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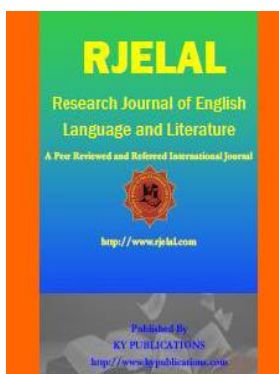
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**SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL DISPARITIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S  
*THE NAMESAKE***

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**ABSTRACT**

The reconstruction of the voice of immigrants along with other associated dynamics the psyche of expatriation has been a subject of serious speculations of the women writers. This paper analyses the growth of diaspora literature from a state of alienation to acculturation with a specific focus at the socio-psychological dynamics of cultural disparities constituting the dimensions of diaspora literature with reference to Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

**Key words:** Socio-Psychological, Cultural disparities, Alienation, Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake, Gogol.

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Jhumpa Lahiri, who won the Pulitzer Prize in the year 2000 for her *Interpreter of Maladies*, is a brilliant novelist. Her first novel *The Namesake* forms the basis of the present study. Lahiri has the first-hand experience to authentically portray the diasporic experience of the second generation of immigrants in America. At the same time, she had taken pains to imagine the experience of loss and nostalgia of the first generation immigrants also. Jhumpa Lahiri was born Nilanjana Svadeshna on July 11, 1967 in London to Bengali parents. As a child, Lahiri moved with her family to Rhode Island where Jhumpa spend her adolescence. Lahiri went on to attend Bernard College, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in English and later attending Boston University. It was here Lahiri attained Master's Degree in English, Creative Writing, and Comparative Studies in Literature and the Arts as well as a PhD in Renaissance Studies. Lahiri also

worked for a short time teaching creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of design. She shot to fame with her first collection of short stories titled *Interpreter of Maladies* which won her the Pulitzer Prize 2000 for Fiction. She also bagged the New Yorker Prize for the Best Book in addition to the PEN/Hemingway Award. A winner of the Hen field prize from the Transatlantic Review, she has published stories in *The New Yorker*, *Agni*, *Story Quarterly*. *The Namesake* is her first novel and has been followed by *Unaccustomed Earth*, another collection of short stories. *The Namesake* is one of the national bestsellers and has been named as the 'Best Book of the Year' (2003) by the USA. Based on this novel, the film of the same name directed by Mira Nair was released internationally in February, 2007.

The emergence of the idea of global community has brought a paradigm shift in life

patterns of social life and it has subsequently redefined the nature and commitment of literature. It has resulted in the exodus of population from one corner of the globe to the other parts of the world where there are ample opportunities for professional growth and the reaffirmation of immigrant identity beyond the rigid hold of conventions and traditions popular in the ethnic societies.

This new spectrum of human existence in spite of its external glamour has paved a way for the new struggle for human existence resisting the forces of cultural apathies and unfamiliarity of geography. This twilight of human existence consisting of the consciousness of home culture coupled with the challenges of the land of adoption has become a subject of serious reflections for the writers of diaspora across the globe. The in-depth analysis of the writings of the writers of Indian diaspora affirms that amid cultural obscurities, the consciousness of gender distinction and gender discrimination work as a major shaping force in the construction of expatriate sensibility in these writings.

Homi Bhabha, in his celebrated essay *The Location of Culture* postulates, how cultural alienation generates the psyche of 'marginality' and the feeling of 'not belonging' reducing them to a state of 'non-recognisable entity'. He states:

Cultural difference must be understood as the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogenous empty time of the national community ...the analytical of cultural difference intervenes to transform the scenario of articulation ... the aim of cultural difference is to articulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalisation ...producing other spaces of subaltern signification. (Bhabha: 162)

This paper is an attempt to read Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* in the light of Stuart Hall's essay on "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". Hall begins his essay saying that identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think it to be. This paper aims to show how the discovery of one's identity is indeed an intricate process, one that is always

necessarily complex. When an individual straddles the boundaries of two cultures, as does Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist of *The Namesake*, the task becomes even more complex and problematic, being grounded in issues of memory, tradition, and family expectations. Throughout the novel, we see that Gogol remains captive to his conflicted identity. Is he Indian or American? Although there is the nearest hint at the end of the novel that he may choose one identity over the other. His trajectory suggests that, for the second generation Indian-American at least, refusing to choose one identity over the other, which might mean complete renunciation of either Indian-ness or American-ness, troubles one's negotiation of identity.

