

## A DISCOURSE ON DIASPORA - EXPLORING JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'NAMESAKE'

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### ABSTRACT

Diaspora is defined by Stuart Hall, as one “*defined not by essence or purity, but by recognition of heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of identity which leaves with and through despite difference.*” Diasporic discourse is marked by its supposed complexities and ambivalences arising, out of the conflict between localities and spatial duplexes. The concept of identity for the Diasporas is precariously bound within an episteme of displacement and the sense of exile. And a zone not defined by ethnicity and nations. The Namesake becomes a culture, hypertext dealing with Bengali culture, and its merging with foreign influences. As in Nikolai Gogol’s *The Overcoat*, the tone of the language and the subject matter of the novel work together, to help the readers find a space in which, to discover his own meanings and contemplate on the inner fables of life.

**KEYWORDS:** Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri, Multiculturalism, Displacement, Identity, Nicolai Gogol & Multiculturalism

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Diasporas have been examined through many different perspectives. One of the primarily acknowledged elements consists of their illustration of dual homes and challenge to national cultures’, aspiring to socio-cultural unities. Inserting a new community erases the individuality of the Diasporas societies, but however, the warrant ethnical reproduction remains, as transnational entities are the symbols they create.

For disgruntling dialecticism Diaspora had also been a favorite topic to discuss about, along with literary productivity. People who have travelled throughout the world, leaving behind the security of their ancestral home and roots, just to find themselves in the midst of the uncertain insecurities, which has become stark evidence in their writings.

The meaning of Diaspora lies to the uprooted people of sama ethnic and cultural group, who's origin is found in another land, other than where they presently resides. Diasporic studies deals with the unity, which can be traced within these divided individuals. Diasporic authors engage with the divided and flexible sense of diasporic individuals, analysing the generations of diaspora and their relation to their original roots. Few remarkable areas, upon which they shed light, are the elements of nostalgia, 'Quest for identity' and the conception of 'roots'. Terry Eagleton in *The Idea of Culture*, remarks that the word ‘culture’ contains a tension between making and being made. Jhumpa Lahiri comments, “*The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially, for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are who grow up in two worlds simultaneously*”.

Diaspora’s quest for identity, arising from displacement and the sense of inability to belong, adds to a sense of otherness and alienation. They become eternal exiles and their homeland metamorphoses, into a romantic illusion. Man does not have a home anywhere. It is this displacement that, tinges Diaspora writing with its peculiar qualities of loss and nostalgia. As Rushdie once remarked, in *Imaginary Homelands* that they are obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of the fragments of which have been lost. An immigrant, even though westernized, he has a painful experience, fraught with identity crisis, where his native culture unconsciously interferes with the logical grasp of alien culture. The issues regarding

the crisis of identity or the search for identity are no longer limited to a single person, but can extend to a group, profession or even a nation. His quest is also one, which symbolizes the human search for attaining whatever is distant and dreamlike, a search which skews from the deepest layers of one's soul, emotions and subconscious desires. In a way, man's quest is meaningful and universal. The recurrent theme in Lahiri's writing is the bittersweet experience of immigrating to America, from India. Lahiri portrays her characters as one often caught in a cultural. In an interview Lahiri has admitted: "*I'm lucky that I'm between two worlds... I don't really know what a distinct South Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life*". And it is thus that she represents her characters.

The Incorporated meaning in every name makes them worthwhile and symbolical, in both literature and reality. Names appear as the symbol of identity. As the meaningfulness of one's identity, the names tend to bear the same importance. They are significant in both their existence and non-existence. Literature analyses the conflict of races, nations and ethnicity - the names appear as identity metaphors.

The novel presents the life story of a nameless community. While from sociological aspect, they represent the second generation South-Asian immigrants.

