



## Adherence of Cultural Identity in *The Namesake* by JhumpaLahiri

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### Abstract

Cultural identity is a self-identification that affiliates to a community. It is the behavioral characteristics of a person, especially who immigrates to other countries. For immigrants, it gives individuality and ensures the feeling of belonging in a foreign country. An immigrant embraces cultural identity for safety and security when settles in another country. *The Namesake* by JhumpaLahiri makes it the best kind of reference to classify cultural identity of an Indian woman immigrant in America. The study portrays the woman character Ashima who immigrates to America after marriage and associates herself with the Indian beliefs and culture. Further, it examines that uprooting from one's own land and re-routing in an alien land has not changed her cultural identity. She adheres to her own cultural beliefs and observes a strong sense of belonging to the homeland. The paper proves that women are powerfully affected through migration, but still adhere the Indianness culture to them.

**Keywords:** Indianness, Culture, Identity, immigrants, cultural values

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### Introduction

The identity of culture includes the quest for the self and of culture. Usually, the problem starts when people feel alienated in a foreign country. However, the adherence of homeland culture helps to make immigrants more linked to be an integral part in a hostland. The term is gaining importance due to the increased controversy over rights of cultural practice in a foreign country. However, most people know what it means to be part of a community living and cultural identity. In *The Sun and Her Flower* (2017), Rupi Kaur says: "perhaps we are all immigrants trading one home for another, first we leave the womb for air, then the suburbs of the filthy city in search of a better life some of us just happen to leave entire countries." (171)

Migrants move to other countries with their strong cultural identity from various cultural backgrounds. After the migration, migrants get in touch not only with citizens of the same community, but also with the culture and people of the host land. The paper depicts Ashima, who loves her identity and combines the values of Indianness in a foreign world. In addition, it depicts the fact that cultural identity has rooted from one's land and re-routed in another country for various purposes. According to MohaEnnajiin *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity and Education in Morocco*: "Cultural identity is the identity of belonging to a group. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture." (21)

Adapting to the host country's culture helps the immigrants adjust to the community living. However, they have the freedom to follow their own culture, which remains their attachment to their country. In *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (1994), Craig Calhoun states: "...national identity and cultural identity are interrelated, because nation refers to the cultural bonds that give a sense of shared identity to a group of people who occupy or aspire to occupy the same geographic territory." (343) In addition, the similar notion is admitted by JhumpaLahiri, subsequently to the publication of *The Namesake* (2003), in an interview she commented: "The question of identity is



always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children.”(Interview by Subhamoy Das)

*The Namesake* describes the perceptions of Indian immigrant’s emotional and cultural theme. The novel emphasizes on the life of a couple of Indo-American immigrants – Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli who caught between conflicting cultures and differences in ideologies. The novel opens with the American Indian immigrant Ashima Ganguli, who every now and then misses her homeland, her traditions, and customs, but observes it in hostland. She plays a typical Indian mother and wife in a foreign country. Moreover, even after residing for thirty years in America, she still follows the Indian culture. It highlights that the luxurious lifestyle in the host land has not changed the culture of the first generation immigrants. After her marriage, Ashima shifts from Calcutta to America where she struggles a lot as an immigrant. Although Ashima lived as a citizen of America, she shadowed the life of a Bengali woman and never trailed the American lifestyle. In America, she still wears Murshidba silk sari, a sign of Indian culture and never mentions her husband’s name as an emblematic Indian woman. Ashima’s Indianness is portrayed:

She has adopted his surname, but refuses, for propriety’s sake, to utter his first. It’s not the type of thing Bengali wives does. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband’s name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. Therefore, instead of saying Ashoke’s name, she utters the interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as “Are you listening to me.” (2)

### **Adherence to Cultural Identity**

In American society, Ashima experiences the anguish and loneliness of being homesick and feels the sorrow of nostalgia, where as in the house of her father there are full of caring people. In the host land, her soul is occupied with nostalgias of the home country. To make her connecting with the homeland, she reads the Bengali short stories and magazines. Moreover, the letters she received from her homeland are deeply connected to her family. The letters are a nostalgic treasure for her and she reads again and again, which brings the bloom of happiness to her.

The first shock to Ashima is when the couple came to America is the cold weather, in her hometown the climate varies, usually hot. As a traditional Indian wife, Ashima sacrifices her life to her husband and family where she cares about their likes and dislikes. As a typical Indian woman by nature, she prepares herself to bear children, look after them, and errands the responsibilities of household to assist her husband. After marriage, she suffers from complications of cultural identity. During her pregnancy, she missed her family members. As an Indian culture, the members of the family will be with the woman while she labors. The support and care of the family members, relatives and the neighbors are missing in America. In the labor ward, as an Indian woman, she intends to talk with the other women, because as an Indian philosophy she used to live in a joint family, where she is not in the habit of being alone:

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. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous 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. (49-50)

