



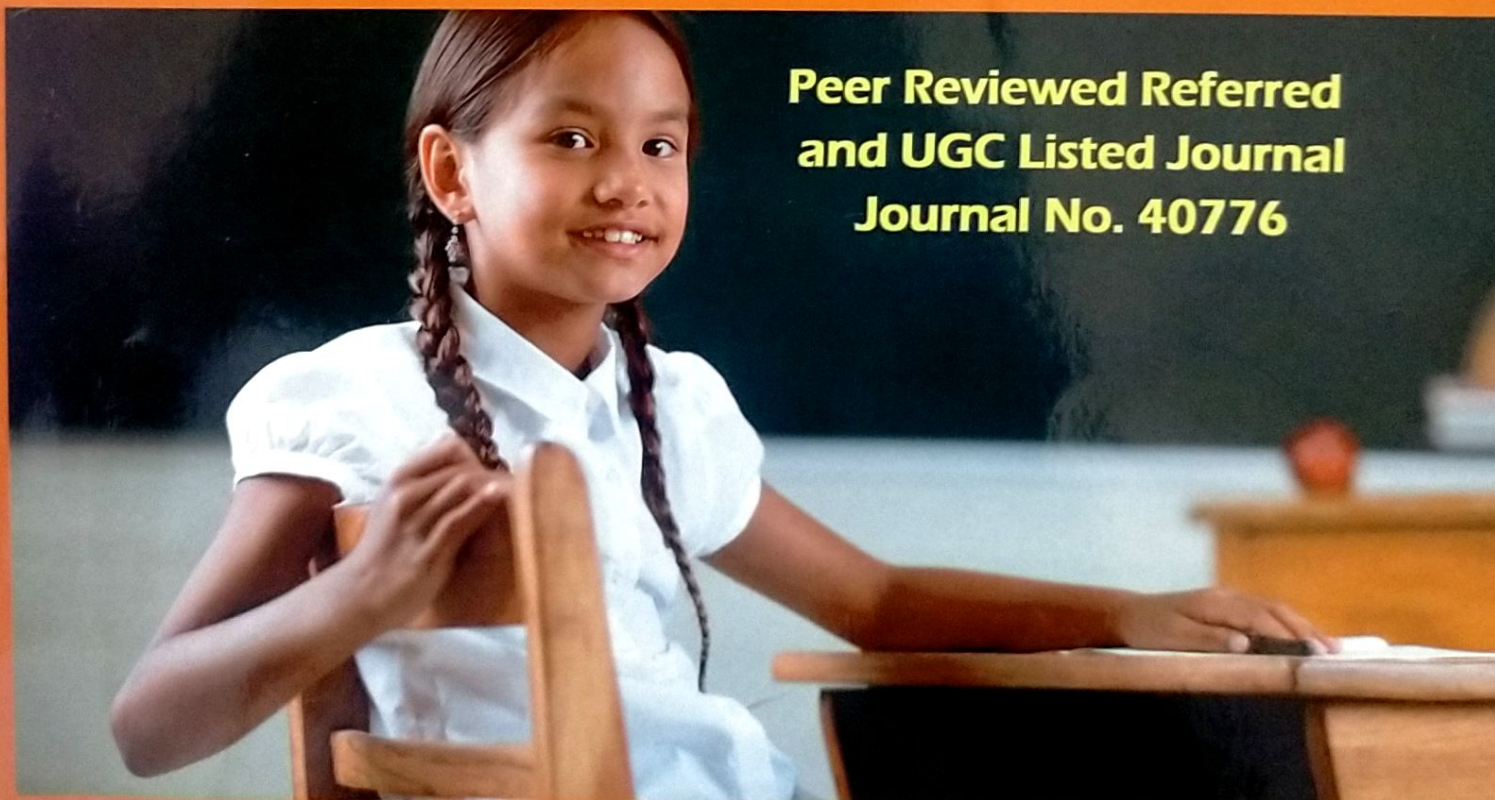
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## 2. Exploration of Multiculturalism and Immigrants' Sense of Identity and Belongingness in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake"

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### **Abstract**

We are confronting some of the global issues like Immigration, Cultural Conflict, Identity Crisis, Multiculturalism, loneliness, alienation and belongingness in the era of Globalization. The Pulitzer Award Winning figure, Jhumpa Lahiri manifests multicultural experiences with the help of habits, foods, traditions and rituals that are different in two countries and cultures. Multiculturalism is not only concerned with the purely visible aspects of diversity but it probes into the inner psyche and philosophical implications of the character.

