

**RABINDRA BHARATI JOURNAL  
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Department of Philosophy  
Rabindra Bharati University  
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**Abstract:**

This article maps out the philosophy of existentialism and diasporic challenges faced by Jhumpa Lahiri's characters in *The Namesake*. It delves deep into the existential dilemmas, sense of loneliness and alienation encountered by the protagonists of the novel. Lahiri delineates characters in search of identity and deals with their dilemma in opting for a host culture. She exemplifies the dilemma of belongingness. *The Namesake* revolves round the Ganguli family and takes them from their tradition bound life in Calcutta to an entirely different cultural ambience in America. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguly settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashoke does his best to adapt to the new environment while his wife pines for home. Their son Gogol stumbles along the first generation path, straddling between two cultures. Almost all the characters of the novel are trying to create a sense of belongingness in a culture which is not originally their own, but ultimately result in facing existential crises.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Diaspora, Cross cultural dilemma, First and Second generation Immigrants, Emotional bafflement, Alienation, Nostalgia

Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer prize winner for the year 2000, is one of the most reputed and versatile Indo-American writers of diaspora. She has always used language as an outlet for her emotions. Lahiri poignantly depicts the predominant issues of the immigrants in *Interpreter of Maladies*, her prize winning collection of stories; *The Namesake*, her first novel and *Unaccustomed Earth*, her series of stories. Her characters are often Indian immigrants in America, who must navigate between the cultural values of their birth place and their adopted home. She examines her characters' struggles, anxieties and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behaviour. Lahiri tries to portray the inner conflicts and anxieties of the alienated people in diaspora, along with their existential angst- a persistent sensation of having lost one's sense of meaning and purpose in life in a strange setting.

Existentialism emerged as a philosophical and cultural movement that aimed to explain the complexities of human nature and its existence. This philosophy is about the search for meaning in life and is particularly concerned with the condition of men, their state of living, their freedom, their decisions in life and finally the challenges that they face throughout their lives. It is the affirmation of a self study by an individual while disobeying or challenging accepted customs and traditions. It is a rebellion against conventions that hamper human liberty. It believes in the essential and inevitable existence of suffering and misery. Martin Heidegger, Soren Kierkegaard, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are the chief exponents of Existentialism. Jean Paul Sartre explains the principle of existence preceding essence in his "Existentialism and Humanism". "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself this is the first principle of existentialism". (Sartre 28). Jacob in his book *In Search of Authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus* states that: "Continuous self-examination helps one to see that to use Sartre's words, one is not what one is and one is what one is not." (Jacob 21) Existentialists raised their voice against the western materialism, industrial revolution, scientific research and machine culture -the modern evils that were haunting and darkening human existence.

The Namesake was published in 2003. It deals with the tribulations of the immigrants in an alien land, their existential crises, the yearnings of exile and the emotional bafflement of cross cultural dilemmas. The story spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguli family. The Calcutta born parents emigrated as young adults to the U.S.A. where their children, Gogol and Sonia, grow up experiencing the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. The Ganguli's are facing existential crises that emerge mostly as they are immigrants adapting to a new culture, location and ideologies. Ashoke, being an immigrant of 1960's, Gogol being an American of Indian origin and Ashima having an unwished married life in a foreign land all have faced the core question regarding their existence.

The novel deals with the story of a young Indian, trying to maintain his family's traditional values while dealing with everyday life in America. The first part of the novel discusses the story of Gogol, the protagonist. His family and friends belong to two different cultures, two generations-one that migrated and the other that was born there. The second part builds up the issue of personal quest for identity as in the case of Gogol. The displacement and its consequences can be seen in the novel at two levels, first from the point of view of the parents, Ashima and Ashoke, and second from that of the children, Gogol and his sister, Sonia- the American born second generation Indian Americans.

The novel revolves around the lives of the Gangulis. Ashoke Ganguli leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies, to do research in the field of Fibre Optics. After two years' stay in America, he comes back to India. He marries a nineteen year old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima Bhaduri. The couple represent the first generation immigrants. Ashoke adapts more quickly to life in America in contrast to his wife. She resists everything in America and pines for her family in Calcutta. But they try their best to groom themselves for the American way of life. Ashima feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable "home" of her father. She spends her time re-reading Bengali poems, short stories and articles from the magazines which she had brought with her. Ashima's experiences during her pregnancy bring out many sharp contrasts between the two cultures.

When the novel opens Ashima and Ashoke are expecting a baby. The first few pages record the pangs of Ashima and Ashoke as they are far away in a foreign land and we are shown how Ashima suffers the alienation and pain of becoming a mother in a foreign land. She does not want to rear her child in an alien land, where she is related to no one, where she is unmonitored, unabsorbed, where life seems so tentative and spare. While pacing the floor in the hospitals corridor, Ashoke is reminded of his childhood back in Calcutta and an incident which subsequently brought him to America. The incident had changed his life and it was again going to have an immense impact on his yet to be born child. In a vivid description, Lahiri records the memory of an accident that occurred far back when Ashoke was twenty two. A student at B.E. College, he was going to visit his parents for the holidays, when the engine and seven bogies of 83 Up Howrah-Ranchi Express derailed from the broad gauge line. The bogies capsized and telescoped into each other, killing the passengers in their sleep. The pages of the hard bound collection of *Short stories by Nikolai Gogol*, which he was reading when the accident happened, tossed from his hand. But he was still clutching a single page crumpled tightly in his fist, and when he raised his hand the wad of paper dropped from his fingers and he was spotted and rescued. The incident never really left his memory and he continued to be claustrophobic for the rest of his life.

