

# Postcolonial identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'

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**Abstract**— The process of colonization involves one nation or territory taking control of another nation or territory either through the use of force or by acquisition. As a byproduct of colonization, the colonizing nation implements its own form of schooling within their colonies. Referring to the main concept of the colonialism indicates an extension of a nation's rule over territory beyond its borders and a population that is subjected to the political domination of another population. This paper looks into the predicament of name and sense of identity and belongingness of the characters of Indian origin and immigrants in the USA in *The Namesake*, the novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. *The Namesake* makes it the best kind of ready reference to classify Diaspora as the term 'Diaspora' and its role in the present era, the life of first and second generation immigrants and their struggle for identity and belongingness are well articulated through the plot and characters. The fact that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants when she migrates from England to America makes her both a migrant and Diaspora writer. She has written on the Indian Diaspora and narrated stories that reveal the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of Diaspora in her works. The study will use colonialism and neo-colonialism as the primary theoretical framework to engage in textual and discourse analysis as the different elements of the study require.

**KEY WORDS:** *Origin, Diaspora, identity, colonialism, neocolonialism.*

## Introduction

Diaspora has been a favorite topic in the transnational world of literature for innovative literary outputs in recent years. People who have flown and tried to settle over the distant territories of the world for various reasons have always found themselves in dual conditions in the process of settling down. They do not get away from the settled assurance of home and they cannot allow their roots being blown over into fragments of uncertain insecurities on a foreign land. The intellectuals and authors have tried to represent these feelings in diverse ways in diverse writings all over the world.

**Struggle for identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*:** It is very much appealing that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants when we think of literature on Indian Diaspora. Immigration became blessing in disguise as that makes her a Diaspora writer. She crosses borders when she migrates from England, her birth place, to the U.S.A. and became an American citizen. The recurrent theme in Lahiri's writing is the bitter-sweet experience of emigrant to America from India. Her characters are often caught in a cultural indeterminate state-excited about their new home but grieving the loss of their country of origin. Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end. Her characters also bespeak the glory of common life, "I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. . . . As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination." (Lahiri, IOM 198). In *The Namesake*, Lahiri's experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resemble that of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. Regarding the self in the text versus the self as text in Asian-American Autobiographies, Rocio G. Davis says, "Asian American autobiographies generally highlight the protagonist's growing comprehension of the meaning or value that society places on questions and attitudes about ethnic differences,

historical reconstruction, and the place of their communities in American societies" (Davis, 2005). In *The Namesake*, she reflects on the Indian Diaspora and creates a narrative that reveals the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of Diaspora. In an interview Lahiri has admitted: "I" am lucky that I'm between two worlds... I don't really know what a distinct south Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life". And that is exactly what she does through her characters. Names are symbols of identity in life. Names help people to communicate with each other, they play an important role for people to identify themselves. As identity becomes the core issue, the names become quite significant. Indian tradition follows various kinds of rituals and ceremonies of naming a born baby. Names play very important role in life. In literature, dealing with the clash of cultures, countries, and races, names emerge as identity symbols. In Indian perception good names represent dignified and enlightened qualities. Pet names are sometimes meaningless and silly. The title *The Namesake* reflects the struggle Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his unusual name. The novel represents the experience of a very specific community which has no name. The novel centers around the couple and community of Bengali origin in the USA migrated for various reasons. Sociologically, they are first and their children second generation south Asian immigrants or south Asian Americans. Narrating the story of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, Lahiri focuses on the cultural dislocations of a family, immigrants from Calcutta who settle in Boston to study, work and raise a family. The novel moves quietly, eloquently across its central arc from the birth of a son to the death of a father. The great concern of novel is that Gogol the representative of community without a name, is himself misnamed Gogol. He struggles with a name he is embarrassed by and a heritage either Indian or American he is not sure of either. Gogol wants to redefine himself as a born and brought up of USA rather than to be identified from his parent's Bengali immigrant culture. In order to get self-definition, he abandons the name Gogol and tries to become someone else. The question of identity becomes crucial when a person is culturally displaced and he cannot co-relate with any of the two worlds in which he is living. While experiencing identity confusion from a change of names, Gogol is nonetheless able to define his identity. Since Gogol is born after his father survives in a horrifying train accident, his father sees the name Gogol as a pet name as a gesture of his rebirth. However, Gogol does not understand how meaningful his name is when he is young. Gradually, he starts knowing the uncommon nature of his name which creates problems with his identity when he grows up main problem with Gogol is that he is a hyphenated character living in two totally different worlds, the stress of which he can't cope up, he is lost and drifts away from his parents and culture. Gogol does not understand the emotional significance of the name. He does not like to be known by a name which is neither Indian, nor American, nor even first name. The name becomes a problem for Gogol, because he feels uncomfortable with the Russian name. It makes him to detach himself from his family members. Later on, Gogol develops resentment toward this name during adolescence and decides to use his legal name, Nikhil, as an overcoat to escape from Indian culture. Although the name Nikhil brings him more confidence, Gogol is always present inside him. Soon he feels a sense of futility and dissatisfaction about avoiding his roots: "Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all" (Lahiri 289). All his efforts pay him back with confusion about who he truly is. He sees himself as Nikhil, striving to be truly American, yet he fails to eradicate Gogol. By the end, he chooses to stick with "Gogol," is Indian identity, since he realizes that everything that he has gone through, from the botched naming attempt at his birth (Gogol) to his realization of the hope behind Gogol, is the meaningful fragment to define who he is. Likewise, Ashima, Gogol's mother arrives in the USA with her husband Ashoke has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents. But she agrees for the marriage since he (her husband) would be there. Ashima often feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three room apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, far removed from the description of house in the English novels she has read, she feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable „home „of her father full of so many loving ones and yearns to go back. Ashima undergoes same phase and she feels that living in a foreign land is like a lifelong pregnancy. She