The rootlessness and of cultural displacement is brought to attention by Lahiri, through the depiction of Calcuttan immigrants, who end up living in Boston. The novel moves quietly, eloquently across its central arc from the birth of a son to the death of a father. It is also a story of guilt and liberation, because it speaks about the universal struggle to extricate ourselves from the past, from family and obligation and the curse of history. Gogol turns out to be the focal point of the novel, as a representative of a nameless society. Being misnamed as 'Gogol', the novel becomes a bildungsroman of the protagonist's striving by his name, which he finds embarrassing and de remnants of an unsure heritage. The question of identity is a very difficult one, it is related to a belongings. Ashima Ganguly born and bred in India, and married in America, she considers living in a foreign land as a lifelong pregnancy, as she sticks to her cultural ethics of Bengal.

The Namesake draws intriguing references from Gogol's *The Overcoat*, with special references to the title itself. The story deals with the enigma of annonymity, which synchronises with Jhumpa Lahiri's saga of an outcaste Indian boy's story, as an immigrant in the American society.

Shakespeare's famous dialogue "*What's in a name?*" seems to echo in the novel title. Lahiri's thinking is existential. Man is thrown into the world abandoned to chance factor, which has already constituted him. He discovered himself as already brought into being, a fact among other facts. This is man's factuality and it becomes his destiny, haunted by the fear of death, his father decided to move to America, as if the new country were immune from death. However, Lahiri also suggests that, one is not just determined by destiny or chance factor, but one is also capable of determining oneself.

It is suggested by Lahiri that, though one is determined by chance factor, one also determines oneself. Man is both what he has been and also what he aspires to become. Born without his choosing in a certain family, or community, man is free and responsible to transform the world and redefine it, according to his terms something that Gogol tries to attain. But, yet after changing his name this past lingers, to haunt him for "*There is only one complication. He doesn't feel like Nikhil not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that, he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past.*" (Lahiri 105).

The story of the first generation deals with adaptation, survival, learning and revelation. The story of the second generation depicts a constant struggle between different communities, ethnicities and expectations. Except Gogol, no one in the family is aroused, out of this in authenticity. He alone, in the end chooses to rise out of his average existence. He resolved to leave a name behind, which an average person would hardly think of. Thus, he hoped to become a category, which is desirable because, to become entails the realization that we must die, a realization which is of crucial importance. Gogol in his reflection achieves what Nikolai Gogol was, he becomes a commentator. He assumes his parents; consciousness Diasporic in essence that, one should retrace one's origins because, one belongs there. He himself had spent years, maintaining distance from his origins and yet for all his aloofness, his impersonality of naming him as someone else, he heard the call of conscience. Human existence, as Gogol also comes to posit in the end, is being in the world his parents were born in a society, in a family and a state. Their very structure was constituted by their relation with others and the world. There is no escape from involvement, but it should be an authentic involvement. Gogol stands out as an unlikely man, in the chaos that surrounds him, and his uniqueness strikes us to the point of oddity. He is the product of expatriate sensibility, emerging out of the clash of continents and cultures, a child of abrupt historical journey patterns, a representative of the generation with torn hopes and psyche. He can say that, he is an allegorical man whose life encapsulates a whole collective historical experience. The quest for identity in his case can be said, as a rootless search for life boats of endurance and survival. Philosophically, it is a deep exploration to reach a stage of conviction, about the value of life, which is pitted against the forces of history and events.

Even presented as an interior monologue in introspection, the textual voice suggests the true identity of the characters. This eerie and deliberate effect reflects the essential strivings, to survive as an organizing consciousness, which cannot be described by words alone. Gogol, the writer transforms into the embodiment of the peculiarities of his personal life, for the morbid fascination of the American teenagers. He appears as Gogol's contradictory self, instead of his identical one. But Gogol, the writer becomes an emblem of the bizzarities of his personal life, from the delighted horror of the American teenagers.