As an immigrant, she really senses the pain in her heart when she is giving birth away from her home, with no one beside her. The feel of completeness loneness submerges her in a deep emotion. In fact, this occurrence is the primary incident in her life that she sleeps alone, bounded by outsiders. Generally, in her motherland, she habitually slept with her parents, or her spouse Ashoke



on her side. “She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American women.” (3)

The account of her pregnancy and her labor pain shows her intimate relationship with her homeland and her feeling of isolation in an alien area. In an Indian context, family members and relatives will have surrounded a pregnant Indian woman, where she has supported those who have been through this before. She recalls such a situation that while she was boarding the airplane to America, 26 members from her native place and family were there to show the love of affection to her on bon voyage. Now, the situation is completely different in the clinic at the time of delivery. “There is nothing to comfort her in the off-white tiles of the floor, the off-white panels of the ceiling, the white sheets tucked tightly into the bed.” (82) She is scared and uncertain about what is going on with her precisely. At the time of the birth of her first child, Ashima is thinking of the Indian culture and tries to console her spirit. In India, during the pregnancy, a woman goes to her father’s home to give birth, the whole family rejoices the period of pregnancy, but here she is single. In the traditional land India, the birth of an infant is an occasion to be cheered. Grandparents, parents and other family members meet to welcome the newborn child. Where as in America, visitors are limited to see the child.

Hitherto, Ashima and Ashoke when naming their newborn child encountered another adherence of identity related to their culture. In America, the couple is not in an awareness that the custom of naming a baby is done before discharging from the hospital. According to them, they have decided to name the child after receiving the name through a postal letter from her grandmother. Ashima’s grandmother has named all the children in the family in India, which is considered as auspicious. Moreover, the grandmother has dispatched the postal letter mentioning the name of the baby. The couple is waiting for the letter eagerly, but has not received the letter. When the doctor asks to name the child, they face a lot of trouble and face a cultural dilemma. To get rid of this dilemma, Ashima and Ashoke believes that Gogol will be provisionally pet name of their son. It is also decided to change the name after receiving the message from Ashima’s grandmother.

### Cultural differences

By the birth of the baby Ganguli, JhumpaLahiri shows cultural variations. Ashima and Ashoke live in two countries – India, America, observing Indian and Western lifestyles. The child was named Gogol, in order to receive a hospital release certificate. According to Bengal tradition, two names should exist for a child; one is called a household name *daknam* for home, a good name, a *bhalonam* for proof of identity in the peripheral world. Moreover, it also helped them to decide their son’s name. They both have two titles — one public and one family.

...a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali, the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments... Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. (25-26)

Both household name and good names have their own importance: “Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated... Good names tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities.” (26) In comparison, Western society is distinct in the tradition of naming. Conventions of naming differ depending on the faith and area of origin of a person. Religion plays an important role in the name, .Hindu heritage has a name, a medium name and a family name generally. The child has names of its ancestors: “This sign of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India. Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. There are not meant to be inherited or shared.” (28)

The observance of the identity of culture is shown in the rice ceremony. It is yet an





additional example of the cultural disparity between India and the West. In Ashima's life, Indianism remains unchanged through its preservation of Indian culture and rituals. By strictly observing the rituals that are part of Indian culture, the bond, the connection with Indian culture is maintained. At 6 months old -the naming ceremony is planned with a grand celebration. It is time for his traditional rice ritual, Annaprasan. Ashima and Ashoke invited all the Bengali families living in the region to celebrate this festive ceremony. It is proved that as an immigrant, the couple wants to observe the Indian culture in naming the child in America.

The Bengals are invited to play the key part of the family at the children's upbringing ceremonies. Ashima keeps address books with the name of any Indian she finds and is proud of each entry and feels fortunate to share rice ceremony in a foreign country with them. She decided to bring up the child in the Bengali cultic and sing Bengali songs that her mother sang to her. She also adapts to her foreign surroundings, brings her child up to Bengali and begins to talk to Americans.

The naming ceremony in India is done at home or at a temple. The first sacrifice is the gods and deities. People pray for the child's happiness, prosperity and survival. The child sits on the maternal uncle's lap who nourishes with the first taste of the solid meal. In order to purify the air, oil lamps are illuminated along with incense sticks. Following the first serving, other family members serve the baby blessings and shower him a spoonful of food. Usually, the food is served on a silver table and is eaten with a silver spoon. This sort of traditional naming of the baby is missing in America; by celebrating the naming function in an exclusively Indian perspective, the family discerns the Indianness.

In their first few days, immigrants face the problems of adaptation to a new society. Similarly, Ashima, in the beginning as an immigrant underwent the feeling of misfit in America, but realized that following the birth of her son that there is a feeling of belonging when many admire the child. The woman protagonist gradually assimilates the American method of lifestyle, while maintaining a robust connection with her own country. In many instances, the immigrants of Bengal assemble altogether for all celebrative occasions, such as name giving ceremony to a child and rice celebrations, anniversaries, marriages, funerals and even for Bengali holidays like Durga Puja and Navaratri. The efforts of this type of amalgamation are to preserve their unique culture in overseas by adopting Bengali customs, wearing customary dress and practicing as much as possible the practices of their parents and grandparents. Rituals are performed with utter zeal even though the land they have embraced varies largely.

