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Social Identity Crisis of Expatriates and The Effect of The Local Culture: THE NAMESAKE by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

Gogole joins “a school field trip of some historical intent,” a part of which is to rub people’s names buried in an old grave on newsprints using crayons. The names he rubbed, though sounded odd like his own, fired an interest in him to bring them home to supplement his artwork collections on the kitchen wall. But his mother wouldn’t allow that.

How would she “...cook dinner for her family with the names of dead people on the walls? ...Only in America (a phrase she has begun to resort to often these days), only in America, are children taken to cemeteries in the name of art. ... In Calcutta, the burning ghats are the most forbidden of places...” Disheartened, he takes them to his room to bury in his cupboard.

A lot of works on Indian Americans use the glossy narratives of high-income groups, stable households, no divorce, Bollywood, music, yoga and so on. Lahiri in *The Namesake* is different agreeing with the facts and reality. Culture evolves, having protective and unifying functions but ethnocentric and egocentric views to preserve it as the set traditions makes a community regressive and the children at a loss. This is certainly a novel that explores the concepts of cultural identity, of rootlessness, of tradition and familial expectations as well as the way that names subtly alter our perceptions of ourselves – but it’s very much to its credit that it never succumbs to the formulas those themes so often entail. Instead, Lahiri turns it into something both larger and simpler: the story of a man and his family, of his life and hopes, loves and sorrows. All Lahiri’s observations surprise your heart with their freshness and truth. Her skill at deploying small physical details as a path into character is as exceptional as it is enjoyable.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s quietly dazzling new novel, *The Namesake*, is that rare thing: an intimate, closely observed family portrait that effortlessly and tastefully unfolds to reveal a hallow social vision. In recording more than three decades in the Gangulis’ lives, Ms. Lahiri has not only given us a wonderfully intimate and knowing family portrait, she has also taken the haunting chamber music of her first collection of stories and guaranteed its themes of exile and identity to create traditional work, a debut novel that is as assured and eloquent as the work of a longtime master of the craft.

This grand sweep of 30 years is the plot of the novel, and it is punctuated with lightly comic scenes that give us glimpses into what it really means to live this life ... As Gogol grows up, his first experiences with girls and sex are affecting, blissfully ordinary ... This is the fine novel from a superb writer, but I do have to say that for all the illuminating moments and for social vision, traditional all the precision of the details, the events of the oddly undramatic. Lahiri tells the story from a great narrative distance, and in a present tense that flattens the temporal content.

Key words:-cultural identity, rootlessness, family expectation, social vision,traditional work

Introduction:-

'Namesake' is the first novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri whose debut collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000.

This novel moves quietly, eloquently across its central arc from the birth of a son to the death of the father. Her point of view shuttles between the parents and their son. Her novel strains for continuity by returning repeatedly to the themes of names and train. Lahiri's insistence on making a connection with Nikolai Gogol, whose writing exemplifies a satirical taste for the absurd outlandishness of life, seems even more forced. It is particularly unsolved in a writer whose tone is utterly filled with sober realism.

... As in her short stories, these relationships give Lahiri a chance to do what she does best: sympathetic character portrayals and even handed, subtly nuanced explorations of the ebb and flow of a couple's dynamics. There's a heart-rending, almost mournful tone and a constant mourning for the past that pervades *The Namesake*. It is a style to both generations. In this post-modern era, culture fragments and bonds of blood disappoint. Lahiri honors a bond stronger, and more transcendent than either of thought.

The Namesake is so soft and subtle. it deserves to lift on cultural effortfulness. The richly drawn characters, the intergenerational sweep of the story. Lahiri crafts a wondrous world where adherences to family, heritage and self linger without serving as a moment.

The Namesake is the first novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. The novel deals with the identity issues of a boy in America, born to Bengali immigrant parents, who finds it difficult to agree with many things his parents say, starting with his name Gogol, which is borrowed from the Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol, to whom his father is indebted. His American schoolmates make fun of him calling 'Giggle' or 'Gargle' and teachers stop startled at his name on the roster.