The novel is synonymous, to the quest of identity that, each of the character undertakes, especially Gogol, the protagonist in the novel. The novel beams Gogol's quest for identity – an identity of his own, which is more synonymous, with the world of his profession, an architect, and stands distinctive from the world of his parents, where his identity ceases to exist beyond Nikhil Ganguly, the son of Ashoke Ganguli. Throughout the novel, his search continues and the distinguished dimensions of his changing personality are unraveled where the women characters, such as Maxine Ratcliffe and Moushumi, serve as signposts along the road. Both Maxine and Ratcliffe are the epitome of two different personalities of Gogol's character. It is more of her parents' carefree and less rigid nature, and a flexible environment in the home, that Gogol's finds himself falling for Maxine. The family's easy of inhibiting the outside world, stands in sharp contrast, to his own family's conventional outlook and environment, within the four walls of the 'home'. Yet, this comfort ceases to exist with the demise of Ashoke, his father, where he discovers a new beginning for himself – a new bend on the road of identity quest. He undergoes an awareness and understanding of the place of the individual, within the family. The ambivalence of his in-between state ceases to trouble him anymore. From here he starts on the journey to the end of his quest of identity as who he is, where he belongs to. He identifies himself with his culture and roots. He is now Bengali Indian in America, with assimilation of two cultures. He chooses Moushumi, as his wife more as a subconscious attempt, to seize his identity; to link to his childhood and family. The identity that he assumed, while being with Maxine, though faded, but still lingers in his character. Lahiri ceases to delve deeper into this, essentially because, like Gogol, she focuses on evoking the meanings,

rather than conveying them. Reality and identity are multiple, existing in several places at the same time – this one thing becomes prominent in its truest sense in the novel, especially through not only Gogol, but through the character of Ashoke as well. They both gain the knowledge that is not simple rational sequential experience, thus accepting the contradiction of their respective lives.

In fact, a waiter mistakes them for brother and sister, signifying each to be the reflection of the other. A person is many people and many selves. Gogol passively assumes his adopted identities, often in the course of his relationships. While outer selves exist as more sequential and not as simultaneous, they fail to give him a sense of wholesomeness and continuity, which is ought to be a necessity to live a fulfilled life.

Lahiri's novel becomes a type of realism that aspires to demonstrate that, the tight casual plot of realism must be abandoned to depict the randomness and irrationality of the sequences that characterize the protagonist's life.

Moushumi basks in the sense of a self created, during her living in France as one brilliant, sensual, exotic and cosmopolitan. She also discovers herself alongside her American identity, crated through her artsy academic friends. Astrid and Donald, an identity they share with other urban middle class Americans.

Moushumi's lover's name is important again, as a device of the motif of naming. The first name is the same as that of adulterous protagonist Chekov's *The Lady with the Pet Dog* and of the tormented brother in *The Brothers Karmazov*.

Gogol becomes aware of the affair when she accidentally speaks her lover's name. All that, Lahiri writes "*And for the first time in his life, another man's name upset him more than his own*". The very name, or the portion of her symbolized by that name, that Moushumi has fallen in love with, so it becomes evident that, the name itself disturbs Gogol. The effect is strangely cinematic, and suggests perhaps the misleading nature of man's perception of others through the outward behavior of people. The novel comes full circle with Gogol's reflection on human alienation. It started with a push towards anonymity, Gogol's; in the very name he was given sadness and amusement. He had tried to correct this error and yet it had not been fully possible to reinvent him fully. A man is developed and constructed by the series of events which occurs in his life from his very birth to death. One simply cannot throw away his or her history and roots to the pit of Oblivion. They remain forever present through the future and present. Gogol is hence evolved by the various events of his life - like his naming, which made his identity. He could not have shaped them, for the world is contingent as there is no reason for its being and central fact about human existence is its temporality. The book gives a dimension into the life of next generation Indians is growing up in western culture. Lahiri brings great empathy to Gogol, as he stumbles along a path, strewn with conflicting loyalties and heart wrenching love affairs that lead him back to the old ways of his parents.

