



NOMINATIVE DETERMINISM AND IMMIGRANT IDENTITY: AN EXPLORATION OF *THE NAMESAKE*

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Abstract: *This paper is an exploring tour through Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Namesake to expose the tug of war between two worlds, one the east and the other the west. The complicated, multicultural identity of an individual nag the person especially for the name tag stuck upon him. Gogol's rather wacky name irks him. It is with this effect of a name that Gogol attempts to live. Nominative determinism comes to play a role in the novel. Gogol sees his name as both the cause and the symbol of the way he feels as an Indian-American, caught between the Bengali heritage of his parents and the American culture he lives in. Together with it, the condition of the mother who feels everything strange in a foreign land is also made a matter of study. The study upon the equipage of the novel gets into the trapped identity of the Diaspora community in general.*

Key Words: Determinism, Nominative Determinism, Immigrant Identity, *The Namesake*

1. Introduction

The Namesake is the first novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. The plot moves between events in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City to expose the varied cultural, social, and psychological nuances involved with each one of them. Lahiri's elegantly measured narrative voice, which is gentle, wise, and unassuming, weaves the common thread for the entire story. The elegance and poise of the writer are uncommon and accolades get accumulated to her credit.

In 2003, Lahiri published *The Namesake*. The story spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguli family. The Calcutta-born parents immigrate as young adults to the United States where their children, Gogol and Sonia, grow up experiencing the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. New to America, Ashima struggles

through language and cultural barriers as well as her fears as she delivers her first child alone. As per the Bengali tradition, the child is to be named by the eldest member of the family. Thus they wait for Ashima's grandmother's letter from Calcutta which never arrives. Bengali culture calls for a child to have two names, a pet name to be called by family, and a good name to be used in public. Ashoke suggests the name of Gogol, in honor of the famous Ukrainian author Nikolai Gogol, to be the baby's pet name, and they use this name on the birth certificate. Entering kindergarten, the Gangulis inform their son that he will be known as Nikhil at school. But Gogol resists the name and sticks on to his pet name. It was thus Gogol came to be called so even at school. But by the time he turns 14, he starts to hate the name for its oddness. Gogol wants himself to be a pure American instead of being true to his lineage.



The story goes on to explain Gogol's engagements and his final acceptance of the name.

2. The Pain of Labor in America

Quite literally Ashima suffers labor pain while being in America. In the labor room, she thinks that it is the first time she is sleeping alone, surrounded only by strangers. But a twitch from the baby reminds her that she is, technically speaking, not alone. If she was in India, Ashima would have gone to her parents, retreating briefly to childhood. Dr. Ashley who supervises Ashima says, "Everything is looking perfectly normal. But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she has arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all." (5). The consequence of making motherhood in a foreign land is more painful than the labor pain that it is happening so far from home, unmonitored by those she loved. For Ashima, without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt by her side, the baby's birth seems to become only half true. The Nandis in Cambridge and Dr. Gupta, despite their love and care, are only substitutes for the people who really ought to be surrounding them. Ashima even feels pity for the child that she has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. During Gogol's annaprasam (rice ceremony), Ashima's eyes fill with tears as Gogol's mouth eagerly invites the spoon. She cannot help wishing her brother were there to feed him, her parents to bless him with their hands on his head.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima does not prefer to get pregnant in the USA. After giving birth to Gogol, though not pregnant, she realizes that being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy. Everyone treats her like a stranger in America. Lahiri says, "For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a

constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts."(49) For her it is an ongoing responsibility. And what she gets from the strangers is the same combination of pity and respect. Ashima says that after twenty years in America, she still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home. The writer has very well interiorized the pain of the diaspora into the figure of Ashima.

Articulations of diaspora frequently and consistently maintain that for a specific group to be considered diasporic, there should be a physical dispersal from an original center to two or more peripheral foreign regions as well as the retention of collective memory or myth about the original homeland which in most cases would result in a physical return. This perfectly happens for Ashima. Ashima indirectly becomes the symbol of Lahiri's mother. Lahiri was born in London, the daughter of Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was two. Lahiri grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Amar Lahiri worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, and her family often visited relatives in Calcutta. Ashima in the story teaches Gogol Tagore's poems. But when she closes her eyes it never fails to unsettle her that the children sound just like Americans. Children prefer the Western ways, slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, and hot dogs. Yet the parents insist that they go for a Kathakali dance performance or sitar recital so that they would get acquainted at least in part with the language and culture of Bengal.

The fear of their children getting dislocated is a constant disturbing thought for the parents. Gogol is the quintessential first-generation American son. He never speaks to his parents in Bengali, and he's embarrassed by



their idiosyncrasies. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia, they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. Like immigrants of other communication, Ashima and Ashoke too make their circle of Bengali acquaintances. They all become friends only for the reason that “they all come from Calcutta”. (38) Robert Cohen rightly remarks “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history” (Cohen:ix:1997). These Bengali families celebrate these different customs and ceremonies like marriages, death, childbirth, festivals, etc together. They celebrate these as per Bengali customs, wearing their best traditional attire, thus trying to preserve their culture in a new land.