At 18, he legally forsakes Gogol for Nikhil, not for any affinity to the home culture but to establish his freedom and identity, pursues a course in architecture at Yale. His father's untimely death calls her to the family duties, and he marries Maushmi a Bengali woman, with his mother's will. However, he eventually turns a divorcee in a year.

names buried in an old grave on newsprints using crayons. The names he rubbed, though sounded odd like his own, fired an interest in him to bring them home to supplement his artwork. Ashima weds Ashoke, a doctoral candidate in electrical engineering at MIT in a typical Indian arranged marriage in Calcutta. The baby boy born to them in America they name Gogol. In the new country over and above the cultural shock, the child's birth unsettles her, "As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known a person entering the world so alone, so deprived."

1. Identity crisis

hardly any Indian immigrant mother in America pardons herself of such pity and guilt, the new world of unlimited material possibilities puts her in doubts of her new born's cultural existence. Indians generally are rooted in the ethnic/caste/communal identities than in the national and resort to the tradition-set rules in the social and family matters at home. In America, this occurs in forms of cultural ethnocentrism and the romanticised self-pity of home sickness about the distant home. They demand the same from the younger generation, which immediately sets conflicts in the relationship. Lahiri in *The Namesake*, stages how this conflict develops on the Ganguly family foraging through the mental map of its members' ego, unaffected attitudes, quirks of the adults and the perceptions, reactions and insecurities of the youngsters. Not through the telescopic view

painfully, sometimes beautifully), comes into his own, and eventually begins to accept and embrace his roots. It's a beautiful story of the importance of knowing where you came from.

THE WAY LAHIRI CRAFTS THE STORY, MAKES IT A COMPELLING READ FROM THE START TO END. HER NARRATIVE IS INFORMAL, CONVERSATIONAL AND RELAXING. HER TALENT FOR OBSERVATIONS AND THE ABILITY TO DETAIL THE SITUATIONS WITH WITTY EXPRESSIONS, SMOOTH THE PATH INTO EACH

That is used around the house and amongst family members, and a "good name," the one on their from the above or commonplaces but Lahiri shows the real-life narratives of such everyday negotiations.

Gogol is ten. On the day following the Halloween, he discovers his father's surname Ganguly on their mailbox in gold letters got tainted, "The word GREEN scrawled in pencil following GANG." During the last visit to Calcutta, he learned of his father's pride about the legacy and popularity of his surname and he worries how this would upset him now. His father stands unaffected in front of the mailbox later purchases stuff from the shop to fix the mail box.

Gogol is eleven in the sixth grade; his teachers and schoolmates are no more at odd with his name. He joins "a school field trip of some historical intent," a part of which is to rub people's collections on the kitchen wall. But his mother wouldn't allow that.

How would she "...cook dinner for her family with the names of dead people on the walls? ...Only in America (a phrase she has begun to resort to often these days), only in America, are children taken to cemeteries in the name of art. ... In Calcutta, the burning ghats are the most forbidden of places..." Disheartened, he takes them to his room to bury in his cupboard.

Portrayal of Indian Women in The Namesake

Ashima internalises femininity to sacrifice personal preferences to remain a dutiful wife in marriage. After thirty-three years in America when returns to India, she doesn't fault her husband for his "...omissions of devotion, of affection...She knows now, (these) do not matter in the end." Maushami on the other hand, a first-generation American woman struggled her way fighting cultural odds and sexism to establish self-will and identity rushes headlong to marry Gogol and divorce him at the realization that, "...he was not who she saw ending up with, he had never been that person...being with him, falling in love with him, doing precisely what had been expected of her entire life, had felt forbidden, wildly transgressive, a breach of her own instinctive will." Ashima's pity for her son entering the world 'so alone and deprived' not only courses the novel forward but forebodes her son's destiny.