David Bromwich in an essay dated 27<sup>th</sup> October 2003, comments that "*Her (Lahiri's) gift is a power of sympathy that makes us concerned with the luck of her characters, even when she is letting us know that the luck will end. It is a mark of self possession that there are no magnificent climaxes here the great changes in the story- a death, a separation, the beginning of self recognition in the protagonist- all take place offstage. As in life, the provocations to feelings or to action do not occur in step with the conscious thoughts of the characters. Yet, a nice, formal symmetry, lightly cued is completed when a story that began with an Ashima's journey to America, ends with a journey back to India. Meanwhile, Lahiri has sailed quite free of the hazards of the generational novel, in which the lives of the immigrant parents loom up as a series of anxieties and lives of first generation Americans as a guilty fulfillment. Clowth, this novel says it is the reward of nothing but time, and time takes away much too.*"

The Namesake is a novel about identity and how names, both confer and conceal selfhood: Bengali spousal names, so ultimately they are never spoken; pet names used only among families and friends, "good" names, used in public; anglicized family names mutated by colonization. The teenaged Gogol seeks in his new name, an alternate identity to the self.

The fluidity of identity finds further expression in Lahiri's use of trains. Train rides are passages between worlds and lives, the author's characters are rarely the same when they disembark: Gogol's fathers near death as a young man in an Indian train wreck; Gogol's meeting with his first girlfriend on Amtrak or a suicide on the tracks that leads his father to reveal Gogol's namesake.

Lahiri's power of description and dialogue are precise and revolutionary, being able to depict a person and place in an image or a phrase: the ramshackle elegance of Maxine's family's New Hampshire lakeside compound contrasts with the motels of Gogol's youth, where Bengalis "*slept whole families to a single room, swum in pools that could be seen from the road.*" Likewise, when a hip professional couple from Brooklyn remarks about possible baby names, "*What we want is something totally unique,*" Lahiri lets their precious expressivism indict itself. She also captures the quiet gratitude of life at its deepest:

*"Is (the wreck) what you think of when you think of me? Gogol asks him. "Do I remind you of that night?"*

*"Not at all," his father says eventually, one hand going to the ribs, a habitual gesture that has baffled Gogol until now. "You remind me of everything that followed."*

The restrained, but an intense and generous exploration of human relationships recalls the Irish writer William Trevor. Lahiri shares his ability to evoke a place or event quickly, to convey the silences that haunt and strangle, and to reveal gentle graces.

While the stories in Lahiri's collection meet Kessler's criteria for great fiction, they also complicate his theory. Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* opening with Ashima Ganguli stands in her Cambridge, Massachusetts kitchen, attempting to cobble together a version of hot mix and puffed rice:

*"Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves. Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing."*

The common place spicy snack that Ashima concocts evokes both, home and displacement, abundance and lack, well stocked American cupboards, as well as a certain hunger. The culinary practice becomes Ashima's participation in a hierarchy, tradition expressing her desires and yearnings that connecting the immigrant experience, with an embodied experience of difference. Narrative closure is often denied to Lahiri's stories unsettling; yet her Foodways blend marginalized identities, with the occidental.

The novel becomes a document of the ways, in which people in American society identifies in particular allusions to Gogol and becomes an elucidations of the causes and the meaning of the confusion, which arises from having a multiple

culture identities. It becomes a portrayal of their unhappiness. It may be equated with what William James called the material self including clothing, food and position in the social self, lovers, friends and families that surrounds us.

Although it appears the Akaky Akakyvitch of Nikolai Gogol's story, has any commonality with the bright conforming Gogol Ganguli of Lahiri's novel, or the grotesque fantastic and very Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century short story of the realistic novel, about a modern Indian American search for identity, in a diasporic community. Nevertheless, among other themes, *The Overcoat* is about identity. Akaky Akakyvitch, the protagonist's name bears an ambiguous identity in itself, being a saint's name and resembling Russian baby talk. Akaky delights in copying out writings by other individuals, while being strangely unable and unwilling to pen down his own saga, or deviate from the original text, when specifically asked to. His happiness roots from his very lack of identity. He metamorphoses into new individual noticing women, for instance, when before he would forget where he was. Even his new overcoat and he are invited to a party graced by the assistant head clerk of his department. On his way back from this outing his overcoat is stolen while Akaky now overcoat less catches a fever and dies. The last we hear of Akaky and his ghost is when a policeman notices his ghostly overcoat thief.

