentions about one of her friends who went to India. On being asked about the place visited by her friend, Pamela said sarcastically, "I don't know. All I remember is that she came back thin as a rail, and that I was horribly envious of her" (Lahiri 157). She further comments to Gogol, "But you must be lucky that way...I mean, you must never get sick" (Lahiri 157). Hearing this, Gogol responds to her bit annoyed, "Actually, that's not true,...We get sick all the time. We have to get shots before we go. My parents devote the better part of a suitcase to medicine" (Lahiri 157). At this, Pamela gets skeptical and said, "But you're Indian. I'd think the climate wouldn't affect you, given your heritage" (Lahiri 157). Lydia then intervenes and clears emphatically that Gogol is American. Thus, this kind of identity crisis, that leads to hybrid identity is common among the second-generation diasporic community. Hybrid identity..... Gogol's plight is that he is not completely Indian for his relatives in Calcutta where he is seen as an American foreigner, and not American enough for his acquaintances and peers, who have strong roots and traditions that are not shared by him. So, he feels that he doesn't belong to the either world completely and this feeling infuses in him a sense of otherness, alienation and lack of belongingness. Through the protagonist, Gogol, Lahiri very well projects how diasporic identity becomes hybrid.

As the story progresses, Gogol gains maturity, after the sudden death of his father, Ashoke. Gogol now begins to understand the significance of his namesake and the emotions and love of his parents attached to his name. He understands that the name Gogol has been given to him by his father as a tribute to the Russian author, Nikolai Gogol, whose book

saved his life. Gogol now begins to acknowledge the sacrifices made by his parents. He no more runs away from his Bengali heritage, rather embraces it and learns to appreciate it. Though, due to this transformation in him, his relationship with Maxine comes to an end which is not regretted by him. He starts embracing his dual identity moulded by his Indian heritage and American upbringing. In order to bring about a kind of reconciliation to his father's legacy and mother's wish, he marries a Bengali girl, Moushumi, who is also born and brought up in America. Though this marriage could not work as both, Gogol and Moushumi, struggled with their hybrid identity. Finally, Gogol understands that to establish his identity, he doesn't need to run away from his heritage and get immersed into the American culture, rather, a reconciliation between the two is required. He understands that seeking identity is a journey towards self-acceptance. By the end of the story, Gogol accepts his name, his Bengali heritage and his dual identity that had disturbed him since beginning. He ultimately reconciles with his own self and experiences peace.

The novelist projects the problems, plight and challenges faced by the immigrant communities. Lahiri candidly presents the identity crisis and the generational gap within the immigrant communities. The novel explores how the immigrant families face the challenges of cultural disorientation that leads to a yawning gap between the two generations within the families. This is very well presented by the characters, Ashima and Gogol, who, while facing different challenges, try to bridge the cultural gap within their family. Ashima and Ashoke, the first-generation immigrants, deep rooted in their Bengali culture, try to preserve their culture while their stay at America. Ashoke perceives America as a land of opportunities while Ashima tries to adjust herself carrying her traditional Bengali way of life with that of the modern new world in the foreign land. Their children, Gogol and Sonia who become culturally disoriented, struggle to establish their identity as Americans. While Ashima reconciles herself, after the death of Ashoke, by deciding to spend half of her time in India and the other half in America, Gogol, on the other hand, brings about a reconciliation by accepting his Indian heritage and American identity thus understanding his true self beyond his name as an identity.

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