In *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, the story revolves around the Ganguli's, a Bengali family who immigrated to the United States in the 1960s. The novel begins with the young couple, Ashoke and Ashima, who were the first to arrive in the country, and continues to follow the lives of their children. The book focuses mostly on Ashoke and Ashima's firstborn, a son named Gogol. Gogol is named after the Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol hates his name as he grows older.

In Indian culture, children are usually given a pet name, birth certificates and that is used in public. In India, traditionally, the grandparents chose the children's good names. Because Ashoke and Ashima were already living in the United States when Gogol was born, they wait for a letter from Ashima's grandmother to arrive with the chosen good name. Unfortunately, the letter gets lost, and they chose to put Gogol on the birth certificate.

When Gogol starts kindergarten, his parents decide that although Gogol is the name on his birth certificate, he should also have a good name. So they enroll him in school with the name Nikhil. Understandably, 5-year old Gogol doesn't want to change his name. He asks his teachers to call him Gogol, and to his parent's chagrin, they agree.

This all begins to change when Gogol is around 14 years old and begins to hate his name. It is here the reader starts to see a change in Gogol: he begins to reject his Indian culture, pushing it aside so that he can be recognized for the American that he is. It's heart breaking to read the exchanges between Gogol and his parents, as they don't understand why he isn't more proud of his culture. When he is 18, Gogol legally changes his name to Nikhil Ganguli.

Along the way, Gogol meets an Indian-American girl named Moushumi. The pair instantly bond over their shared experiences as first-generation immigrants. I was already enjoying the novel, but the introduction of Moushumi carried me even deeper into the storyline. And, as this is a feminist book review, you know I have to take a closer look at one of the more important female main characters.

Moushumi thrives in her new life in Paris. She speaks French and the language becomes an escape for her, and it is all hers. It isn't pushed on her like her Indian roots, and it is a way for her to declare her independence from her parents and their adopted country. I couldn't help but relate to Moushumi, there is something so alluring about moving to a new country and immersing yourself into a culture where you know no one. A place where no one knows your name, so to speak. It's liberating and terrifying at the same time, and the passages that take a closer look at what's going on in Moushumi's head really stuck with me. I ended up disliking her character because of the ending of the novel. I won't spoil it for you, so you'll have to pick up the book for yourself to find out why she ended up rubbing me the wrong way.

It's impossible to deny that *The Namesake* echoes some of Lahiri's own experiences as a child of Indian immigrants. Inside the novel, she reminds the reader of the power that language, and in particular, a name can have over a person. It is a commentary on the pressure and expectations that can come from family. *The Namesake* is also undeniably a coming of age story, and over the course of the book, the reader watches as Gogol grows up (sometimes painfully, sometimes beautifully), comes into his own, and eventually begins to accept and embrace his roots. It's a beautiful story of the importance of knowing where you came from.

The End

As the story ends, we see Gogol sitting alone in the home he spent his early days with his family thinking, "...without people in this world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he lives, Gogol Ganguly will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so cease to exist.

We focused on the Chinese, Indian, and Cuban diaspora in America. As an immigrant myself, albeit a white immigrant in a majority white country, I couldn't help but relate to several of the books that we covered. Although I immigrated from one western country (the United States) to another (France), there's no denying the culture shock, separateness, loneliness, and homesickness I experienced. It was obviously the hardest in the beginning, but even now, six and a half years later, there are still days when I just feel...different. As humans, we crave to belong and we crave to connect.

A huge theme of the course was the power of language. They make comments about my accent, or simply ignore me once they hear that I am a foreigner.

Along the way, Gogol meets an Indian-American girl named Moushumi. The pair instantly bond over their shared experiences as first-generation immigrants. Moushumi secretly double majors in French and immediately after graduating moves to Paris. She thrives in her new life in Paris. She speaks French and the language becomes an escape for her, and it is all hers. It isn't pushed on her like her Indian roots, and it is a way for her to declare her independence from her parents and their adopted country. I couldn't help but relate to Moushumi, there is something so alluring about moving to a new country and immersing yourself into a culture where you know no one. I ended up disliking her character because of the ending of the novel.

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