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DILEMMA OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BELONGINGNESS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S  
*THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an effort to deal with the dilemma of the first generation and the second generation immigrants' sense of identity and their adherence to their home land and the alien land. With the impact of globalization and fast developing technology people migrate to foreign land in order to encash their talent and for better opportunities. They want to connect themselves to that place but their attachment to native language, culture, food and traditions arouse an emotional and psychological bondage resulting in a dilemma of identity and clash of culture. But after spending so many years in another country they feel belonging to the people and the country. Indian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* examines the immigrants' inner psyche , identity crisis, sense of belongingness, loneliness, alienation, the clash of culture, the conflicts of adjustment and the tangled ties between generations. The second generation groomed to be 'bilingual' and 'bicultural' dilemmas and displacement more. The novel delves deep into the immigrants' experiences of their struggle with the cultural dilemma in the foreign land. The fiction shows that the immigrants, in spite of their adhesion to their own cultural beliefs and customs, gradually pave towards the cultural ways of the host country too. Lahiri portrays that the total rejection or adoption of either culture is not a way towards adjustment or re-adjustment rather mesh the both and gain the best of both the cultures.

**Keywords:** Identity, dilemma, culture, immigrant

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Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri has emerged as a voice for those who suffer from 'Foreign Born Confused Desi' syndrome. Born in London and grown up in Rhodes Island, U.S.A. Jhumpa Lahiri portrays her own life and experiences in her debut novel *The Namesake* (2003). Even though she was brought up in America, She became very close to her Bengali heritage from an early age. Growing up with ties to all the three

countries created in her a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted. In this context, Jhumpa Lahiri herself told Barbara Kantrowitz, "I've often felt that I am somehow illegitimate in both cultures. A true Indian doesn't accept me as an Indian and a true American doesn't accept me as an American" (Barbara,61). This multicultural lifestyle plays a central role in many of her stories which depicts the alienation and loneliness of immigrants caught between two drastically different worlds.

Her debut novel *'The Namesake'* reflects a deeper insight into the immigrants' families who make every effort to inculcate in their children the cultural and moral values of their native country as well as it also deals with the misery of the children who have to deal with two different cultures. What is right in one culture, is unacceptable in another that's why these children grow up with confused identities. In most of the matters an immigrant has an intense desire to be at once loyal to the old world and yet fluent in the new. But it is always hard for 'American Born' children to put themselves in their parents' shoes, trying to understand their parents' nomadic struggles to survive in a foreign land and their ever increasing longing for cultural roots. While on the other hand, their skin colour and features are obvious signifiers of an outsider in the west, always force them to accept the cost- iron fact for that they are not simply what they think they are –authentic Americans. "American- Born children of Indian parents, showing how they do well between the assumptions and dominant form of the American society, on the one hand, and the values of their ancestral homeland, on the other"(Ashcroft,138).

*The Namesake* represents the experiences of American Born Confused Desi (ABCD); a term generally used to refer to South Asian American born in the United States (Christopher, 287). The term was originally coined in reference to Indian–Americans, it has been adopted by the South Asian Community at large. The term 'Desi' comes from the word 'des' (homeland) in both Hindi and Urdu. 'Desi' means 'of the homeland' and denotes anything or anyone from South Asia. ABCDs create dual identities to balance the rigid values sanctioned by the Indian community with aspects of American culture.

Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel *The Namesake* explores the conflicts of Indian immigrants for both the first and second generations, spanning a time period from late 1960s to early twenty-first century. The novel focuses on the lives of Indians who have migrated to America and their assimilation in a new country. Lahiri focuses on the clash between Indian culture and American one, especially in case of second generation immigrants. The first generation immigrants try to follow the mannerism, values and beliefs of their own culture and any clash between their concept of 'home' and their beliefs baffle them. Most of the second generation immigrants have less emotional attachments in these matters.

In the present novel the story revolves around four members of Ganguli Family, Ashoke, Ashima and their two children Gogol and Sonia. The novel opens with Ashima recalling her homeland fondly. She is in her an advanced state of pregnancy, admitted in a hospital for her delivery. To quote :

Nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive, It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land. ....It was happening so far from home unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved.(Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*,5-6)

In the United States, Ashima struggles through language and cultural barriers as well as her own fears as she delivers her first child. To add to their woes, the rule in America compels Ashoke and Ashima, to compromise with their custom and name the child before leaving the hospital. Due to the strange set of circumstances, the couple names their first-born 'Gogol' in remembrance of a Russian author Nikolai Gogol, whose book saved Ashoke's life years ago in an unfortunate train accident.

Gogol, unaware about the fact for giving him this name, is unable to identify either with Americans or with the Indians. This name becomes the focal point of the life of the baby. He grows up and feels inferior because of his name. In school, he feels embarrassed when learns that Nikolai Gogol was a frustrated man. As

a child, he refuses to change his official name to Nikhil in school because he feels no attachment for his name. As he grows up, he himself gets it changed to Nikhil although his parents stop him. However, problems do not end here. Gogol keeps on running away from his culture.

