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**Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake : An Indian-
American Immigrant Experience**

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Abstract

The paper entitled, " Jhumpa Lahiri's the Namesake : An Indian American-Immigrant Experience" discusses agonizing experiences of the characters. The first part gives a brief introduction of novelist's perspective gradually focusing experiences of various characters; Ashima, Ashoke and Gogol in the following parts.

The titular hero's rebellion against his parents regarding his name, his American mentality clashing his parents' Indian mentality is discussed briefly. After much agonizing experiences he faces certain realities which in a way represent the universal immigrant experience that is concluded in the last part.

The *Namesake*, the first novel from the Pulitzer - winning author of 'Interpreter of Maladies', Jhumpa Lahiri, is about a second-generation Indian - American immigrant who begins to feel the strong pull of his heritage and destiny. In the collection of stories Lahiri introduced to people who left behind family and friends to build a new life in America. The *Namesake* is based on the Indian American immigrant experience. It depicts the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who emigrate to the United States and try to form a life outside of everything they know. Their life is divided into their Indian, rather Bengali, identity and the American experience.

The novel begins in Boston in 1968, with the birth of the baby-boy of Gangulis, Ashoke and Ashima. Both of them are waiting for a letter from his great grandmother, suggesting a formal Indian name for the newly born. But as the letter fails to arrive, and the infant cannot be released without a proper birth certificate, Ashoke has to settle on the name of Gogol, the famous Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol who, in a way has saved his life. Naming the boy after the great writer is impulsive, yet a gesture of gratitude on Ashoke's part.

The crises of emerging with the American lifestyle is faced by both Ashoke and Ashima but for Ashima it is more difficult. She resists everything that is American and pines for her family. Ashima has accepted her immigration Eight Thousand miles away in Cambridge with an assurance that Ashoke will be there so she can survive severe snowy winters in his company but is welcomed by a cold, gray city making her a foreigner. She mourns the life she has left behind. Ashima's disappointment arises when she sees the tiny three room apartment. The home is quite different from that she imagined. She was expecting a home like the homes she remembers from American movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Seven Year Itch*. And later, in her pregnancy, she is terrified at the prospect of raising a child in the country where she is related to no one.

But soon the Gangulis try to adopt themselves with the American ways and yet try to sustain their very own Bengali identity. Eventhough their house on Penmberton Road looks like other houses they never felt at home. Their roots in India are so strong that they never experience ease in

the process of getting rooted in America. Ashima's effort to feel at home by preparing a Calcutta snack with Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts and chilli powder appears a vain endeavor. She has to compromise with the more complicated life that is substituted with her life in Calcutta. In the initial stage the sense of detachment overpowers Ashima.

Ashima is not ready to throw away repeatedly read, a tattered copy of Desh magazine that she had brought to read on her plane ride to Boston. The printed pages of Bengali type, slightly rough to touch, are perpetual comfort to her. A dozen times she has read the short stories and poems and articles from the magazine. Her memories related to her father and Calcutta, do not allow her to throw away the worn out copy. This is clinging to past, lingering there is comforting for Ashima.

Ashima can not understand Americans' sense of privacy when most of expressions of love making of them are exhibited openly. For Indian woman like Ashima it is bewildering. The words like 'Goddamit' "goddamn you" are never heard by her and ever are expected from her husband make her more an "outsider". In the hospital, for the first time in her life, she sleeps alone surrounded by strangers. All her life she has slept either in a room with her parents or with Ashoke at her side. Like any Indian woman she wishes to talk with the other hospital mates and wants to know their experiences of being mother. But soon she has to give up the idea as she realizes that they prefer privacy. For Ashima living in America is a kind of exile at this particular moment. Nothing feels normal to her. Motherhood in a foreign land is the intolerable idea for her.

Unlike Ashima, for Ashoke it is a Journey of liberation. A voracious reader, Ashoke, following what his grandfather used to say, "Read all the Russian Literature and then re-read them, they will never fail you", has read widely. While traveling from Calcutta to Jamshedpur, Ashoke carries with him a hardbound collection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol, which his grandfather has given him. He meets a Bangali businessman, Ghosh, who asks whether he has seen much of the world and Ashoke answers that once he has been to Delhi. The experienced man advises him to pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world he can and he won't regret it.

After this crucial incident Ashoke remains awake, reading the book and in the early morning at 2.30 the bogies of the train get derailed and nearly all the passenger die. In the glare from a search lantern the rescuer incidentally sees fluttering page of the book in Ashoke's hand thus Ashoke is survived miraculously. For Ashoke it is his rebirth. He owes his life to Gogol and following the advice of Ghosh envisions another sort of future. He decides to walk away as far as he could from the place in which he had nearly died. Thus, the inspired immigration of Ashoke makes him leave behind his homeland, bewildered father, speechless mother and weeping and pleading siblings.

