

## An Analysis of Cultural Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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**Abstract:** *The Namesake* is the debut novel which was written by the Indian American writer, Jhumpa Lahiri. In this novel, Lahiri depicts the lives of two generations of Indian immigrants in America and their own problems. It differs from other immigrant novels in the way that Lahiri does not arrange rise and fall of experiences for her characters. She just uses the simplest words to describe the heroes' daily life. Under the multicultural background, Lahiri lays a lot of emphasis on the struggles and sufferings of the cultural identity of Indian American. This thesis aims at the analysis of the different identity confusions between the first generation immigrants and the second generation immigrants in terms of their names, love experiences and marriages. This paper attempts to conclude that the cultural differences have a great influence on the fate of characters. Meanwhile, it points out different attitudes and solutions toward the problems.

**Keywords:** Immigrants, Cultural Identity, Identity Confusions.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction of Jhumpa Lahiri and *the Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri is a famous Indian American writer, and she obtained the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2000 for her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*. *The Namesake* is Lahiri's debut novel, and also an international bestseller. *The Namesake* tells a story of how a new couple, who emigrated from India to America, building up their fortune from nothing.

The novel mainly describes different identity confusions between the first generation immigrants and the second generation immigrants, and how they eventually solve these problems. Generally speaking, the researches of *The Namesake* abroad mainly concentrate on the following aspects: the viewpoint of traditional Indian religious culture, the feminist perspective, the ideological perspective and the perspective of cultural identity. Although these researches should have further study and exploration and many perspectives have already been discussed, but they still give me an important inspiration and guidance in my writing.

The thesis focus on interpreting *The Namesake* from the perspective of personal experience and analyzing the intercultural phenomenon based on the novel. In the thesis, the author combines the influence of immigrant culture with individual identity for avoiding talking about the role of national culture vaguely and ignoring the uniqueness of the individual. (Unlike the other studies in the past, this thesis not only analyzes the different identity confusions of the first and the second generation, but also gives proper

suggestions for the people who live in the immigrant culture [1].)

With the rapid development of the multinational literature, American literature has precious diversity in the past few decades. Meanwhile, more and more readers and critics concentrate on the multiethnic writers, the Jewish and African writers top the bill and the Asian writers follow. But (in recent years, more and more great Indian writers become to play an important role in multinational literature of America. Beside V.S. Naipaul, the most famous Indian American writer, there are some talented young writers should be focused on; Jhumpa Lahiri is the most brilliant woman writer among them) [2].

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most talented and prominent contemporary American writers. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London in 1967 and grew up in Kingston. She was born in an Indian immigrant from the state of West Bengal, so Lahiri has made numerous trips to India, where her parents were born and raised. Under the influence of the intellectual atmosphere, Lahiri loves writing when she was a child. Jhumpa Lahiri is good at associating her life experiences with

her literary creation. She lives in America, but implanted in India, so her works reflect the immigration issues. In 2000, Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction by *Interpreter of Maladies*, and it also won O. Henry Award, Hemingway Award and *The New Yorker's* Best Debut of the Year. In 2003, Jhumpa Lahiri published first novel -*The Namesake*. Jhumpa Lahiri is a new generation of Indian American fictionist, the material of her fiction and her world view come from her own experiences. Most characters in Lahiri's works have an Indian background; they can't forget India but live in America, communicating with people in different backgrounds and feeling the sense of homelessness.

*The Namesake*, which is Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel. It is an international bestseller and has been translated into more than 20 foreign languages. *The Namesake* has been voted as a notable book of *New York Times* a nomination of Los Angeles Times Book Prize. And it was also elected one of the best books of the year by *USA Today* and *Entertainment Weekly*. In addition, the novel was adapted for a movie named *The Namesake*.