The abstract of this paper explores the theme of cross cultural and sandwiched world where Indians are living in the host country and refused to give up their cultural roots. They still hope for assimilation and acculturation in new land. 'The Namesake' is the novel of an identity, therefore the issue of tight focus is Nikolai Gogol's identity in relationship with his name and namesake. He is an ABCD- an American Born Confused Desi. Here, Lahiri very effectively depicts that the ABCDs are unable to answer the question: Where are you from?

Jhumpa Lahiri very artistically probes into the psyche of characters and brings out stirring and teasing sense of identity caused by the clash of cultures.

Multiculturalism is one of the prominent global issues. The Post-Colonial immigration from the Eastern part of the world to the Western, enhanced Cultural Diversity. Identity (Cultural, Political, Social) becomes the issue of prime importance among these immigrants. Multiculturalism, though eludes any comprehensive definition, deals with the lives and experiences of the immigrants. It can be called as the post colonial movement for the existence of cultural and personal identity. The gradually evolved cultural conflict, sense of belongingness, loneliness and alienation among these immigrants found its best expression in Diaspora Literature.



The Pulitzer Award Winning novelist Jhumpa Lahiri manifests Multiculturalism through the overt aspects of immigrant's lives, such as habits, foods, traditions and rituals and the covert psychological reality. Lahiri probes into the inner psyche of her character and unfolds various undercurrents in search of identity both personal and cultural.

The characters in 'The Namesake' frequently encounter crisis of identity and they are unable to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity. The first generation immigrants and their children are struggling to find social identity (a place in American Society). The former has managed somehow with a bit of hesitation to adopt a different culture mixing into their own, resulting in a fine concoction. They are trying to inculcate Indian culture in their children, who are prone to embrace American Culture. This constant shutting between the home and society, bound to arouse in them a conflict of culture and identity. Lahiri, herself asserted in an interview;

"It's a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced. My parents were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture when I was growing up. Maintaining tie to India, and preserving Indian traditions in America, meant a lot to them. They're more at home now, but it's always an issue, and they will always feel like, and be treated as, foreigner here. Now that I'm an adult I understand and sympathise more with my parents' predicament. But when I was a child it was harder for me to understand their views. At times I felt that their expectations for me were in direct opposition to the reality of the world we lived in."

The protagonist in Lahiri's 'The Namesake', Gogol Ganguli is snarled up in the trap of identity and trying helplessly and hopelessly to untie the knots of the same. Gogol is like a plant in a pot having soil not of its own and enjoying weather of the host country and isn't rooted in any land. The case of Ashima is quite different from him. Her roots are very much nourished in India and in American land she is struggling hard to adjust her already sustained and shaped roots. The soil is not always soft to make adjustments so she has to direct them according to the texture of the land.

In a symbolical opening of the novel she is preparing Indian Chat with American material. It is nothing but the objective co-relative of her nostalgia. She persistently anticipates Indianness in America. She is a humble housewife who feels alienated in American Society and



her husband is busy with his job and she is missing her relatives, her neighbourhood and above all community feeling that is totally absent in American culture.

Lahiri finely brings out Ashima's craving for home and homeland, as there is a tradition in India to go to parental home for the first delivery where the pains are lessened by the cares taken by the relatives, while suffering from the pains of child pain in Mount Auburn Hospital, she constantly pines for somebody who will accompany her to reduce her mental stress through not the pain of contraction.

"Now she is alone, cut off by curtains from the three other women in the room. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American women. Perhaps one of them has given birth before, can tell her what to expect. But she has gathered that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on the top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy."