The story depicts non-American ideas about identities and the instability of a fixed identity. Akaky's overcoat seems to represent the material self and the social self both of which he was devoid of, before. It is even suggested by Nabokov that, for Akaky the coat resembled even a mistress or wife – something that defined him as a member of the society while paradoxically causing him to lose his essential self.

*The Overcoat* is a manifesto that deals with identity and loss. However, these metaphors are still ambiguous in the story to conjure meaning and be evasive at the same time. However, the essence of the story does not lie in the plot, but as Vladimir Nabokov remarks that the story has an inner meaning which is conveyed through the style, not the plot. Tones, voices and a certain level of reality are fused in the story. Nabokov says "*Gogol's art discloses that parallel lines not only meet, but they can wiggle and get more extravagantly entangle, just as two pillars reflected in the waters is the most wobbly synthesis.*"

"*Just as Akaky's ghost haunted the final pages, so did it haunt a place deep in Ashoke's soul, shading the light, that all that my irrational that was inevitable about the world.*" (Jhumpa Lahiri) Lahiri only writes the rational and inevitable. She writes about Gogol in intention to conjure meaning, rather than depict them. However, one aspect which Ashok responds to is the sense in both identity and reality works on multiple layers. A person is an amalgamation of several people just as Akaky's existence is based on all of the documents he copies and none in himself. For Gogol Ganguli, becomes a source of pain throughout the course of the novel, perhaps in part because he indirectly takes them simultaneously, often attached to a relationship with a woman, apparently he keeps confusing of of material and social self as his true characteristic essence. Moreover, his outer self is sequential rather than continuous, providing him with no sense of continuity, to live a secured and fulfilled life.

As in Gogol's short story, introspection even if it were presented as interior monologue, suggests that this voice was who the character 'really was'. The effect is both eerie and deliberate and perhaps suggests the way in which essential identity, the self as a continuous organizing consciousness, is beyond the power of words to describe. The readers come to know only on the surface. A sense of what lies beyond it is left to be only evoked and illuminated.

As in *The Overcoat* the name Nikhil seems to represent as part of the material self along with Gogol gains alternate identity through his with the transient love affair like that with Ruth, are also the overcoat. His relationships serve

him with probable identities which he accepts temporarily. They fail to give him security, but rather appear as camouflages which hide him.

The narrative reflects Gogol's seeming reluctance to explore on his own and at eighteen, he rejects his name and with it the transcultural identity, that his father had bestowed upon him. Moushumi is the fourth character in the novel, as she strives to create a material self for her and Gogol that dominated his active consciousness. Rather, she seems more concerned with not being engulfed up by the identity of being a married woman, which she stems from her mother's despair and dependency. Again, like Gogol, her sense of herself appears to originate more from declining identity rather than trying to create one for herself through her own experiences. She refused to change her last name to Ganguli; a portion novel's pattern is dedicated towards the probing of the relationship between naming and identity. She intentionally spends time in solitude, telling Gogol she is studying; a false statement that seems a necessary to her as the time alone to sustain a sense of identity as a different entity for him. She is also disturbed by what Gogol comes to represent her in her own mind "Though she knows it is not his fault, she can't help but, associate he at times, the very life she has resisted had struggled so mightily to leave behind." (Lahiri).

Earlier in the story, Gogol himself had wondered, "*whether he represents some sort of capitulation or defeat*" (Lahiri) Although, referred to as Nikhil, he is not the sophisticated man that Gogol imagined, he is transcending into as assuming that name, but the safe and familiar man that Moushumi identifies with her own uneasy adolescence. Just as Gogol noticed in both Ruth and Maxim, an identity he thought he craved for and eventually unable to reconcile with his own sense of himself, however blurry the sense of the self appear, so Moushumi seems to perceive in Gogol an identity for herself that she doesn't want to be.