*The Namesake* narrates a story about the life of Ganguly family in the over 30 years. The novel opens with a pregnant Bengali wife named Ashima Ganguly. She is making an Indian dessert in her department in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1968. Her husband Ashoke Ganguly is a young man, who lives in Calcutta, but once when he went to visit his grandparents by train, he suffered a train wreck and almost been killed. Fortunately, when the accident occurred, a rescue worker was searching for the injured and noticing a page which is *The Coat* of Russian writer Nikolai Gogol's short story collection in Ashoke's hand and saving his life. Since this accident, Ashoke is aware of the transience of life, so he decides to go to a great big world that is America. Later Ashoke returns to India and marries Ashima, the woman he has met once, after they hold a wedding, immigrating to American. When their first child was born, the readers move their focus to the little boy named Gogol who has the same name with the Russian author Gogol. In some extent, the name of Gogol has great significance on Ashoke. But for Gogol, the name bothers him because the name of Gogol is neither an Indian name nor an American name. (The name also hints of the fate of Gogol that he is no sense of belonging) [3]. He will be a man who doesn't know which culture he accepts to, which side he belongs to and who he is, and he is free between two cultures for a long time.

*The Namesake* was written based on the life experience of Jhumpa Lahiri. As the same of Gogol, Lahiri's parents are a couple of Indian migrants. In the beginning of kindergarten life in Rhode Island, her teacher decided to call her nickname Jhumpa, as it is

easier to pronounce than her formal name. At that time, Lahiri always felt embarrassed because of her name. She thinks that kind of feeling like you are causing someone pain just by being who you are. So Lahiri has sympathy of Gogol, the major character of her novel *The Namesake* with his unusual name. Throughout the novel, *The Namesake* applies name as a special theme, elaborating the struggle of individual identity.

### **Different Confusions in the Two Generations in *the Namesake***

*The Namesake* is a kind of subtle novel, crossing two generations and two regions. In the novel, the two generations have to face different problems. The problem is related to the first generation of immigrants who were born in homeland but immigrated to another country to start a new life. They object to giving up the original way of life when living in a new cultural environment. Therefore, they may feel lonely and guilty. Another problem is about the second generation of immigrants who were born and grew up in the new country. They want to be the person of the new country but the impact of family has rooted in their blood deeply. However, their sense of belonging is different when the two generations face (the question of "Who Am I") [4].

Ashoke and Ashima are the examples of the first generation of Indian American immigrants who bear the suffering of far away from home. They moved to America for a better future, but they couldn't forget Indian traditional customs. In India, Ashoke and Ashima were born in an upper-class family, a big family with servants. Both of them have accepted higher education. Ashoke has a PhD at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Ashima has a B.A. at University of Calcutta. Ashoke is supposed to get married and live with his family in Calcutta, but a train wreck changes his life. After that accident, he goes against his parents and goes to America to begin his new life. Although Ashoke has lived in America for many years and received American education, he still complies with Indian traditional culture. One day, he flies back to India and marries Ashima, which girl he has only met once. After the wedding, they come to America together.

In the beginning, Ashoke and Ashima have a hard condition in America. They live in a small apartment which is cold in winter and hot in summer. Ashima does not know anyone so she spends her whole time in the room missing her family and crying. But she has to accept that no one can help her to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash clothes, or shop for groceries, which makes her feel homesick, we can see Ashima feels lonely and sad when she comes to America in the first time. She emigrates from her homeland to a strange city and begins to adapt to a new

lifestyle, makes new friends and learns new language. Ashoke is busy with his study and works, there is no one to accompany Ashima, so Ashima misses her family every day. But after her pregnancy, she feels less lonely and thinks life is more meaningful. In accordance with the Indian custom, the name of her child should be named by Ashima's grandmother. But when the child was born, the letter has not been sent yet, so they called the boy Gogol as a nickname. When Gogol is six months old, Ashoke and Ashima hold a ceremony which is the first formal one for him, focusing on eating solid foods. ("She can't help wishing her own brother were here to feed him and her own parents to bless him with their hands on his head" [5]. So they invite their Bengali friends to play relatives to feed him rice, which is the Bangladeshi tradition. As the growing of Gogol, their social circle is expanded, but most of their friends are Bangladeshis. On Sunday afternoon, they drink milk tea and taste Indian traditional food together. The husbands discuss the Indian politics and the wives talk about cooking and shopping. A few years later, they make a move to a town in Boston when Ashoke is appointed as an assistant professor in the University of Cambridge. The job is Ashoke's dream, so it is an exciting thing for him. But Ashima feels disappointed because there is no Bangladeshi. Gradually, she realizes that:

*(Being a foreigner, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy---a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that precious life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect) [4].*

It is obvious that Ashima found that the life which they live in America likes a sort of lifelong pregnancy. American culture is going to take place of their original culture, and they cannot do anything except suffering. Where Ashima has to change her Indian lifestyle and adapt to accept American living habits, and she has neither friends nor relatives to talk with. Ashoke is busy in his works so that Ashima needs to make all the decisions and takes care of children by herself, who just like pregnancy; the mother needs to bear the pain, and changes her habits. The process of pregnancy is lonely and hopeless.

### **Different Cultural Identities for the Two Generations**

As the first generation of immigrants, Ashoke and Ashima suffer the bitterness of apart from home. Ashima always repeats these words that ("We have no relatives in this country...that is why we are going to India in the first place") [6]. India is their origin,

spiritual destination and cultural destination. They have clear and unshakable faith on themselves — Bengali, so it is hard for them to blend in American culture. Cultural differences become cultural barriers when individual leaves its former culture or subculture and struggles or successes in another culture. Although Ashoke and Ashima have a stable life, gain respect and obtain the wants and needs of material, they inhabit their home as well as spiritual. Cultural differences make it difficult to get rid of the maternal for them, so they can't acquire the real happiness. In order to relief the homesickness, the only thing Ashoke and Ashima can do is coming back to Calcutta and visiting relatives. So they can ease their guilt and pain arising from self-imposed exile and balancing their inner world. They rely on memory living in America, a country lacks of warmth and thoughtfulness, so they try to maintain traditions that their children won't forget ancestral traditions. Therefore, Ashoke and Ashima to their children is an undertaker of cultural continuity, a character of media and medium and a bond of the second generation immigrants and motherland culture.

With the difference of holding on Indian traditional culture of the first generation immigrants, the second generations of immigrants try their best to integrate American culture and make them be more Americanized. The first generations think they should combine their children with Indian culture, because India is the blood of their children. But the second generations refuse to connect with Indian culture, they believe the further they far away from it, the better they are. But after the blow of them, they need to define the relationship between Indian culture and their own identity.

In *The Namesake*, Gogol and Moushumi are the second generation of the immigrants that they have different torments. (For them, India is a distant and unknown country, but America also makes them feel alienated. They were born and grow up in America, but their parents keep an Indian atmosphere for them. So they come to the conclusion that they are different from the real American people) [7]. However, they are unable to identify with India, a strange country that they have never experience on.

Gogol is a boy with the blood of Indian, and his mind is under the influence of two different cultures. He has the diligence of Indian and the rebellion of American. But actually, he wants to be a real American and refuses to admit his Indian background. Ashoke, Ashima and their Bengali friends held a ceremony for Gogol when he was six months. They put several items before Gogol and let him choose one of these things. In Indian culture, the thing which Gogol chooses can predict what he will do in the future. (And in the ceremony, people are talking to him: "Put the money in

his hands!’ Someone in the group calls out. ‘An American boy must be rich!’ ‘No!’ His father protests, ‘The pen. Gogol, take the pen’ [8]. They want Gogol to become what they expected. But Gogol cried and chose nothing; it means he just wants to do himself. Gogol doesn’t like taking part in the party of Bangladeshis or eating changeless Indian food. To compare the Gustavo Poyet with Christmas Day, he prefers to the latter one. He hates his parents to arrange the class of Bengali and make him learn Bengali culture. He is interested in English and American culture. The trip to Calcutta is a wonderful thing for Ashoke and Ashima, but it is an upset and hopeless thing for Gogol because he can’t eat hamburger and pizza or drink a glass of cold milk in there. Months of homecoming are so long that he feels the day they come back to America will never arrives. Under this situation, Gogol is unable to confirm his own cultural identity, just like the awkward name — it is neither an Indian or a American. It is very distant but covers himself, becoming his bad image and letting him languish. Gogol falls in love with American girl and flees the family in order to resist the opposition of his parents. And he also smokes Marijuana and drives to watch the film of rock and science fiction secretly.