Ashoke records that he was born twice in India and then a third time in America. For this, he thanked his parents and Gogol, the Russian writer, who had saved his life. He named his son Gogol. Ashoke finds himself a cultural transplant and feels that his is a new life in America. Situated in the cusp of two temporal punctuations, the immigrants' only means of survival is by oscillating between fact and fantasy, tradition and modernity, past and present. When Ashima delivers the child, she is visited by their

Bengali friends. This makes her nostalgic about her homeland. After some time Ashima adjusts to her new environs, bringing up her child in the Bengali way and learns to communicate with Americans around her.

Ashima and Ashoke consciously try to hold on to their Indian-Bengali selves. The couple decides to go to India for eight months. They eagerly look forward to meeting their relatives and friends. Lahiri describes how Gogol and Sonia resent these childhood trips to India, during which they are forced to interact with the family and give up the material comforts of American life. The second generation immigrants' trauma links up with a crisis of identity and obstructs the development of effective relationship between self and place. Gogol, like a typical second generation Indian-American, makes a conscious effort to be different from his parents. Gogol Ganguli is the most striking character in the novel. Gogol wants to live in a world free from Bengali culture, from the traditions that tie him down to a country and culture, he does not know. He experiences a cultural dilemma on numerous occasions during his life.

Gogol's affinity has been towards American culture. Ignoring his roots he indulges in several misbegotten relationships. Gogol's unsuccessful love affairs with Ruth and Maxine can also be accounted as a conflict between two alien cultures. His free life makes him rootless and displaced. The trauma of finding a suitable companion for Gogol becomes an impossible situation and his wedding with Moushumi eventually turns out to be a disastrous one. Moushumi like Gogol is at odds with the Indian-American world she inhabits. Her secret illegitimate affair breaks their marital relationship. Gogol becomes totally lost; his great American dream is shattered.

Gogol is always in a dilemma feeling alienated, fitting nowhere. He is an existential hero who swings between estrangement and reconciliation. Gogol agonizes over the fact that he is neither fully Indian nor fully American, in his name as well as in cultural situation. He experiences an Identity crisis. He feels like a perennial outsider, a fish out of water. In his youth he tries to distance from his Indian roots, does not think of India as home, as his parents do, but as "India" like his American friends.

The life situations of Ashima, Ashoke and Gogol being emotional and psychological, and triggered by past experiences and encounters, are also linked up with their immediate environments. Their diasporic existence highlights their acute sense of loss, pain and nostalgia for the native land, its people and culture, and heightens their feelings of alienation and at times of deep despair. All the family of Ganguli's in the novel try to escape the reality of life, death, and ultimate nothingness and constantly try to make their lives happy.

The novel is a poignant study of immigrant sensibility. The immigrants, most of them in their Indo-American duality may at times become neurotic, schizophrenic, ambivalent and suspended between the two worlds. Crisis begins when Ashoke wishes to escape the fear of death by migrating to foreign land. His wife Ashima encounters alienation, in culture food and religion in a foreign land. Their son Gogol experiences the ultimate indifferences of life while searching for the meaningfulness of his name and life. Gogol has gone through a series of anxious moments in his life, even then he is not so desperate as to be unhappy with his life. Without allowing his heart to break he moves on negating the adverse elements and absurdities of life. He can be considered happy like Sisyphus by easily adapting to the life around him. He somehow moves confidently creating a sense of existence in the land which is alien to his parents. He too like Sisyphus has no hope of deliverance and has remained satisfied with the physical effort needed to push the stone uphill. Moushumi also has a peculiar sense of alienation and a meaningless life. *The Namesake* is a social document of a perplexing bicultural universe that analyses the values and norms of both the new world and the old with a kind of "double consciousness". In America's multicultural matrix Lahiri's Indo-American characters often end up as victims.

Lahiri portrays Ashima and Gogol as cultural survivors in America's multicultural milieu. It is difficult for them to maintain cultural insularity and like millions of immigrant Indian's they essentialise their life in the cultural available of America. Lahiri talks about the collision of cultures that takes place in the life of immigrants. The immigrants can neither totally immerse themselves in American culture nor break ties with their intrinsic Indian culture. Jhumpa Lahiri, in *The Namesake* grapples with characters caught drifting between two worlds, two identities.

Jhumpa Lahiri, herself a second generation immigrant in America, can very well comprehend the plight of young generation that feels sandwiched between the aspirations of parents cast in the traditional Indian mould and the influence of the western peer groups as also of the wider American milieu. Lahiri's novel is a trans-cultural novel that brings out the immigrant angst very clearly.

Lahiri succeeds in welding the theme of immigration and displacement with that of human relationships. She successfully explores the myriad landscape of human relationships against the backdrop of both geographical as well as emotional displacement. Lahiri through her vast canvas of different characters, realistically portrays how the native Indian culture and the alien American culture are at an interface and describes, with graphic detail, the efforts taken for interlacing both the cultures by all the immigrants at all possible levels. The novel is the best example for existential dilemma faced by the characters. Their plight, agony, alienation and isolation have a deep impact on their lives in a new land.

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