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### The Namesake: An Exploration of Family Values and Alienation

#### Abstract

This article, The Namesake: An Exploration of Family Values and Alienation, aims to analyze how Ashima, an Indian woman, born and brought up with Indian family values finds herself alienated in American culture which is different from her own culture. She struggles very hard to instill Indian Bengali culture and family values in her children, Gogol and Sonali. In the first part of the novel, Gogol appears as an American lad who does not want to stick to the old customs and traditions of India. But in later part preponderance of Indian family values is seen in his character after the death of his father and his divorce from his wife, Moshumi.

Keywords: Indian Family Values, Culture, Alienation, Name

Value system consists of all the beliefs and viewpoints that the parents of every family hands over to their next generation, the next generation hands it over to their offspring and so on. It is these beliefs and viewpoints that shape or influence the personality of a young child. In India, there are certain values that are part of India's cultural heritage. In India, the family is one of the most important institutions which have survived through the ages. Indians love to live together peacefully and respect each other's rights. They maintain strong bonds with other members of the family and relatives. They always seek the advice of their

elders in case of any important decision. Every member of an Indian family adds great import to family integrity, family loyalty, and family unity. The family supports the old and takes care of the widow. Guests in Indian family are considered as God. Traditionally, India adheres to a patriarchal ideology. In family women are typically submissive, demure, nonassertive, and values the happiness of the male members above their own. Many social changes are taking place gradually but arranged marriage is still the custom. Children are expected to listen, respect and obey their parents. To better his prospects when an Indian person born and brought up with such beliefs and values migrate to a country whose culture is different from that of India. He finds himself in a state of cultural indetermination. On the one hand he is excited about his new home but on the other he is grieving the loss of his country of origin. His excitement about the new home ends when he is rejected by the natives of that country. This rejection breeds in him a sense of loneliness, exile and rootlessness. Consequently, he feels alienated in that culture.

Every writer is the product of his/her social milieu and the nation he/she belongs to and Jhumpa Lahiri is not an exception to it. Born as Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri she is mainly known under her nom-de-plume Jhumpa Lahiri. As Lahiri is a native of America, being attached to India, she highlights the experiences of the diasporic expatriates, which this Paper proposes to study with specific reference to the theme of alienation and family values in *The Namesake*. Being a sibling of Indian Bengali immigrant, Lahiri is emotionally attached to Indian soil. Almost in all her works, she portrays and elucidates alien culture in the context of India. Her novel, *The Namesake*, published in 2003, deals with the life of first and second generation immigrants of India to America and covers a period of thirty-two years.

Lahiri's teachers used to call her by her pet name, i.e., Jhumpa, because it was easier to pronounce than her good name; Nilanjana Sudeshana. As we are aware of the fact, in India, there is a custom of having two names, one is pet name or *daknam* and another is good name or *Bhalonam*. Pet name is generally used at home by our kith and kins while at our

workplace or offices, we are addressed by our good names. At one place, Lahiri says, “I always felt so embarrassed by my name...you feel like you are causing someone pain just by being who you are”(Wikipedia). The dilemma of Lahiri’s own identity was the inspiration for the ambivalence of Gogol, the protagonist of *The Namesake* over his peculiar name. In other words, Gogol may be an alter ego of the writer.

In Shakespear’s *Romeo and Juliet* Act 2 Scene 2, Juliet tells Romeo “What’s in a name?”(71). This statement shows the insignificance of the name in this context, as name is supposed to be an artificial and meaningless convention. But here Jhumpa Lahiri has presented and shown convincingly the importance of name. The crux of the plot lies in the significance of name and the writer has beautifully portrayed how one’s name can be responsible for one’s alienation and detachment from his society in general and family in particular. At the very outset of the novel, we come across a character named Ashima and find her doing household chores inside the kitchen. She is a pregnant lady making concocted (mixed) dish to eat. Though she has now come to America she has hardly forgotten her bygone days of homeland Kolkata where she lived before she was married to Ashok. Meanwhile, she feels excruciating pain and calls her husband but not by her name. When Ashima is admitted to hospital, she feels lonely even though there are three other pregnant ladies—all Americans—in the same room, separated by curtains. She is aware of the concern for privacy in Americans. She arrived in America eighteenth months ago. She has been concerned about delivering her child on foreign soil “Unmonitored, Unobserved by those she loved (Lahirin 6). Thus it is very clear in the very beginning of the novel, how the theme of alienation and family values pervades the plot.