Whereas Gogol's mother, Ashima, as a first generation Indian-American, is able to negotiate a hyphenated subjectivity because she has an original identity as starting point, Gogol is 'always-already' in crisis due to his birth on 'foreign' soil. This paper throws light on how Lahiri uses Gogol's name to show the duality of immigrant experience and thus explain what Hall meant by diaspora experience when he said that, "diaspora experience is defined by.... The recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a connection of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridist."

The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. Jhumpa Lahiri says, for immigrants the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, is more explicit and distressing than for the children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants-those with strong ties to their country of origins, that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This paper aims to show the discovery of one's identity is an intricate process, one that is always necessarily complex. When an individual saddles two cultures, as does Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist of *The Namesake*, the task becomes even more complex and problematic, being grounded in issues of memory, tradition, and family expectations.

The issues of names and identity are presented at the beginning of *The Namesake*. As Ashima's water breaks, she calls out to Ashoke, her husband. However, she does not use his name because this would not be proper. According to Ashima, calling one's husband by his name is "not the type of thing Bengali wives do, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over". From this statement we are shown how important privacy is to Bengali families. Bengali children are given two names: one is "daknam", that is, pet name, used only by family and close friends, and the other is "bhalanam" that is used by the rest of the society. At birth, Gogol is given a et name as his official name because his official name, sent in a letter from his great grandmother in India, gets lost in the mail. Upon entering kindergarten, Gogol is told by his family that he is to be called Nikhil, his "bhalanam", by teachers and the other children at school. Gogol rejects his proper name and wants to be called Gogol by society as well as his family. This decision made on the first day of kindergarten school causes him years of distress as it was also his first attempt to reject a dual identity.

*The Namesake* records the plight of Gogol's desperate attempt to change his identity by renaming himself from Gogol to Nikhil and thus helps us to understand Stuart Hall's definition of Diaspora identities as "those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves a new, through transformation and difference". As Gogol grows older, his name becomes the troubled border between what he is and what he wants to be. Thus, before he leaves for Yale, Gogol rejects his identity and decides to reinvent himself by a legal deed as Nikhil; his parent's chosen "bhalanam" for him. Gogol's act of renaming himself from Gogol to Nikhil explains his urge to assume as American person in order to blend into mainstream American society. It is as Nikhil that he embarks on his adult life, as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party and as Nikhil that he begins to have relationship with white American women, keeping his private life secret from his parents:

By the following year his parents know vaguely about Ruth. Though he has been to

the farmhouse with Maxine twice, meeting her father and her stepmother, Sonia, who secretly has a boyfriend these days, is the only person in his family to know his girlfriend. His relationship with her is one accomplishment in his life about which they are not in the least bit proud or pleased (Lahiri, 116).

Thus as Nikhil, he becomes a part of the mainstream, and not at all a hyphenated American. On the surface, he lives a life that is not that different from those of his fellow American students, yet the name Gogol still has a hold over him. He dreads his visit home and his return to a life where he is known as Gogol. Gogol is not just a name to him; it signifies all his discomfort to fit into two different cultures as he grew up. Being away from home at college makes it easy for Gogol to live as Nikhil in American society. He does so happily for many years, detaching himself from his roots and his family as much as possible.

