



# The Psychology Of Cultural Identity In *The Namesake*

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**Abstract:** This research paper discusses the psychological aspect of the cultural identity of *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. The novel narrates the life of Gogol Ganguli, a second-generation immigrant who was brought up in the United States of America, with a father and a mother of Indian descent. Although most works deal with the theme of migration, naming, and generational conflict, this paper will look into the underlying psychological conflict that the protagonist in the story is undergoing. The cultural identity of the novel is not a social state alone, but also an inner emotional process that influences the life of the main hero.

Based on the postcolonial theory and the psychological approaches to identity formation, the paper examines the character and growth of Gogol. Gogol always balances between two worlds, the Indian world of his parents and the American world where he has been raised.

The novel illustrates how second-generation immigrants tend to experience the feeling of belonging to two cultures simultaneously but not necessarily belonging to either. This situation brings about confusion, insecurity, and conflict of emotions. Cultural hybridity thus turns into a complicated psychological process and not a mere merger of cultures.

When reading the novel, I observed that Lahiri also introduces identity as a psychological process that moves step by step instead of being a fixed state. The events that Gogol goes through show that identity is always influenced by memories and relationships, as well as personal revelations. According to the paper, *The Namesake* portrays identity as dynamic and in constant motion. Gogol is not able to come to a conclusion of his identity crisis, though he slowly comes to the realization that his background is a complex one. In such a manner, the novel communicates the psychological truth that most immigrants are living in a more globalized world.

**Index Terms – Cultural Identity, diaspora, psychological conflict.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Migration has become a social fact in the world of the modern times. Citizens change residence to other countries in order to either study, work, or get improved living conditions. These lead to the fact that a great number of people grow up in various cultures, languages, and traditions. This type of social transformation is frequently reflected in literature, where characters have trouble with the issues of identity and belonging. The *Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri is one of such novels that are important. The story in the novel is of Gogol Ganguli, son of Bengali immigrants in the United States. Lahiri uses the life of Gogol to dissect the emotional and psychological issues surrounding the second-generation immigrants who have to grow up in a cultural world other than that of their parents.

On the surface, the novel focuses on the strange name of the main character. Gogol is named after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol, and this is why his name contrasts with the Indian and American naming culture. As the story progresses, however, it is evident that there is more to the novel than a name. It is the more serious confrontation of trying to make sense of oneself when in a trans-cultural world. Being raised in the United States, Gogol tends to be ashamed of his culture and family traditions. Meanwhile, he is not able to fully disidentify himself with the heritage that his parents left behind. This gives the impression of confusion, which persists in his life. As we can see in the novel, identity is not merely a matter of personal choice, as it is also influenced by family history, culture, and social environment.

Reading this novel, I understood that Lahiri introduces cultural identity as a psychological process. The events that Gogol goes through illustrate how people who are raised in the culture of both worlds tend to have some emotional conflicts and confusion over their own identity. The novel, rather than offering a simple solution to the issue, poses that identity is made in stages through experiences and introspection. This research paper is thus aimed at exploring the psychological issues of cultural identity in *The Namesake*. The paper examines how identity is created and how processes are altered in a multicultural setting by examining the identity of Gogol in the context of naming, family relations, culture, and maturation.

## II. Literature Review

*The Namesake* is a book that has been looked at by several scholars from various academic views. The themes about migration, diaspora, cultural displacement, and generational conflict are the main topics of the majority of studies. Among the key themes that critics examine in the novel is the fact that it was an influential work of immigrant writing that shows how difficult it is to adapt to a new land. The symbolism of the name of Gogol is one of the popular discussion topics. According to researchers, his name is a symbol of his cultural misunderstanding and alienation within American society (Lahiri 102). Since the name is not obviously a part of the Indian or the American culture, it emphasizes the fact that he is in a state of belonging to two worlds. The other notable theme that critics have raised is the generational gap between the immigrant parents and their children. Other characters, such as Ashima and Ashoke, keep to the tradition of Bengal despite relocating to the United States. However, their son is raised in an American setting, and he tends to lose attachment to such traditions.