The question of identity is always a difficult one for those living in one culture, yet belonging to another. This question frequently lingers in the mind of most immigrants. They feel culturally confused as they are simultaneously living in two cultures. On the one hand, they no longer feel emotionally attached and cannot fully identify themselves with their native culture; while on the other, when they wish to adopt the identity of the new culture, they have not been fully accepted as its members. Lahiri is conscious about the existing problem of cultural diversity in a foreign land and she opines that immigrants' struggle to grasp a transnational identity becomes an urgent issue in this environment. In an interview to Mira Nair, Lahiri had opined, "I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It's a classic case of divided identify". This constant struggle is portrayed through Ashoke and Ashima who try to bring up their children the way it is done in India. Gogol and Sonia, American born and educated, want to be accepted as Americans. Gogol's parents make arrangements to send Gogol for Bengali language and culture classes at the home of one of their Bengali friends. But the children lack interest and take it as a burden.

The Children in the class study without interest,  
wishing they could be at a ballet or softball  
practice instead (*The Namesake*, 66).

The first generation people try to adapt themselves with the society and make a space for themselves in the new country. To assimilate themselves with American society, Ashoke and Ashima concede to Sonia and Gogol's demand of celebrating Christmas and having an American dinner once a week. However, they feel alienated both from their parents and from their American friends who consider them as outsiders. According to Dubey, "The immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world" (*Dubey*,22-6).

The present study depicts how cultural signifiers such as food, language and traditions are rendered in context of clashing culture. For instance, Gogol is invited by a white girl named Maxine, for dinner. While having dinner with Maxine's parents, he recalls his mother's hospitable nature. "*His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest*" (*The Namesake*, 133). He compares the Indian and the Western culture, their life styles, customs and traditions. He even feels ashamed of his own parents because he feels that they do not fit into American culture. Another incident occurs when Gogol attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. There the question about marginality is discussed. To quote:

Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to  
answer the question 'where are you from?'  
the sociologist on the panel declares (*The Namesake*, 118).

At this, Gogol realizes that ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) refers to him also. He realizes the question of identity. Lahiri represents the marginality of characters through the idea that immigrants are usually assumed to be on the periphery of culture, regarded as different and outsiders in a foreign country. Although Gogol is a naturalized citizen of the United States but it doesn't guarantee his identity as an American.

Lahiri declares that the clash of culture is a complicated issue for the second generation. At home Indian culture and values are stuck to, while in public the American code of conduct is followed. This creates confusion for them as evident when Gogol meets Ruth and introduces himself as Nikhil, "*he feels at once guilty and exhilarated*" (*The Namesake*, 96). Due to this identity crisis Gogol officially changes his name to Nikhil before his departure for college. Even after his parents' efforts to provide him the best of both worlds by religiously celebrating every American and Indian holiday but Gogol drinks, smokes pot and has more than one romantic relationship and is able to dissociate himself from the memories of his girls friends, albeit with great difficulty because he wants to behave like an American and not a Bengali. But Ashima, being an Indian parent,

doesn't like it when Gogol's girl friend Maxine addresses her by name and hides their relationship from her Bengali community. However, Gogol breaks up with Maxine after his father's death and marries an American Bengali girl; Maushumi Mazoomdar from an instinctive desire to cling to Indian roots. However, Maushumi's love for western lifestyle, leads their marriage to a disaster.

The story ends with Ashima preparing to go back to Calcutta but she is not the same person who missed her 'Desh' all the time. She is now quiet aware that Calcutta, "the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign"(The Namesake,278) is not home anymore. Now she has many special memories related to this "foreign land". To quote:

For thirty three years she missed her life in  
India. Now she will miss her job at the library,  
...she will miss the country in which she had grown  
to know and love her husband (*The Namesake*, 279).

Towards the end of the novel Lahiri stabilizes the imbalance that Gogol had always felt. Now he is comforted by one thing; before his father had died, he had revealed the reason behind choosing that name for him. At the age of thirty-two, finally proud of his name and its meaning, Nikhil Gogol Ganguly accepted his name and his fate. Simultaneously he now has the additional burden of hating himself for hating his name. He ponders over his name, his identity, his namesake and realizes that one has to carve his own path to explore the life in this world. He recognizes his roots and feels belonging to his mother, sister and other people. He comes to learn that it is not a way to diminish either Indian or American culture; his identity is embellished by both cultures. Through Gogol, Lahiri portrays that the total rejection or adoption of either culture is not a way towards adjustment or re-adjustment rather mesh the both and gain the best of both the cultures. He found himself steeped in American culture and values, at the same time remaining faithful to his parents' Indian heritage. In the last moment, Gogol finally opens the book of short stories by Nikolai Gogol and reads the story 'The Overcoat' that had given his father a new life.

Jhumpa Lahiri has very beautifully juxtaposed the immigrants' initial experiences and practices in the United States with their later adoption and immersion into the U.S. culture. Therefore, her characters confront immigrant experiences in the United States and, constantly negotiate between different aspects of their lives, recreate a third space that transcends the definite cultural and national boundaries. A formation of transnational identity doesn't negate the notion of nation or national borders. It makes a connection between different nations and their people by crossing boundaries. This process of border-crossing constitutes the notion of identity as always evolving, owing to the fact that it becomes what it is in the context of constantly changing and mobile relationships between human beings and a globalized world.

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