As the second generation of immigrants, they are living in the crack between two cultures. They become the ABCD which is faring away from the center of the mainstream culture. If the first generation immigrants face the pain of homesickness in the self-imposed exile, then the second generations of immigrants undertake more distress. From the birth, they have no choice; they can only receive American culture passively and accept the influence of Indian culture. Their pain and despair are deeper than the first generations. They are not a true American but not a real Indian, they are just the outsider of two culture. When they face the question “Who Am I”, they are even more confused. In general, both of the two generation immigrants are all in the face of identity confusion. If they want to identify themselves, the only thing they can do is casting off the predicament.

As we know, name is the symbol of a person; it represents the elders’ wishes to the new baby. And love experience and marriage are the most essential part of one’s life, so they can show the attitude in life of man. From these two parts, we can analyze the way of self-identification in this chapter; name is also a logical web of oneself. In this part, the first generation and the second generation hold the different attitude to their name, and it can reflects different cultural identity for two generations.

According to Indian traditional culture, every person has two names in his life. One is nickname which is used in family members and relatives; the

other is formal name which used in public places. (“Once Gogol is sick in the hospital, Ashoke and Ashima see the name of Gogol written on the prescription, they feel bad because the nickname can’t be used in public place in India”) [7]. The nickname just used by a small group of people, it seems more private, the formal often been used in envelopes, telephone directories, passports and enrollments. And the wife will never call the name of her husband in public place: (“Her husband’s name, which she has never once uttered in his presence”) [9]. In India, the child will never use the same name with his parents or relatives because the individual name is sacred and inviolable, it is not meant to be shared or inherited. So in India, different names represent different meanings and different identities of people. Bengali parents are in no hurry to give a name to a new baby immediately, because it is a significant thing. In fact, people always ask the elders to name the children because they think it is propitious in Indian traditional culture. So in *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri gives different meaningful name for the characters. And these names express different cultural concepts.

Gogol, the son in the novel, which is the same name with a Russian author named Nikolai Gogol. It is neither an Indian name nor an American name, but it symbolizes the life of his father. Because of the strange name, his childhood is filled of painfulness, so he decides to change his name to Nikhil. The name of Nikhil means a person is entire and encompassing. But although he changes his name, he also can’t leave the past and doesn’t know which the real one is finally. Moushumi, the daughter-in-law in the novel, which means a person is southwesterly, Breeze, which means she is a vagrant. She immigrants from London to America and studies in Paris. She swears that she will never marry an Indian man and get a relationship with a French man. But before her wedding, the man refuses to accept Indian culture, so they broke up. With the efforts of her parents, Moushumi marries Gogol.

Love experience and marriage are the identity of intermediary and bridge, so they are themes in *The Namesake*. Jhumpa Lahiri uses the interracial marriage to express the understanding of identity exploration, the result of identity choice and the psychological state of identity selection. This section analyzes the different love experience and marriage between the first generation and the second generation and obtains the belonging of identity and cultural.

### **Reconstruction of Identity in Two Generations**

Ashoke was born in India, and he suffered a train wreck when he was 22 years old. At the ages of 23, he decides to go to America, starting the trip of his dream. After seven years, he has a good career, a social circle, a house, wife and children through his efforts. He

makes his American dream come true and everything seems to be successful, but the loneliness can't replace the achievement that he gained in a foreign country. Ashoke follows Indian traditional culture to marry Ashima, the girl he only met once, their marriage is supported by common customs, common culture and common feeling of homesickness. At first, they were strange, and then they got familiar with each other, at last they rely on each other. It is different to say that they had something called true love, they can't find the kind of mutual appreciation, attachment and attraction in it. But it is a very deep feeling, which they can leave the place where each other regard as the land of inseparable or the root of culture. It can be said that they find roots in each other and the link is deeper than love and harder to break.