This pattern of looking for identities in relationship seems to be disturbing for both Gogol and Moushumi. It is because, the sense of herself that she feels with Gogol, a self she doesn't want, that barely a year after he and Gogol are married, she has an affair with an older, less attractive man with the unlikely name of Dimitri Desjardens, a man she knew and was infatuated with in her bookish girlhood days.

Ashoke himself is both the obedient son, who returns to India every year to see his larger family and the man who hurt and abandoned his bewildered family behind, to begin a life in another country. Both of them, Bengali and American, respected professor Ganguli and the patronized foreigner. Both Ashoke is a good name and Mithu is pet name. His world is not just limited within the boundaries of India and America, but the Europe of the authors he studies, his time flows through both the twentieth and the nineteenth centuries.

As Gogol reads the inscription that his father had addressed to him, "the man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name", he reads this while a celebration of multiplicity and hybridity is taking place downstairs – a Christmas and going out party for Ashima, attended by her Bengali American friends who have adapted a Christian holiday now part of their own family tradition, even though they are of a pagan religion, it seems and symbol of the potential continuous amalgamation and fluid, flexible identity that Gogol may now be ready to accept about himself.

Attentive readers are left to ponder with Gogol the meaning of both the sentences that, Ashoke wrote and the name Gogol was given. The name can mean genius, his need to a loss of identity rather than finding it and understanding of the absurd tragedy of mistaking oneself for his overcoat, a world of multiple realities, of the irrationality, and randomness of life, all of the things the fourteen year old Gogol failed to realize.

The Ganguli family is educated, cultural and elite Calcuttans, who love to read Russian and English literatures. Her later novel, *The Lowland* (2013) sets in the Naxalite movement, in the late 1960s Calcutta and the theme of diaspora and the obvious complexities, arising out of a diasporic identity. Calcutta plays a significant art's role in Lahiri's imagination. To the Vibhuti Patel's question of what role Calcutta plays with her imagination, Lahiri says: "... A significant yet marginal role. I spent much time in Calcutta as a child- idle, but rich time-often at home with my grandmother. I read books; I began to write and to record things. It enabled me to experience solitude-ironically, because there were so many people, I could seal myself off psychologically. It was a place where I began to think imaginatively. Calcutta nourished my mind, my eye as a writer, my interest in seeing things from different points of view (emphasis added). There's a legacy and tradition there that we just don't have here. The ink hasn't dried yet on our lives here." We can find Bengali culinary stuff in almost all her stories. Foods and dresses are fundamentally cultural specific. These items are rigorously used significant metaphors in the diasporic literature, since they are regarded as a crucial part of one's identity. In the short stories, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* and *Mrs. Sen's* in the collection *Interpreters of Maladies* (1999), the Bengali food items are blended with the texture of these two stories. In *Mrs. Sen's*, Bengali fish becomes a "leitmotif." The stories of *Unaccustomed Earth* focus on second generation immigrants building up lives, loves and identities in England and America. Readers follow brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, friends and lovers in stories that take them from Boston and London to Bombay and Calcutta.

## CONCLUSIONS

Lahiri questions the roots from which we take our notions of romantic love, from our family and friends, or from the society and the media or how much our cultural heritage define our ideas and experience of love. Lahiri has explored in several ways, the difficulty of reconciling cross- cultural rituals around death, dying and love. She has tried to answer all these questions in her own poise, through the quest of identity of her characters, who are what they are actually, Indians at heart, having familial ties, bonds that last longer than all the physical relations, they build around themselves. The second generation Diaspora finds their roots, only after undergoing cultural imbalance. Multiculturalism teaches them that, where the person may go or wander, he will always go back to roots in search of his identity. His expatriate sensibility will never remain at rest, until and unless his quest ends. The authenticity of one's self, its discovery is full of trials and errors, but this search is meaningful, as it will ultimately lead a person to find a meaning in this otherwise meaningless world. "*Nothing begets anything*", but something does provide a self.

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