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The Namesake: A Struggle for Identity

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Abstract

The Namesake, by Jhumpa Lahiri, is a story of culture, race, and inheritance and how these factors mold our attitudes and direct our lives in an ever-changing society. The novel follows the lives of Ashima and Asoke Ganguli, and how they left behind a life in India that they had grown to know and love to live the American dream and provide the best life for themselves and their children. Gogol, their only son, and the carrier of their family name, struggles incessantly to find his identity while attempting to mold to his family's expectations and the expectations of American society. The latter dictated that adhering to the model of the Standard North American family establishes normalcy. Gogol engages in a constant struggle to remain loyal to both worlds. Hence, the major theme portrayed in the novel is one of *identity*. This theme is illustrated vividly by examining the importance of one's culture and background, gender, and name as the definition of patriarchal lineage and destiny in life. Such factors that contribute to problems with identity are not only recognizable in Indian cultures, but can become hindrances for many immigrants who enter the United States each year.

The Namesake: A Struggle for Identity

The Namesake, by Jhumpa Lahiri, is a story of culture, race, and inheritance, and how these factors mold our attitudes and direct our lives in a society that is ever-changing. The novel tells of the lives of Ashima and Asoke Ganguli and how they leave behind a life in India that they had grown to know and love to live the American dream and provide the best life for themselves and their children. Gogol, their only son, and the carrier of their family name, struggle incessantly to find his identity while attempting to mold his family's expectations with the expectations he feels in American Society. The major theme portrayed in the novel is *identity*, vividly illustrated by examining the importance of one's name as the definition of patriarchal lineage, background, and gender as a means by which one's destiny in life is dictated. Such factors that contribute to problems with identity are not only recognizable in Indian cultures, but can become hindrances for many immigrants who enter the United States each year.

There can be a great sense of identity in one's name and there can be great significance in the maintenance of a good family name. For example, I would hear my friend say over and over again, "It's not just a name!", as he battled to come to terms with the fact that he had been left branded with the name of the father who had abandoned him, and was the one person he hated the most. It didn't take him long to get his name legally changed, for the pain of carrying on the legacy of that man was something that he could no longer bear. I couldn't understand at the time, but his name really wasn't *just a name*; it was a reminder of his past life, which would continuously haunt him if he did nothing about it. Such are the tribulations that the Ganguli family faces in The Namesake. Ashima and Askoke want to give their son a name that will add meaning and

purpose to his life. One chosen by his maternal great-grandmother would have been sacred and perfect in every way. When this was not possible, Ashoke gave his son a name that represented hope for a better life and second chances - but it also represented tragedy.

The young Ashoke is consumed in the work of Nikolai Gogol on the train ride back home, and refuses to part from the tattered book even in the late hours of the night. The quiet of the early morning is abruptly broken when Ashoke's car derails, and he and the pages of his novel are thrust upon the cold, wet soil outside the train. Rescuers pace about the wreckage in search of the few that survived. Had it not been for the pages of Nikolai Gogol that were clutched in the hands of Ashoke and lay crumpled next to his limp body, he may have never been found amongst the rubble that covered him.

Knowledge of the source of his name redefines the path that his life begins to take. Similarly to my friend, and like the mangled pages of Nikolai Gogol at the scene of Ashoke's train wreck, Gogol's life is filled with dead-ends, disappointments, and confusion as he struggles to figure out who he is and where the curse of his namesake will lead him next.

Conversely, the names of Gogol's parents: Asima ("she who is limitless, without borders") and Ashoke ("he who transcends grief") were chosen with care according to Hindi customs. Their names drive their lives in a positive direction and, even in their hardest times, provide them with the strength and determination to persevere. Ashoke's name was one to be respected particularly, and according to the practices of his culture, it is sacred and never to be uttered by his wife. Such respect for names also rings true in other cultures that I have encountered. One in particular with which I have had first-hand experience is the Korean culture. In high school, I spent long afternoons and early-

release days visiting with a friend who had not long ago migrated from Korea. While with her, I observed that she would constantly refer to her brother as Opa and her father as Apa. Never would she utter the names of her father or brother while in their presence, for this would be a sign of disrespect and irreverence. In my own family, I have observed that referring to an older brother or sister by their first name is something looked down upon by the generation in which my paternal grandmother lived. They refer to older siblings as 'brother' or 'sister'. In essence, culture dictates that, through names and titles, age is a means by which one establishes his or her identity with regard to social status. From my observations, this practice is pervasive, and it is only recently that many have begun to turn their backs on this long-established custom.

In essence, the names that the protagonists carry in The Namesake not only add meaning and direction to their lives, but give them a sense of cultural identity and belonging among other Bengalis. However, their Bengali names and heritage provide distress and discontent as they try to find their place in American society. Though named after a famous Russian writer, Gogol's name is a representation of his being bound to a backward Bengali heritage of which he longs to break free. Ever since his youth, Gogol's father, Ashoke, idolized Nikolai Gogol not only for his writing, but for the new meaning of life that he brought to him. Nikolai Gogol's characters represented the humble beginnings of Ashoke's father's life, and their story is always one that Ashoke can identify with. The stories shed insight on mysteries of the world that once were inconspicuous to him, and the ghosts of Nikolai Gogol's characters reside in 'a place deep in Ashoke's soul' (Lahiri, 2003, p14). It is for this reason that Gogol rejects his name. It connects him to the seemingly nonsensical traditions that in the past he was

forced to honor and that hindered him from living a free and fulfilling life; the name connected him to his father. If Gogol is Russian, how is this connected to Bengali heritage exactly? So, Gogol, who has spent his entire life in America, chooses to reject his name – not because he is ashamed of his associations to his father – but because he is ashamed of his history and longs to ‘fit in’ with the apparently much superior American society.