The horrifying images of past haunt Ashoke. The memory of pain does not haunt him but his waiting before his rescue. This persistent fear rises in degrees. The haunting past overpowers his present making him a claustrophobic. He feels that he has reborn for third time in America. His wish to make his life in America has been boosted up as a gesture to overcome his traumatic past. Hence, Ashoke's reaction is not as acute as that of Ashima's. Both Ashoke and Ashima are taken away from where they were. The Diaspora forces them to fragment and schools them on how to assimilate into the culture without abandoning their own. For Ashima her born-in-the-USA baby, represents the new life she will build in her adopted home. She realizes that she has to plant and cultivate new roots in America. Her old roots in Calcutta begin to wither slowly. Ashima starts building a new community around her, to fit herself happy in it.

Both, Ashoke and Ashima, rear their two children, Gogol and Sonia, in a protective and apprehensive manner always paranoid about security whereas the two children do not understand from where the fears of their parents originate. Their parents try to raise them in the Bengali way and the happy go lucky American children resent being treated thus. As Gangulis prosper the children also grow up being in but not of two cultures at once. Gogol attends American schools but has to spend his weekends in his parents' extended circle of Bengali friends. Both the children are taken to Hindu celebrations, "... they don't understand Gogol can not understand his saree-wearing mother capitulates to chirstmas tree and thanks giving Turkeys."¹

Jhumpa Lahiri's life, as of the children's in the novel was also pulled between the clash of cultures. In an interview she tells :

*It's what my world is, and what I've always been aware of my parents came from Calcutta. They arrived in Cambridge much like the parents in my novel. And I found myself sort of caught between the world of my parents and the world they had left behind and still clung to, and also the world surrounded me at school and everywhere else, as soon as I set foot out of the door. So I've never not been aware of that division in my life, and I wanted to write about that in the book.*²

Gogol, as a teenager, struggles with his Indian - American identity and rebels against his father. Gogol, too, feels like a perennial outsider. In his youth he tries to distance himself from his Indian roots. He does not keep company with Indian-American friends and for him India is not his home. He describes Indian experience to his friend with a touch of mockery in it. He always has the feeling of aloofness from India. Gogol has a strong resentment about his, neither Bengali nor American, name and not even the first name. He is not flattered by the Russian name as it makes him more foreigner. Teaching of Gogol's writing in school is a big embarrassing moment for him. The life of Gogol, full of hardships give him a feeling of shame. He has nauseatic feeling towards his name. He goes against his father's choice for his name oblivious of reasons behind it, and changes it to Nikhil.

Gogol feels betrayed by his parents on the other hand Gogol's father had a point in feeling that ...

*the only person who didn't take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person who constantly questioned it and wished it were otherwise, was Gogol.*³

Gogol stumbles along the first generation path. He wants to establish his own identity, a relationship, a place he is Nikhil Ganguli but his nickname sticks him and haunts him like a ghost. Initially, Gogol fails to understand his father's attachment to the name. He rejects it openly in the American way. The name that represents his father's life is grossly misunderstood by him ... "Gogol, young and American as he is, finds himself increasingly drawn to his heritage, his name and his identity as the embodiment of his parents' aspirations."⁴

Gogol and his sister, Sonia, are drawn towards the mainstream white culture. Gogol has affairs with white girls and nearly marries one much against the wishes of his parents. While having a love relationship with his Anglo-Saxon American girlfriend, Maxine. Gogol realizes that her parents and she herself possess a confidence and familial continuity that he and his parents will never possess in this country. In an emotional crises Gogol draws away from the girl friend. Gogol's father's death creates a great emotional stir in his life.

After Gogol's break-up from Maxine, Ashima talks Gogol into starting a new relationship with Moushumi as they share the same culture and background. Both, Moushumi and Gogol are disappointed in love with partners from the "outside" world they carry out. Consequently, Gogol realizes that his clumsy attempts to create coherent identity are futile and Gogol breaks up when Moushumi starts having a sexual affair with another man. Gogol cuts and the relationship comes forth to fill in the lives of his parents. Thus, Gogol's experiences focus Jhumpa Lahiri's view about "what is foreign". Gogol's discomfort, too, causes because of his not quite belonging attitude.

Eventually, Gogol comes to appreciate his parents and their bravery, the world they left behind and the new world they created. The feeling of exile is mellowed down to the realization of identity. In their endeavor to preserve Indianness, Ashoke and Ashima, do not fail completely. Gogol finds the copy of Gogol's stories, given by his father, the book has remained unopened on the shelf and on the day of his father's funeral party Gogol gets it and he begins at last to read.

All the identity crises, generational conflict and cultural confusions are the part of Indian - American immigrant experience. Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully depicts pre-history of immigration focusing the silent first generation and the new generation's confusions regarding cultural belongings. Immigration takes these characters away from where they were but adds something more to who they are and the society they join. Lahiri brings out the means by which the characters slowly sometimes painfully come to define themselves. Identity crises is the main theme in terms of being pulled between two cultures. But the confused collision of cultures depicts painful yet ultimately freeing reconciliation.

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