Lahiri often co-relates her character's cultural isolation with extreme personal isolation, suggesting that the cultural isolation causes the personal. Though Ashima is living in an American Culture and her nerves never permit her to adopt that pattern. She is highly obsessed with her belongingness. However, her life is consumed by re-creating Indian culture in America.

Ashok Ganguli, her husband a young electrical engineering student who narrowly survives death in a horrific train accident in West Bengal and follows the advice given to him by a fellow passenger just hours earlier.

"Pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can."

With not much more than a pillow and a blanket, and a place in a doctoral program at MIT, Ashok and Ashima leave family and culture in Calcutta for America. Being a doctoral student in the University, he is accepted by the academic Community but at home he also continues to be a typical Bengali, fastidious about his clothing and his food etc. Scattered with the various shades of cultural conflicts, 'The Namesake' illuminates that the Indians living in a host country continues to live in a Sandwiched World and refused to give up their cultural roots. These immigrants still hope for assimilation and acculturation in a new land but they do not sever relationship with their homeland. They yearn for a cultural identity of their own.

Therefore, William Safran rightly observes;



"Immigrants continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in a way or another. Their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such relationship".

'The Namesake' chiefly deals with the problem of identity of the protagonist Gogol Ganguli. While probing into the inner psyche of Gogol, he tends to be completely rootless, isolated, disappointed and alienated. Gogol is the outcome of the most rigorous and obscure problem of identity. He is born of Indian parents, brought up in American culture and atmosphere and received the name Gogol after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. He is so uprooted that he has nothing of his own. In this context Harsh Sawhney aptly calls him;

"Gogol is an ABCD- An American Born Confused Desi"

Throughout the novel Gogol hated his name which is imposed by his father after the name of Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. His name means nothing for him. His real psychological complexity about his name intensified when he goes on a school trip. The eternal plight of Gogol is being different from others.

After listening everything about Nikolai Gogol from his teacher, Mr. Lawson, Gogol underwent a sea change and took decision, to change his name. Undoubtedly it is an unbearable problem of dual identity for the boy of mere teenage. When the judge asked him, why does he want to change his name? His innocent answer reveals everything about his abstractions. He said that he doesn't want to feel an 'Outsider.'

Again he said that he wants to be free like a prisoner released from the jail. Of course he has an idea that, "Everyone in this world, he knows still call him Gogol. He's aware that his parents and their friends and the children of their friends will never call him but Gogol" Jhumpa Lahiri has dexterously delineated the bitter plights of the immigrants in the new land. Here in the character of Gogol, Multiculturalism caused an entirely innovative aspect of an identity. As Gogol belongs to nothing. He could not answer to such question like, "Where are you from?"

However, the novel unfolds the problem of immigrants who are facing the problem of their identity in alien land. In this context what Prof. Dubey pointed out is really worth appreciating;

"The immigrants' experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually as a transit station fought with memories of the original home which are struggling with realities of the new world"



The Namesake's span is of over 30 years. It stands as a representative account of the immigrant's plight and the second generation Indo-American's social, cultural and individual's reality resulting in a state of alienation. Their parents are successful to a large extent to recreate their homeland for themselves but the second generation is almost residing nowhere and that is good for nothing. Gogol Ganguli's search for identity ends in disappointment. Through the catastrophe of her protagonist and her characters entangled in identity crisis and belongingness, Jhumpa Lahiri propagates a demand for cultural identity to immigrants in a host country as these immigrants are not willing to melt in the Pot or to be thrown out of the Pot. Even they don't prefer to be a part of Salad Bowl. They anticipate and long for cultural as well as personal identity to their own.

However, it becomes one of the most recurrent themes in Indian Fiction in English. Actually, it is such a cardinal issue which deals with the live experiences and pathetic plights of immigrants. Among these Postmodern novelists Jhumpa Lahiri earned a notable and remarkable place by her effective and deep expressions of Indian Diaspora through all her characters in "The Namesake" and even in her collection of Short Stories "Interpreter of Maladies".

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