Being a part of an immigrant family from Jamaica, I have observed this sort of mindset amongst other immigrant families from my country and other parts of the world. The need to be accepted is something that we have all encountered. For instance, when a friend of mine told me that her grandfather had changed their family name upon migrating to the U.S., it came as a great shock to me. It was feared that their apparent Middle-eastern names would have them targeted as followers of extremist Islam. And due to the negative attention that such groups were receiving at the time, they did not want to be identified as members. Their name, an emblem of a rich and beautiful heritage, was abandoned for one that would be accepted – one that was American.

Thus, culture and upbringing as a way of establishing one’s identity is a dominant theme in the novel. Cultural differences also give rise to the identity crises that the protagonists encounter. The Namesake follows the lives of Ashoke and Gogol, father and son living in two different times. Though they are both of Indian ancestry and both live under the strict statutes of the Indian culture, Gogol’s cultural identity is bombarded by intense consumerism, materialism, and the open-mindedness that was characteristic of American society during the 1970’s. He considers his parents’ homeland in India to be backward and wishes not to be associated with the traditions that many of his family

members have adopted. Though his parents raise him in the way that they believe a Bengali is to be raised, Gogol establishes early on in his life that he is indeed an American. However, his choice is met with much protest by his family. So he decides to conform to their wishes to not deviate from Bengali customs. This leads to much confusion for Gogol as he tries to meet what is expected of him as an American and an Indian. This situation is similar to the life story of Barack Obama, detailed in his autobiography Dreams from My Father, which I recently read. Being of European American and African ancestry, Senator Obama constantly struggles to find his place among the African and European Americans in the United States. He is always placed in the position of choosing one over the other and is never able to represent both cultures, which he most strongly embraces.

Struggles with identity such as Senator Obama's are ubiquitous in American society today, being that there is an increasing demand to conform to certain *norms*. These struggles are particularly felt by immigrants who come to America with the hopes of bettering their lives by adopting societal standards with regards to their views of what the ideal family is in order to achieve a sense of normalcy. Similarly, those of the growing multiethnic community are often strongly encouraged to identify themselves as one race and keep within those racial boundaries, lest they be seen as 'out of the ordinary.'

Though *The Namesake* focuses primarily on name, culture, and inheritance as a way of establishing one's identity, it also sheds light on the ways in which gender helps to define a person's life. In the novel, Ashima's entire life revolves around her children and she feels an emptiness within her whenever a major stage of their lives has come and gone. Her primary purpose in life is to care for her children and husband, and she has

been primed for this role ever since her childhood spent keenly observing other women in her family. Such observations mold her identity as the primary care-giver, and dictate that deviating from this way of life is of no advantage. In the novel, the author states that while Ashima is in labor with her first child, “in spite of her growing discomfort, she’d been astonished by her body’s ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmothers had done” (Lahiri, 2003, p6). She has found her identity in life: motherhood. And, it is the way that nature has perfectly intended. Unlike Ashima who gives up her job upon marrying, women in America today have access to more educational opportunities and perform roles that include a variety of activities in addition to the more traditional expectations of home-making and raising children. Though my own mother has had the opportunity to experience privileges that Ashima had never known, she still takes a traditional stance on the roles of wives in the home. I have found from my own experience that my mother (who does not work outside the home) dedicates much time to ‘taking care of the family,’ and considers motherhood to be one of the most important experiences in womanhood. She has encouraged my sister and me to place great importance on this role since she has found it to be a rewarding and fulfilling experience. Like Ashima, my mother came to develop this outlook by constantly watching her mother and grandmothers.

Ashoke sees himself as the head of the household and feels responsible for the well-being and happiness of his entire family. For instance, as Ashima complains that she does not have the strength to raise a baby alone, away from her extended family, Ashoke feels responsible for her heartache because it was he who had taken her away from her family and a life that she had grown to know and love. Similarly, in my family, my father

is seemingly the more emotionally stable party and considers himself responsible for the family's financial and spiritual growth, though my mother plays an integral role in these issues. Hence, the family dynamics presented in The Namesake are very similar to those in 'Normal American Society' today. Hence, the societal mindset that gender grounds one's identity is strongly supported.

Because the Gangulis carry with them myriad traditions and practices upon migrating to the United States, their son finds it difficult to establish himself in society and find his own identity. This is vividly illustrated by examining the importance of one's name as the definition of patriarchal lineage, background, and gender as a means by which one's destiny in life is dictated. The never-ending search for identity has been an increasing issue for many in today's society, particularly among those who have recently migrated to the country.

References

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