Chanchala K. Naik quotes Kellner as saying that one can choose and make, and then remake one's identity as fashion and life possibilities change and expand. But by choosing and remaking one's identity as Gogol did, one is always anxious about the recognition and validation of that identity by others. After remaking himself as Nikhil, Gogol relishes the moments when he encounters people who have never known him as Gogol. The irony, of course, is that the reader, as well as the novelist herself, have invested too much in the significance of his name and can seldom think of him as anyone but Gogol. In other words, the readers as well as the novelist fail to recognize him as Nikhil.

Moreover, the reasons that by changing his name from Gogol to Nikhil, he can shed some cumbersome ties to the past. What Gogol does not realize is that his pet name, Gogol, is more than simply the product of his father's obsession with the Russian author Nikolai Gogol. He is named Gogol, rather, in memory of a train accident in which his father nearly lost his life. Throughout most of his childhood and early adult years Gogol experiences little intimacy with his father and his traditional ways, and perceives his father's name choice to be the greatest burden he must bear. When Gogol's

father finally explains the significance of his name to Gogol, it becomes a way of bridging the gap between father and son, as well as his lack of identification with his Bengali heritage:

Gogol listens, stunned, his eyes fixed on his father's profile. Though there are only inches between them, for an instant his father is a stranger, a man who has kept a secret, has survived a tragedy, a man whose past he does not fully know. A man who is vulnerable, who has suffered in an inconceivable way. He imagines his father, in his twenties as Gogol is now, sitting on a train... and then nearly killed. He struggles to picture the West Bengal countryside he has seen on only a few occasions, his father's mangled body, among hundreds of dead ones, being carried on a stretcher, past a twisted length of maroon compartments. Against instinct he tries to imagine life without his father, a world in which his father does not exist (Lahiri, 123)

Gogol knows nothing of his namesake except what he learns in high school: the Russian writer was a famously "eccentric genius", who was reputed to be a hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man". It's hardly the image an adolescent boy would warm to. Gogol hates 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". Learning about the train accident that set Ashoke on the road to America does not change Gogol's feelings about his name; instead, the name shoulders too much of the burden of the family hopes and wishes, and it adds to the exasperating process of assimilation.

Growing up as an outsider is difficult. And when your name is unlike everyone else's, it can be a greater burden. At fourteen, Gogol wants only to escape his name. "He's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain... He hates having to wear a nametag on his sweater at Model United Nation Day at school. He even hates signing his name at the bottom of his drawings in art class". To him, the name is a burden, a disfigurement, an ugly reminder of the many differences between him and his peers. As he grows

up, Gogol embarks on a bitter love-hate relationship with his name; he loathes it, and tries to escape it. It seems that an identity crisis is imminent as Gogol's name becomes the source of greater anxiety: "At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, managed nevertheless to distress him physically like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear". Gogol, who "cannot imagine saying 'Hi, it's Gogol' under potentially romantic circumstances", experiences his first taste of liberation when he introduces himself to a college girl as Nikhil.

Jhumpa Lahiri seems to understand the huge cost that abandoning one's ethnic identity carry for immigrants who desire nothing more than to blend in. Her Bengali protagonist, acutely aware of his difference but unable to resolve his dual identities, comes to symbolize the anguished decisions all young immigrants must make as they carve out their paths towards becoming American. Gogol Ganguli becomes the archetype for every immigrant who has wrestled with issues of conflicted identity; cultural confusion identity- is he Indian or American? - although there is the merest hint at the novel's end that he may choose one identity-American at least, refusing to choose one identity over the other, which might mean complete renunciation of either Indian-ness or American-ness, troubles one's negotiation of identity. Whereas Gogol's mother, Ashima, as a first generation Indian-American, is able to negotiate a hyphenated subjectivity because she has an original identity as a starting point, Gogol is 'always-already' in crisis due to his birth on 'foreign' soil.