Although Ashoke receives American culture and the liberalism, he also has an arranged marriage. He abides by Indian traditional value and culture, so India is rooted in his blood. From the living of Ashoke and Ashima, we can see that the native culture is the focus of their lives and the roots they rely on.

When Gogol was in his sophomore of the college, he met an American girl called Ruth. They have similar interests and the same appreciation of artistic works, so they talk about everything together. Gogol invites Ruth to come to his home and introduces his parents and living environment to her. Subconsciously, Gogol wants the alien woman can enter into his family which is normal in Indian culture. However, Ruth is attracted in the United Kingdom culture; she went to England for studying. After lost the intersection of American culture, they lost touch with each other, so Gogol is unsuccessful through the way of interracial love to gain (the recognition of heterogeneous culture) [10]. When Gogol has a relationship with his second girlfriend called Maxine, he effortlessly participated into their lives at the beginning. Gogol lives in her home and enjoys the holidays with her parents together, as she enjoys living with Maxine. And it is not difficult to understand that after the sudden death of Ashoke, the spiritual world of Gogol turns changeable and clear. After Ashoke's depart, Gogol follows the Indian traditional to mourn and plans to come back to India to spread his father's ashes into the Ganges. The plan doesn't inform Maxine. Meanwhile, Gogol spends more time with his mother and sister and make himself aloof Maxine. When he is asked for this, he just answers "I don't want to leave", and eventually he comes out of the life of Maxine.

From a child, Gogol hopes to become a real American and refuses to admit himself in an Indian culture background. The death of father tightens the line of Indian culture and pulls the characteristics in bones. And it makes himself approve of Indian culture, puts

himself relocating the Indian culture and belongs himself to Indian culture. And Gogol also announces his returning to Indian culture with the marriage of the Indian American girl Moushoumi.

In the novel, Ashoke and Ashima are the typical representatives of the first generation immigrants. They emigrate from India to America and start a new life, but they cannot abandon Indian culture. They were struggling between Indian culture and American culture. They at last got used to living in American way, but they also refused it at the same time in their deep heart. Gradually, Ashoke and Ashima began to accommodate to American and change their living habit during the time when the children are growing up. (Ashima cooked sandwich or hamburger instead of the Indian traditional breakfast, and she also made a turkey on Christmas Day. Ashoke's clothes were made by tailor when he lived in America at the beginning, but now his clothes are bought from the markets. And he also uses ballpoint pen instead of fountain pen. Meanwhile the family celebrates American holidays such as Thanking Day, Christmas Day, Easter and so on) [11].

Gogol is the prime representative of the second generation immigrants. He was born and grew up in America, he could communicate with other local people in English fluently, but he also needed to speak Bengali language with his family. His favorite food was pizza and hamburger but his mother did Indian food for him. He wanted to be a real American and got rid of anything about Indian. He changed his name to Nikhil when he was going to study in university. After the departure of his father, he felt regretted and guilty when he knew the meaning of the name Gogol. At that moment, he accepted the name of Gogol for the first time. (Gogol was getting to know why his parents asked him to learn Indian traditional culture, which was a part of his life) [11].

## CONCLUSION

As we know, America is the most multicultural country in the world. Nowadays, with the growing number of people from different countries with different nationalities swarm into America, it is of great value to study spiritual and cultural destination of immigrants.

The thesis makes an empirical study of searching for identity. From the paper, it is easily found that the right way to search for identity is reconstructing the identity, so we need to respect the original culture and absorb the essence of foreign culture. And the thesis sums up to provide opportunities to examine how the first generation immigrants and the second generation immigrants through alter ego and self-defeat, finally searching for their cultural identity.

When we are in the multicultural background, if we abandon our own culture, we may lose the sense of belonging. If we only emphasize our national culture and refuse foreign cultures, it will cause the conflict between races and nations. Thus (we had better absorb the excellent part of foreign cultures so as to make up the disadvantage of our national culture) [12].

In conclusion, the process of searching cultural identity is reconstructing the identity, we need to face and admit the troubles, escaping is not the right way to solve problems.

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