The idea of hybridity is often applied to explain the identity of Gogol by postcolonial critics. Hybridity involves the mixture of various cultural influences in cases where people experience living in between the worlds of various cultures (Bhabha 56). This idea can be used to understand why identity is complex in the case of diasporic communities. Nevertheless, as I studied what the existing literature provides, I observed that most of the analysis is oriented towards the sociological factors of identity. These works predominantly talk about immigration, cultural conflict, and diaspora societies; however, they do not necessarily investigate the inner emotional conflicts that the main character faces. The problem of identity that Gogol is facing is not merely a cultural conflict but a psychological one. All his connections, recollections, life choices, and even his feelings or emotional life contribute to his changing identity. Thus, the psychological aspect of identity can be analyzed to gain a better insight into the novel.

### III. Research Gap

Whereas several scholars have analyzed *The Namesake* as a topic of study in terms of migration and diaspora, the psychological aspect of cultural identity has not always been examined in detail. The majority of the studies are centered on the outside elements of the social world, like immigration, cultural conflict, and generational differences. Nevertheless, the number of studies on the inner emotional conflicts of the protagonist is less. This psychological aspect is significant to understand since identity construction is a combination of the outside culture and the inner emotional reaction. As I read through the novel, I realized that the identity crisis in Gogol is expressed in most cases in very minor psychological instances. The fact that he does not like his name, his efforts to disidentify himself with his family customs, and his quest to find a place are indicative of underlying emotional struggles. This study, hence, intends to explore the identity crisis experienced by Gogol through the psychological lens and discuss the experiences of naming, family relations, romantic relations, and cultural memory.

### IV. Theoretical Framework

In a bid to comprehend the issue of identity struggle in Gogol, one can look at the theoretical concepts of identity formation and cultural hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha, another postcolonial theorist, comes up with the phenomenon of hybridity, which relates to the process of interaction and mixing of cultures, which happens when people reside in different cultural spaces (Bhabha 56). Hybridity implies that the identity is not permanently set but changes in a continuous negotiation with the culture. The other helpful approach is the psychological theory of identity formation by Erik Erikson. According to Erikson, people undergo various stages of identity development, especially during adolescence stages when they are in need of knowing why they are who they are in society (Erikson 109). The development of an identity in the case of Gogol is more complicated due to the fact that he develops between two cultures. His parents want him to live according to the Indian traditions, and the American society wants him to embrace other cultural values. This is what provokes an identity crisis, which influences most of his choices in the novel.

When we transfer these theories to the novel, I feel that the identity of Gogol may be interpreted as an experience of a hybrid psychology. He is not entirely a part of a certain cultural tradition. Instead, he is always between various cultural influences at the negotiating table.

### V. Naming and Formation of Identity

*The Namesake* focuses on the theme of naming. A name is not always merely a label, but a cultural identity, family background, and identity. In the case of Gogol Ganguli, the onset of his mental struggle with identity is his name. Ashoke, the father of Gogol, gives him the name of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. This choice has a very personal motive. Ashoke had earlier survived a fatal train accident as he read a book by Nikolai Gogol. The book was the sign of survival and a second life. So, calling his son Gogol was one of the ways through which Ashoke was able to remember that moment and keep that experience that altered his life.

But even Gogol himself was not aware of the meaning of this name in his childhood. Rather, he feels lost and disgraced. His peers and teachers often ask about his peculiar name, and it makes him feel that he is not similar to others. As I read these passages in the novel, I realized that Gogol is not so much bothered by the sound of the name itself, but by the fact that he is always reminded of the fact that he does not entirely belong in his world.

Naming Gogol, but his name continues to frustrate him as he advances in age. At the age of teen, he legally changed his name to Nikhil. This scene is a significant phase in his identity development. Gogol decides to change himself by taking a new name as a way of redefining himself and getting rid of the confusion that is linked with his birth name. Nevertheless, he is not totally resolved in his identity crisis by the change of name. He continues to bear the memory of his original name even after he becomes Nikhil in his official documents and in socially oriented situations. The two names start symbolizing two worlds of his identity, Gogol is a symbol of his childhood and family traditions, and Nikhil is a symbol of his course to integrate into American society. Personally, I believe that by this dual identity, Lahiri attempts to elaborate that cultural identity cannot be easily transformed or forgotten. The past experiences

and family history, as well as the emotional attachment of a person, still affect his/her sense of self.