The novel shows how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system. Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Their own children groomed to be bilingual and bicultural face cultural dilemmas and displacement more. The novel examines how the first and second generations are caught between two conflicting cultures with their religio-socio differences.

3. The Name Game in *The Namesake*

Gogol and Sonia are the representatives of the second class of generation in the story. Gogol’s only ally is Sonia. From time to time they privately admit to excruciating cravings, for hamburgers or a slice of pepperoni pizza, or a cold glass of milk. The travel to their homeland is travail for the children. Returning from Delhi to Calcutta, they have constipation followed by the opposite. It is with Gogol the pain of a dislocated name comes to

disturb. Instances of nominative determinist tension seem to outgrip the boy in America.

Nominative determinism is the theory that a person's name can have a significant role in determining key aspects of a job, profession, or even character. That the name may decide the entire personality associated with the bearer. The term nominative determinism had its origin in the 'Feedback' column of the British popular science magazine *New Scientist* in 1994. In 2002, nominative determinism became a serious study in its own right, with the publication of a paper in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* entitled 'Why Susie Sells Seashells by the Seashore: Implicit Egotism and Major Life Decisions. The theory when applied to Lahiri’s story has got a lot of significance. Gogol’s entire dislocation happens not because of his Bengali lineage but because of the weight (lessness) of the name that he carries.

As a young boy, Gogol does not mind his name. Then one day the peculiarity of his name becomes apparent. One day the students are taken to a graveyard as part of a school project. All of them look for similar names on the graves. But Gogol found no name to match his. Gogol has come to hate questions about his name and hates having constantly to explain. He even hates signing his name at the bottom of his drawings in art class. He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. The name has a history behind it. Gogol’s father, Ashoke had a close encounter with death as a young man when he survived a train crash in his native India. On the train, he happened to be reading a book by his favorite author, Nikolai Gogol. So it is that years later when he is living in America with his new wife, Ashima, he decides to give their newborn son the pet name “Gogol.” It soon



becomes his given name, but for years little Gogol is unaware of the significance behind it. Gogol wants to at least shorten the name. But Gogol already short and catchy resists mutation. He cannot even imagine telling a girl, “Hi, it’s Gogol” under any potential romantic circumstance. “Gogol sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity or gravity.” (96) Once Gogol introduces himself to a girl as Nikhil. The name has got a meaning, he who is entire, encompassing all. With the change of name, he is confident about kissing the girl. “He kissed her. But he does not believe that it was Gogol who had kissed Kim.” (96) The idea to change his name had first occurred to him while being at a dentist’s. He saw an article in the *Reader’s Digest* with the title “Second Baptisms”. In the court the only reason that Gogol can think of changing the name is that “I hate the name Gogol. I have always hated it.” (102) And now that he is Nikhil it is easier to ignore his parents for they had said, to them Gogol will never be anyone but Gogol. The name was a constant disturbance for him that he changed it. This agitation associated with the name is the author’s own experience getting portrayed. Lahiri was born Nilanjana Sudeshna. When she began kindergarten in Kingston, Rhode Island, her teacher decided to call her by her pet name, Jhumpa, because it was easier to pronounce than her proper name. Lahiri recalled that she always felt so embarrassed by her name. Lahiri’s ambivalence over her identity was the inspiration for the ambivalence of Gogol over his unusual name.

Gogol comes to regret the change of name only at the cost of a loss. It is with the death of his father that Gogol realizes the warmth associated with the name. Gogol, the prodigal son, leaves his swanky, independent life in New York City to help, flying to Cleveland to claim the body and pack up his father’s temporary apartment. “Thinking of his

father living here, alone these past three months, he feels the first threat of tears, but he knows that his father did not mind, that he was not offended by such things.” (174) In the apartment, Gogol finds sneakers, flip-flops, a photo of the family on the refrigerator, four plates, two mugs, four glasses, some tea and sugar, and rice. He cancels the utilities, calls his father’s workplace and returns the leased car. These mundane activities are, for Gogol, at once therapeutic. After packing up all of his father’s belongings, he lies on the couch to sleep, and unable to do so thinks about what happened to his father. “Gogol imagines his father by the door, bending over to tie his shoelaces for the last time. Putting on his coat and scarf and driving to the hospital. Stopping at a traffic light, listening to the weather report on the radio, the thought of death absent from his mind.” (178) For the first time ever in his life Gogol understands the significance of his name. Gogol comes to accept his name and picks up a collection of the Russian author's stories that his father had given him as a birthday present many years ago.

It is only with the acceptance of his name that Gogol comes to peace of mind. The concept of a perfect name for himself is abandoned for his good. Gogol finally proclaims, “There is no such thing as a perfect name.” (245) And Lahiri fills the rest that there is only one thing as the acceptance of one’s name.

4. Conclusion

The Namesake is so refreshing with its open sensuality and hidden complexity. It is more than a book about a name. It is about finding identity in a country that will treat you as an alien even if you were born there. This alienation would be worsened if the person is dissatisfied with his own received identity as what had happened with



Gogol. The first thing to be done is to get acquainted with your name and feel yourself being in that name. In this context, many questions arise as to why people of famous personalities change their names. There is yet another section for discussion.

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