The couple retains on to the culture in their own manner in America. In the 3rd grade, Gogol was sent every other Saturday to learn Bengali and the culture of Bengali. When Ashima and Ashoke are not present in the house, their kids talked like Americans and never could fear them. It is a method for identifying children in marginal groups to become imperceptible and alternative way to escape the host prejudices.

The Gangulis moved to Boston, the only tenant in Bengal. Ashima is once again alone and the transfer is more difficult comparing it from the place of Calcutta to the city of Cambridge. Ashima is surprised to see people's unfavorable characteristics, so she is stuck back in the bed. She cannot even go shopping since there are no shops around. The history and culture of New England mean little to Ashima who struggles alone and depressed. Without the other Bengalis in the neighborhood she is nothing. Therefore, it is witnessed that Ashima experiences isolation that reveals her identity.

Ashima received a call from the hospital and hears her husband had passed away with a heart attack. To identify the body of his father, Gogol flies to Cleveland. Nevertheless, Ashima conveys Gogol not to carry anything from there to home, particularly the items of his dead husband's because "it is not our way" (175). Ashima goes through all the rooms and switches all the lights on. Moreover, she formerly flips the lamp on the grassland around the garage before she returns to the



kitchen. According to the Indian Hindu culture, Hindu death and mourning rites include that a lamp which is lit, illuminate the defunct soul, which Ashima admires naturally and exhibits the identity of Indianness.

A widow now, Ashima wears a white sari and removes the bangles she wore. She avoids non-veg cooking for ten days and now prepares only rice and vegetables. The children Gogol and Sonia took part in the ceremony of light foods, which conjures the appearance of Ashoke. On the 11th day, friends from six states are invited to an elaborate dinner, which marks the end of the period of grief. They are performing a religious ritual, with Gogol sitting before his father's image while a priest singing Sanskrit lines. Eventually, she stanchly discerns the traditional Indian mourning practices.

### **Nostalgia of immigrant**

The nostalgia of Ashoke and Ashima and reminiscences of the home country and culture is seen in their American home. The living room painting of a watercolor portrait of a camel caravan by her father is emotionally associated with her, as if she is in close touch with her father. In the house of the Gangulis, the other aspects are usually Indian. Their spiritual convictions show the immigrants of the first generation identity. It is there, a Kashmiri mat on the ground and a cushion made of Rajasthani silk on the sofa and an idol of God Nataraj made of cast iron on the bookshelf, which reflects the typical character of an Indian.

Ashima faces major difficulties in changing its social and cultural identity into an American one. Her portrayal actually contrasts directly with her husband, Ashoke. Moreover, she stands with Indians immigrants who do not want to change their ethnic identities or embrace the host country's culture. The inability to adapt may also be the direct result of her not being completely introduced to the cultural ethics of this modern culture. Ashima thus lacks the stimulus to shift.

*The Namesake* reveals the nostalgia of the first century, which seeks to connect by means of visits, calls, ceremonies and the letters they get from India to seek relief and warmth. Therefore, life without their parents and ancestors looks chaotic to them. Jhumpa Lahiri also speaks of cultural shocks; Bengal's loyal homemakers see West lives and designs. For instance, once Ashima reminisces the flat of their owners, the Montgomery's with enduring is may pronounces: "just beyond the ceiling yet so different from her own, piles everywhere, piles of books and papers, piles of dirty plates on the kitchen counter, ashtrays the size of serving platters heaped with crushed-out cigarettes." (31-32) The novel deals with this perpetual problem that immigrants face kept their identity apart. It is also about the set of distressing decisions, which they are forced to make every day as they attempt to escape inappropriate conditions in a foreign country. An immigrant has to be true to the old country at the same time and still flowing into the modern world.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that that the novel celebrates the hybridity of culture that is the consequence of globalization and the interconnection of the world. In a personal view, the fight to understand a transnational identity becomes a matter of urgency of the current challenge of ethnic diversity. Given the essence of a culture, Ashima's identity indicates that in this globalized world marked by hybridity, immigrant so serve their homeland individuality. Therefore, it can be observed that the novel is one of the few literary works to show the reality of an immigrant's identity. Jhumpa Lahiri's art is not just a critique and saturation of the cold-blooded American society, neither is it only a representation of immigrants' cultural identity. It is proved that the woman protagonist

discovers that she has lost her life and family in India for decades. Ashima skillfully negotiates with contentious concerns, which oppose American culture to the Indian. Jhumpa Lahiri is a reminder for



today's generation and for the next generations that happiness is no where associated to the place of living, it is connected with cultural identity.

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