*“Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant*

*episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement".( Said 87)*

After the birth of her son, Ashima wishes to go back to Kolkata to raise his son amongst her relatives. When we look at it from another perspective we observe that she wants to inculcate Indian family values in her child so that he could understand and know Indian family values. But she knows she can't do it for the pleasure of her husband. She spends her time alone at home; she sings lullabies for her baby and cries herself on her lonely state. This sense of loneliness and alienation increases further when they go from the university apartments to a university town outside Boston. To her entire stay in a foreign land appears nothing less than a lifelong pregnancy "a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (49). Ashima is aware of this fact, if she has to make a proper balance with her children she will have to indulge herself more in the American way of life therefore she equally participates in all the activities of her children. She celebrates Christmas, enjoys Roasted Turkey on Thanksgiving and cooks American food once in a week for the children. Such values are often seen in Indian mothers who go to any extent for the pleasure of their families. Ashima's decision to live six months in India and six months in America is also a symbol of Indian family values where Ashima is trying to establish a harmony between her children and her parents at home.

Indian and American societies are poles apart and this distinction creates a chaos in the life of Ashima. In Indian perspective, men and woman have some specific role in society. Women are more or less dependent on male members of their families but in America it is not so. In America both are independent. Ashima is the embodiment of a true Indian woman and represents India and Indian customs. She organises parties with the invited Indian families in America. This circle of Indian families grows larger each year. Thus she maintains the Indian customs and creates an Indian ambience in America.

When it comes to Ashoke, being aware that his newborn son is an American, he decides to wait for the name to come from India. Thus he follows the Indian family tradition that the oldest in the family chooses the name of the newborn. In India, it is a filial duty to take care of our parents and in the novel it is clearly revealed through the character of Ashima and Asoka. They frequently visit India to meet their parents. This is one of the rarest familial values which are found in Indian families.

The writer has beautifully portrayed the reminiscence of India and Indian way of life in this novel. The second generations do not have direct experience of their parents' homeland. It is through the eyes of their parents that the second generation learns about the homeland. Alienation from one's own culture involves the loss of language and family ties. The writer hammers home the immigrant experience in humanist outlook. The loss of one's own identity in an alien land evokes a feeling of alienation. To put it in different way the loss of roots, language and social norms of immigrant's own country creates a situation of dilemma. The protagonist of the novel, Gogol, represents the second generation Indian immigrants to America; he is the mouthpiece of the writer whose estrangement in American society often compels him to think of his real identity. Like the writer Gogol is also misnamed by his father. He struggles with his name; he has to often face embarrassment among his friends and in American society. Though he is an American citizen by birth, his identity is often questioned due to his name.

Our identity is revealed through our names. Name does not help us only in finding our identity but also establishes our unique place in the society. It claims a sense of self-importance. Gogol feels to be alienated in America. His social affiliation in American society is often challenged because of his peculiar name. To get a social affiliation he changes his name Nikhil from Gogol. He wants to be accepted as an American because he belongs to neither Russia nor to India. His typical name creates a great upheaval in his life. Whosoever comes to know his name he looks at him with doubt. Such instances in his life

make him alone and alienate from his peer group. Gogol is named after a Russian writer Nikolai Gogol whom his father considers instrumental in saving his life. In the beginning, Gogol fails to understand the emotions of his father which compels him to dislike his father's attitude. Gogol comes to know about the implication and importance of his name after his father's death. Gogol's split identity is the product of his name. It makes him detach himself from his family members. Later on Gogol develops a chip on his shoulder, he finds himself segregated from the rest of his friends because of his name. His legal name, Nikhil, proves an overcoat to him to escape from his alienated self. Although the name Nikhil brings him more confidence, Gogol is always present inside him. Soon he feels a sense of detachment and dissatisfaction about avoiding his roots:

Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will once and for all vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all. (289)

Gogol was brought up in an Indian ambience at home and American outside. By nature and blood he was an offspring of Indian immigrant. Indian customs and traditions were imposed on him by his parents, which he never liked but it shaped his personality unconsciously. In such circumstances, he sometimes felt as a pendulum that keeps moving between two extremes: one Indian and the other American.