## **VI.Cultural Memory and Family Relationships**

The family relations are crucial in regulating the process of shaping the concept of cultural identity in Gogol. Ashima and Ashoke are his parents, and they are immigrants who went to the United States to find a better life. Although they are getting used to living in America, they do not lose all relations to their Bengali roots.

Ashima, specifically, feels very lonely when she gets to the United States. She misses the life she knew back in India, her family, and language, as well as her culture. In order to deal with this sense of alienation, she attempts to bring the elements of Indian culture back into her house. She prepares Bengali cuisine, observes cultural holidays, and ensures that she is in touch with the other immigrant families.

As I was analyzing these features of the novel, I observed that Gogol tends to be confused by such traditions. He even experienced some embarrassment, having grown up as a boy and adolescent, over the traditions of his parents. He desires to belong in American society and is afraid that his cultural background will make him seem unlike his counterparts. Meanwhile, he is not able to absolutely dissociate himself from his family heritage. He has kept his parents' stories and memories, traditions, and it is a significant part of his upbringing. These influences slowly form his perception of identity as time goes by. Ashoke is especially important in the psychological growth of Gogol. Even though he does not impose any strict cultural expectations on his son, his silent spirit in the form of his presence and the history of his life makes a great impact on Gogol. Ashoke's train accident story later becomes one of the critical events in the realization of identity by Gogol.

In my opinion, Lahiri has used the family relations to demonstrate that identity is very closely related to cultural memory. The life of the past generations persists in the lives of upcoming generations, despite growing in different environments.

## **VII.Romantic Relationships and Search for Identity**

Even romantic relationships that Gogol goes through demonstrate his identity quest. Maxine is one of his most important relationships. Maxine is another symbol of life that is totally dissimilar to what Gogol has ever experienced. Her family is rich, self-assured, and well-established in American culture. Spending time with Maxine and her parents gives Gogol the freedom and acceptance that he had never before granted. As I read this section of the novel, I realized that Gogol appears to be momentarily happy residing in the world of Maxine. He likes the informal lifestyle of the family house and enjoys no cultural demands. This impression implies that he has managed to divorce himself from the ways of his parents.

Nevertheless, it is not that sense of belonging that lasts indefinitely. The abrupt demise of his father alters the thinking of Gogol about his life and relationships. In this state of mourning, he starts to understand better the emotional attachment that he has with his own family and culture. Gogol, later in the novel, gets married to Moushumi, a Bengali American-origin woman, with whom they share a common culture. Their marriage is first seen to give them some sense of cultural understanding. The two of them have gone through the hardship of being raised in two cultures. Although they share this background, their relationship serves to break down later. Moushumi is also struggling with her identity problem and is trapped between the demands of the Bengali community. This culminates in their separation. These experiences reveal that cultural identity cannot be solved very easily by just a relationship with other people. Rather, identity needs individual cogitation and acknowledgment.

### **VIII. Language and Cultural Identity**

In immigrant families, language is a significant factor in defining cultural identity. The Bengali and English names in *The Namesake* bring out the generational gap between the parents and Gogol. At home, Ashima and Ashoke tend to use Bengali as it is a way of identifying with their motherland and tradition. Language is a means for them to preserve themselves despite their stay in a foreign land. In the case of Gogol, though, English is the language of life. He was brought up in English at school and among his friends. Consequently, he feels out of place with the language of his parents in some instances.

During the study of this feature of the novel, I observed that language indicates the cultural gap between generations. In the case of immigrant parents, language maintains the cultural memory. To their children, language forms a part of the social world in which they are growing up. This disparity does not always bring a conflict; still, it shows the multifacetedness of identity in multicultural households. The fact that Gogol is able to move across languages indicates that he is between two cultural worlds.

### **IX. The Feeling of Not Belonging and Alienation**

The feeling of alienation is another psychological theme that appears in the entire novel. Alienation is the sense of a lack of connection to the surroundings or the community. This feeling is quite common to Gogol as he is caught between two cultures. He is, at times, not a match in American society due to his culture. Concurrently, he also becomes an outsider when talking to the relatives in India since he has been brought up in the United States.

As I was recalling the events that Gogol faced, I discovered that such a dual alienation is not new to most second-generation immigrants. They can also experience that they are members of two cultures at the same time, but they do not fit in either of the two cultures. Lahiri describes this emotional conflict in very subtle and realistic terms. Rather than introducing dramatic conflicts, she concentrates on ordinary scenes that show how Gogol is uncertain of his place in the world.