clutches to her moral and cultural ideology of Bengali Indian. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguly try to create a small Bengal clutching to their roots and culture in America far from the land of their birth and struggling for an identity in the land of opportunities and riches. At home and with friends they speak in Bengali and eat only Bengali dishes with their hands. They find many Bengali friends and try to create their own community there. Often they used to throw parties to their friends in order to meet them. They wait eagerly for such gatherings. They try to restore their traditions by preparing Indian food, inviting Brahmin for rituals and so on. As Wiewiora states, when a Diaspora community is “constantly rejected or interiorized while only wanting to be included, either socially or culturally, or when this group or this individual is racially discriminated, and demonized under the argument of a supposed cultural different” then the individual or the group is embarrassed and this eventually “leads to a self-definition and behaviors based on this culture and, eventually, racial distinction.” An atmosphere of home is tried to be built up for children and themselves far from their real home. This sense of alienation from the western culture and the land where they live creates a feeling of rootlessness among the children who can neither co-relate with the place where they are born and bred nor to the place to which their parents belong to and about which they are always being told about. Parents do their utmost to create Bengali ambience for Gogol and Sonia by arranging all Bengali get-togethers, but the two as they grew in hybrid culture, part Bengali, part American, gingerly respond to their parents efforts to create a homeland in America, an oasis of Bengali culture. Ashima tells Gogol about Durga Puja, she also makes him memorize four line children’s poem by Tagore. But at the same time she is conscious of her child being American student and makes him watch Sesame Street and the Electric Company in order to match with English he uses at school. So Gogol is always sailing in two boats simultaneously, one with his parents at home speaking Bengali and living in Bengali style and the other of American Indian. ‘Multiculturalism’ suggests the co-existence of a number of different culture .It does not prescribe homogenization and conformity directly. It also does not encourage openly different ethnic religious, lingual or racial constituents of a particular society to degrade and alienate each other so that such a society is damaged or destroyed permanently. *The Namesake* is a perfect reference for Lahiri’s story about the strangeness of the Indian immigrant experience in the United States and that is somewhat true also because the child of immigrants begins in a kind of nowhere place. Gogol or even Lahiri is firmly of America but is not quite an American in part because they are not recognized as such by others. Gogol desires to blend in the American society. He wants to live unnoticed. But he is not viewed as an American by other Americans, even though he is a native born citizen. He tries to put a wall between his past and his present but it is not easy. The adoption of ‘Nikhil’ is a part to live only in the present but the ghost of Gogol clings to him that he signs his old name unconsciously, he does not respond immediately when he is addressed as Nikhil. He tries to become an entirely different person from what really he is. Gogol struggles to carry the burden of two names. Nikhil resembles American names, yet ‘Gogol’ and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. Jhumpa Lahiri tries to focus on the issue of identity what she had faced in her childhood. The problem of Gogol’s name symbolizes the problem of his identity. He wants to be connected to the strange names in the graveyard when the students were taken to the graveyard for the project. He wants to relate himself with American locale but his name hinders his way to be recognized as an American. Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. No one knows him as Gogol but Nikhil. His life with new name also gets changed. Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with Indianness. So ‘who he is’ becomes a great problem. It is the name which determines identity. Gogol is trying to get identity. Even after making all efforts to erase his past, his failure to assert his identity is seen in his relationship with women. He does not want Ruth or Maxine to meet his parents. Such efforts are made to escape his past identity and heritage.

### **Conclusion:**

*The Namesake* convincingly illustrates the lives of both first generation and second generation Indian migrants in the USA. 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 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 second generation Diaspora finds their roots only after undergoing cultural imbalance. Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities, spaces for growth, resolution of conflicts and a new culture. Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural belief and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Their own children groomed to be „bilingual“ and „bicultural“ face cultural dilemmas and displacement more. But at last Lahiri also shows that all immigrants carve their own ‘routes’ in the course of time and it’s not necessary that they should settle in country of their own origin.

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### **BIO-NOTE**

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