When we look at the character of Moshumi; She is the wife of Gogol who is divorced later on, is made up of different stuff and she is the most complicated character in the novel regarding the concept of identity. Born of Indian parents in England, having several relationships with people from diverse backgrounds and nationalities, make her an intricate personality who is also in search of fixed identity without noticing it. Her continuous search for a fixed identity makes her life lonely and she has a sense of alienation wherever she goes. Moshumi's multiple personality does not let her stick to anything in life permanently:

“She feels unmoored...beyond the world that has defined and structured and limited her for so long.”(153)

When the basic difference between the character of Gogol and Moshumi is taken into account it appears that Gogol feels alienated because of his name whereas Moshumi's unstable nature makes her alone.

Lahiri in the novel portrays how the first generation immigrants make effort to preserve their native culture in their new homes. They train their children in Bengali language, literature and history at their home and through special Bengali classes expose them to their family values and customs. In the first part of the novel, Gogol appears as an American lad who does not want to stick to the old customs and traditions of India. But in later part a drastic change can be seen in his character. When Gogol's father dies from a heart attack in Ohio, Gogol still lives with his girlfriend Maxine. No sooner does he hear this news than he goes to collect his father's body and prepares a funeral for him. Ashoke's unexpected death proves an emotional setback for Gogol. Now he possesses his father's tangible legacy in his absence. At the same time, his cultural upbringing makes him realize and sympathize with his family. His break up with Maxine for the sake of family connotes the values and importance of family in Indian culture.

He remembers Maxine's reactions to his telling her about his other name as they had driven up from his parents' house. ‘That is the cutest thing I've ever heard, she'd said. And then she'd never mentioned it again, this essential fact about his life slipping from her mind as so many others did. (156)

Gogol is desirous of getting a permanent place in American society. We always find him imitating American values and ways of life. But his Indian blood makes him realize his duty towards family. After his father's death, he appears to be more concerned about his family especially her mother and calls her every week. The best example of family value can be seen when Gogol marries Moshumi because it was his mother's desire to get married in

family's acquaintances. But his conjugal relationship with Moshumi does not come to fruition. Consequently, they are separated. His unsuccessful marriage and his father's death are important reasons that re-connect Gogol with his family.

Gogol feels that his parents lived in America 'in spite of what was missing' and now he too faces the same prospect of missing his only parent alive. He feels he lacks the stamina for it. Though he stays deliberately away from his parents yet he hovers close enough to his house only when his father moves to Cleveland in America. Gogol was a little more away from him. He realizes that he came home for the sake of his family only. It shows he was unconsciously tied to his family. When Gogol develops a relationship with Ruth and his parents come to know about their steady relationship, they remain indifferent without expressing any curiosity about his girlfriend. Ruth tells Gogol that she does not mind his parents' disapproval which she finds romantic. But Gogol knows it is not right. He wishes his parents could simply accept her as her family accepts him, without pressure of any kind. This act of Gogol presents a befitting example of Indian lad who cares for his family's like and dislike.

It would be more appropriate to quote here that alienation is a part of the experience of the Indian diaspora and even if people are at ease in any part of the world it does not mean that they will not undergo the sense of alienation. Increasing acceptance into the host society does not indicate that the diaspora characters can feel at home. Social alienation (in the context of Gogol) is replaced by metaphysical alienation (in the case of Ashima). Diasporic writing becomes relevant biographical sketch of the writers who describe in their writing an immigrant's effort to belong to two places but fail to belong to the either, try to preserve traces of old identity while struggling to acquire new identity, lose both the identities in the process. When immigrant or diasporic community is not accepted in the host country it brings a loss of identity and a sense of alienation. In the dinner at Lydia's house Gogol's identity is challenged once again:

But you are an Indian, 'Pamela says, frowning. I'd think the climate would not affect you giving your heritage. (157)

At the same time, the bond of Indian family values has been beautifully portrayed by the author in this novel. It is a general belief among the Indians that in India children do bother about their parents. Though in the first part it contradicts but in the later part of the novel, the behaviour of Gogol towards his family testifies to this statement.

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