### **X. Self-Acceptance and Psychological Development**

The second turning point in the novel takes place following the demise of Gogol's father of Gogol. This incident makes Gogol think more about his relations in the family and culture. It is during this time that he gets to know the entire truth about his name and the train crash that transformed the life of his father. The interpretation of this story enables him to view his name in another light. Earlier on, he had linked the name Gogol to shame and bewilderment. Nevertheless, he now understands that the name is an indication of survival and appreciation of life by his father. This understanding alters his affective attachment to his identity.

To my mind, this scene can be considered a significant phase of the psychological development of Gogol. He starts to embrace his complexity as a result of not dismissing either culture in order to embrace another culture. This is not to imply that his identity crisis has gone away, but this implies that he has started to appreciate both cultures that have influenced his life.

### **XI. Cultural Identity within a Globalized World**

The topics of *The Namesake* are very pertinent to modern society. Migration and globalization have resulted in the formation of multicultural societies across the world, whereby people tend to encounter numerous cultures. The lives of many second-generation immigrants are also difficult, just like the life of Gogol. They have to juggle between the family culture and the demands of the societies where they reside.

Reading this novel, I understood that the picture of identity Lahiri describes depicts the actualities of contemporary multicultural existence. The notion of cultural identity is no longer defined based on a single national or cultural background. Rather, it is usually a product of cross-cultural interaction.

## XII. Cultural Hybridity and Negotiation of Identity

The other significant psychological aspect of *The Namesake* is cultural hybridity. Cultural hybridity is the concept of mixing various cultural factors that arise when people are raised in a multi-cultural setting. In the case of the second-generation immigrant, such as Gogol, hybridity is not only a social phenomenon but a personal psychological one as well. According to Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity can be defined as a zone where new cultural identities are formed during the process of interaction between various traditions (Bhabha 56). Rather than being fully acculturated in one culture, these people in this position tend to acquire identities that blend across several cultural backgrounds. Although such a cultural mix can give a chance to have a wider view, it may also cause confusion and emotional turmoil.

This hybrid condition is manifested in the life of Gogol in *The Namesake*. Since his childhood, he had been brought up in two different cultural worlds. His parents keep the Bengali traditions, language, and social customs at home. They embrace the Indian festivals, prepare traditional food, and are in touch with their family members back in India. It is outside the house, though Gogol exists within American society. The American culture influences his education, his friends, and his social experiences. As I was reading the novel so keenly, I realized that Gogol has a tendency to move repeatedly between these two worlds. He, at some points, attempts to deny his cultural heritage of his parents since he would rather feel more at home in American society. At other times, he realizes that these traditions are a significant aspect of himself. This tension can be observed especially in the adolescence of Gogol. Adolescence is already a time when people attempt to establish their individual identity. In the case of an individual such as Gogol, this is further complicated by the fact that he has to negotiate not just his personal identity but also his cultural identity.

Indicatively, once Gogol starts to alienate himself from the traditions of his parents, he is convinced that by embracing the American cultural standards, he will be able to feel more welcomed. His changing his name to Nikhil is an indication of his striving to be more in line with American society. The new name enables him to portray himself differently in society and gives him the impression that he has managed to redefine himself.

But as the story unfolds, it becomes obvious that cultural hybridity is not a problem that can be easily solved by simply making a choice between one cultural identity and the other. Gogol keeps on struggling with uncertainties and reflections. Although he later embraces an American way of life, he still remembers the cultural values and memories that go along with his family background. It is, according to my judgment, a constant negotiation process of cultures that exemplifies the psychological complexity of hybrid identity. Lahiri does not represent hybridity as an issue that has to be resolved. Rather, she makes it a fact that a large number of people have to learn to manage and accept.

The other part of the novel that is interesting in terms of hybridity is reflected in how Gogol interacts with other families of immigrants. The Bengali community in the US usually organizes itself into social events and cultural celebrations. The meetings assist the immigrant families to have some form of connection with their cultural background.

