



Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute
(University with Graded Autonomy Status), Chennai

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Editors: Dr. R. Pushkala, Dean, English
Dr M. Chandrasena Rajeswaran, HoD, English

A Study on the Concept of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel:
The Namesake

Blessy R, I M.A. English

Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute (University with Graded Autonomy Status)
Chennai

ABSTRACT

All diasporas are unhappy but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Immigrants, expatriates and diasporic authors deal with identity and alienation in their novels scrupulously. The struggle to place their loyalty between the land they were born in and the land they live in is definitely distressing. The characters portrayed also strive to live in the quest for identity battling some serious issues, which is termed as psychological pain, including mental trauma pain and depression. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* depicts the issue of her own cultural location in West Bengal, India. It explores the problem of one being rooted, uprooted and re-rooted. The characters are perplexed which is a result of flux and agony. It explores the various reasons affecting the series of incidents in the novel. This article is an attempt to crucially look

at 'identity' through the eyes of a first generation immigrant, versus how different it is through the eyes of a second generation immigrant. This paper scrutinizes identity on the grounds of land and name.

Key words

Identity, culture, land, name, foundation, life.

INTRODUCTION

Diasporic writings, also known as 'expatriate writings', deal with the traumatic experiences of the writers. Immigration proves a pleasant experience only to a few immigrants who succeed in adapting themselves to the new geographical, cultural, social and psychological environment. To most diasporic writers, immigration is not a delectable experience.

They often find themselves sandwiched between two cultures. They are forced to live in a state of dilemma, completely lost in the search for identity.

IDENTITY AND LAND

'Identity' begins with the land. The land in which one is born, childhood spent, education, job, marriage and death are of great significance in one's life. Memory begins when an individual grows from infant to a child. From birth to marriage is a 'foundation' in one's life. Ashoke and Ashima had their 'foundation' nailed, and rooted in India. Every human being remembers something of his or her childhood - playing with neighbours, around trees in their house, school bus picking and dropping at and from school, height marks made on their birthday, memories of cleaning car with dad, playing with pets, visitors coming home, first day of school, petty fights with friends, sharing lunch, praises, punishments and the list is endless. All these stick on to one's memory and have a huge impact in shaping one's future. These memories are often remembered along with the place and people. Ashima and Ashoke had their memories and childhood rooted in the same land, where their culture was accepted and they belonged. They grew up to be adults without facing any identity crisis. Their childhood was secured.

Even with this stable foundation and as adults they had a hard time being accepted in a foreign land. Ashima and Ashoke stick to Indian culture in terms of clothing. Ashima still wears a saree and Ashoke prefers wearing a stitched piece of clothing. Ashima thinks about her family back in Bengal during her pregnancy, clinging to a Bengali magazine, crying after

the birth of Gogol and asking Ashoke if they can go back to India. Whereas Ashoke wait outside the labour room with his thoughts circling around the accident which happened in India.

The stream of consciousness technique used by Lahiri, is proof of how much they miss their homeland. The thoughts and feelings when one is alone postulates a lot about the character. It is their true image. It is a reflection of the heart and it is evident that Ashima and Ashoke are two individuals whose bodies are in a foreign land but their souls, back in India.

The concept of 'foundation' is rather uncertain in the life of Gogol and Sonia. This begins right from Gogol's birth. He is not completely American nor Indian. Both Gogol and Sonia were born in a foreign land but were brought up in Indian culture. Ashima pities Gogol's birth, and is worried about how he will be raised in a land of strangers. The celebration of his birth happens in an Indian way which is comfortable for Ashima and Ashoke.

The fear of forgetting Indian culture makes Ashima raise her children in an Indian way, but in a foreign land and this marks the beginning of insecurity in Gogol. She tries to push a culture which is her own but alien to Gogol and Sonia. The typical way of surviving in a foreign land is seen when majority of the visitors coming home are only Bengali's. Ashima sings and teaches in Bengali to Gogol as a child. Gogol is forced to go to Bengali classes. Ashima is strong in her decision in taking Gogol to India for the long vacation. She convinces the Counsellor by stating that they don't have any relatives here and the books are to be sent to the Indian address. The trips to India are the ones Gogol hates the most. He craves for American Food and music and this feeling is only shared by Sonia because their homeland, the so-called 'foundation' is in a foreign land.