Lahiri uses Gogol's name to, literally and figuratively, represent the ways in which his cultural heritage severs him from the social sphere, forcing a gap between him and his American friends, and serving as a constant reminder of the depth of this disparity. He already knows that his Indian heritage sets him apart from his schoolmates, and that his inner turmoil is evident from a young age. He tries desperately to distance himself from being Indian. He would rather not be forced to attend the weekly gatherings of Bengalis, and would rather not visit his relatives in India. He would rather attend art classes than Bengali lessons and he would rather listen to

Beatles than his father's classical Indian music. Being the child of immigrants Gogol begins in a kind of nowhere place. He is firmly of America, but is not quite an American, in part because he is not recognized as such by others. For much of his life, Gogol has difficulty understanding where he is from or who he is.

Gogol is often unhappy because it is difficult for him to reconcile the different cultures, countries, and people that define him. For Gogol, the universal difficulties of adolescence are compounded because he is the son of first generation immigrants. As he enters his teenage years, he begins to resent his Bengali heritage. He begins to address his parents in English, while they speak to him in Bengali. Gogol wants to adapt to American values and life concepts, which are firmly resisted at home. He cannot understand why his parents disapprove of his romantic relationships with American girls; he cannot understand why his parents do not accept his American girlfriends as their parents accept him; he dislikes his parents when he compares them with the parents of his American girlfriends. When Gogol is involved with Ruth, his parents refuse to give him money to fly to England where she has gone for a semester. Afterwards, when he gets involved with Maxine, he sees Maxine's parents, Gerald and Lydia, as stark contrast to his parents. Gogol distances himself from his parents and starts living in New York, away from his parents. He avoids going home on weekends, excusing himself on the false pretext of work and spends his time with Maxine and her parents with whom he feels "none of the exasperation he feels with his own parents. No sense of obligation". He thinks of the terms of his parents arranged marriage as "something at once unthinkable and remarkable". When he goes on a vacation with Maxine and her parents "he feels no nostalgia for the vacation he's spent with his parents." Gogol's desire to spend more and more time with Maxine and her family shows his desperate attempt to mimic and assimilate:

He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper. He comes to

except the weight of their flatware in his hands, and to keep the cloth napkin, still partially folded, on his lap. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. He learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine (137)

Gogol's act of appreciating and eating meals with the Maxine's family serve as an actor's assimilation. When Gogol makes American culture a part of himself, for example, by making its cuisine his own, he can no longer identify himself as separate from it. As Gogol partakes of these high-class, expensive meals, they become part of him and he becomes part of them. He is both assimilating and assimilated. Though his mimicry, the unfamiliar becomes familiar as he tries to adapt to their culinary tastes and practices as his own. His mimicry of these habits gains him a place in the privileged sphere. However, his assimilation is not a very comfortable act for Gogol. As Homi K. Bhabha has put it, mimicry "emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a disavowal". This disavowal via mimicry is illustrated when Lahiri writes that, Gogol is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own. Gogol's moving away from his parents and seeking a life separate from theirs might be interpreted as an exercise in cultural displacement: he did not want to go home on weekends, or to go with them to *pujos* and Bengali parties, or to remain unquestionably in their world. Gogol struggles with the pain of being a second generation Indian American. Lahiri's *The Namesake* is an example of the Contemporary immigrant narration which doesn't place the idea of an 'American Drama' at the centre of the story, but rather positions the immigrant ethnic family within a community of cosmopolitan travellers. She chronicles dislocation and social unease in a fresh manner. She blends the two cultures and creates inner turmoil for many of her characters who struggle to balance the Western and Indian influence. Though she lives in US, got married with a Spanish American boyfriend, Alberto Vourvoulis in the traditional Bengali fashion but her works are imbued with the ethos of Indian culture and

sensibility. Her novels are more about the co-operation of culture than about confrontation. Stereotypes are examined from a number of angles and deconstructed from both sides- Indian and American.

*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 immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural belief and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the lost 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 the country of their own origin.

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