As far as childhood is concerned, the land, language, people, food, dress, ceremonies, and names made sense to Ashima and Ashoke. They belonged to the community. What happens in their home and what they see around them was same and they could easily connect to the land they were born in and the culture they followed. This is not the case with Gogol and Sonia. The land they were born and the culture they were forced to grow in was completely ironical. What happens in home is not what they can easily connect to what happens outside. They tried adapting for their parent's sake and were too young to understand how two cultures are being forced on kids by immigrant parents.

If Ashima and Ashoke felt India as home, Gogol and Sonia felt the land they were born as home. Gogol and Sonia grew up in struggle trying to 'fit in'. Their attempt to adapt to a different culture failed and eventually they started moving away from identifying as anything but Indian.

Sonia threatens colouring her hair. Gogol calls Yale his home. This makes Ashima mad. This evidently proves how Gogol and Sonia had a very capricious childhood, who were raised by insecure parents, which in turn made them insecure. They had to face identity crisis at a very young. The age too young to understand the concept of 'identity'. They were forced to spend that childhood in dilemma, trying to answer questions, 'who they really are?' and 'where do they belong?'.

IDENTITY AND NAME

'Identity' is equally shared with the name.

People judge. They judge on a lot of things. The first in the list is the way they look, which tells where they belong to, and the second is the 'name'.

Ashima and Ashoke had to name the baby in order to oblige to the law of the land. They choosed the name what they thought was the best, and was reasonable. Grandmother's letter never came and eventually they lost hope. Their hearts knew something was not right, while seeing the name in medical records and while applying passports.

As parents they attempted to change his name during his admission at the nursery. Unfortunately, Gogol himself stopped it. Hence, Gogol remained Gogol. It was only while he was growing up that he faced a problem with the name. He started developing a hatred towards it. He understood both Gogol 'as a person', and his 'name' did not belong to the foreign land. Ashoke should have told why he was named Gogol. He gave a hint with the birthday present on his 14th birthday but Gogol didn't read it. Something stopped Ashoke in further explaining about the value of his name. At least in the final attempt of stopping him from changing his name, Ashoke should have told about the incident.

Inspite of his instable childhood Gogol wanted to change his name, to a name which he believed will get him hopefully rooted in a foreign land which will at least make his adulthood reliable. It is in this quest for his identity that he changed his name. He believed it changed his life. He moved away from his home, away from people who calls him Gogol. He lives the life with a new name, and new identity. He in fact, paved way for an entire university to call him 'Nikhil'.

But this happiness did not last long. This new identity only made him move away from his parents. Within a year or two from changing his name Ashoke tells about the accident to Gogol. Now Gogol is guilty for the latter than the former. Now he is neither happy with being 'Gogol', nor changing his name to 'Nikhil'. He is now desperate and helpless.

Multiple attempts in changing his name and the chance to know why he was named Gogol

never occurred at the right time in Gogol's life. This reflects badly in the days which followed in his life. He never had a stable adulthood as well. None of his relationships lasted long. Life was unfair to him. Perhaps, Gogol's rice ceremony predicted his future accurately.

CONCLUSION

If the land one is born, the childhood one grows up, and the name he carries is the same as the culture which is followed by the fellow beings, the problem of 'Identity crisis' will not arise. It is safe to blame fate for all the instances occurred in Gogol's life, and indeed he was the pitiable character of all.

Every immigrant experiences injustice, inequality, discrimination, biases, prejudices and a threat to cultural identity in an unfamiliar country. Adjusting with the social, economic, political, psychological and environmental changes is a challenge. The abrupt change in the lifestyle, culture, status, society leaves immigrants bewildered. The land one is 'born' versus the land chosen to 'live' might vary, but the hidden dark truth is that, one must adjust with the changing scenario of their lives, accept, adapt and move on. It is the hardest, but the only way to survive.

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