To the first generation of immigrants, such meetings bring a sense of relief and comfort in a new location. Nevertheless, to the young generation, such incidents at times cause alienation, especially to Gogol. They may not necessarily be emotionally attached to these traditions as much as they realize the cultural meaning of such traditions. This cultural gap also brings out the psychological complexity of hybrid identity. Children of immigrants tend to acquire different identities from their parents. They are raised between the two cultures, yet they fail to consider either of the cultures the same way the earlier generations did. Simultaneously, hybridity may lead to individual development as well. Since Gogol has been exposed to various cultural views, he slowly becomes enlightened in terms of identity and belonging. His experiences make him notice that cultural identity is not determined and fixed to a particular tradition.

In my opinion, Lahiri relies on the experience of Gogol to show that hybrid identities can be changed. In the very start of the novel, Gogol sees his cultural origin as a humiliation or misunderstanding. Being a person who feels the obstacles to belonging between his family heritage and American society, he feels that the differences between the two societies pose a problem. But later in life, when he takes time to reflect on his experiences, he comes to realize that these cultural differences are also something that gives purposeful associations with his family history and his own growth. His father's story, his recollection of

his family meetings, and his acquaintance with the other immigrants all take him to a greater consciousness of identity.

This changed attitude is a significant step in the process of psychological growth of Gogol. Rather than regarding cultural hybridity as a burden, he starts perceiving it as a part of his identity. He is a mix of various influences instead of a decision between two different cultural worlds. To put it in another way, the image of hybridity given by Lahiri can be interpreted as the experiences of numerous people who currently live in multicultural communities. Migration across the globe has given rise to communities that are filled with cultural identities that interact and develop over time. Consequently, most individuals acquire identities that are influenced by numerous languages, customs, and social contexts.

The story *The Namesake*, thus, is not just about the experiences of one person. The trip of Gogol can be viewed as a wider psychological truth of a lot of immigrants who belong to the second generation. His difficulties in belonging, identity, and cultural expectations depict the emotional hurdles that are likely to accompany multicultural life. Reading the novel, I began to understand that the story by Lahiri prompts the reader to rethink the conventional concepts of identity. The novel provides identity as a dynamic process rather than something constant and fixed, which is promoted through experience and reflection. Discussing the psychological nature of cultural hybridity, *The Namesake* eventually provides an idea that identity is formed not only by the cultural background but also by individual cognition. Through self-reflection and personal development, people can get to know how to embrace the multiplicity of their cultural experiences.

### **XIII. Personal Realization and Identity Reconstruction**

The identity reconstruction is one more significant psychological feature introduced in *The Namesake*. The reconstruction of identities is a slow process where people review their experiences and redefine themselves. In the case of Gogol Ganguli, this process is especially apparent at the later stages in the novel when the latter starts thinking more profoundly about his past. Gogol tries to separate himself throughout the major part of his life, which is related to the cultural expectations of his family background. The choice of the name he makes to replace Gogol with Nikhil is one of the most obvious manifestations of the struggle to create a new self. In that instant, he feels that a new name will assist him in getting out of the embarrassment and indecisiveness he associated with his childhood name. But as the story unfolds, one realizes that identity reconstruction is not that straightforwardly an act of replacement. His memories, family ties, and culture do not die because of changing his name. Rather, these factors and their impact on him persist in his personality and emotional reactions.

It is possible to say that, while reading the novel, I paid close attention, and I have noticed that Gogol changes his perception of himself after the death of his father dramatically. This is a sad event that compels him to think a lot about his life. Loss of Ashoke makes him remind him of the emotional and cultural attachment to his family history. It is then that Gogol gets to realize the true meaning of his name and the tale behind that name. He had considered the name an embarrassment before, since it made him feel oddly different in the presence of the people around him. Gogol understands that his name is the symbol of life, memory, and gratitude after getting to know about the train accident and the role played by the Russian writer in the survival of his father.

This understanding is a turning point in his psychological growth. Gogol starts to appreciate the importance of the experiences that made him what he is, as opposed to denying them. He begins to realize that there is no way that identity can be totally reinvented through just new labels or new ways of living. Personally, I believe that Lahiri uses this point to show that personal identity is usually formed through introspection and acceptance. Instead of deciding between two cultures, Gogol slowly comes to note that both his Indian traditions and his American background are critical to his life. This identity reconstruction phase is not that Gogol is resolved perfectly and forever. Rather, it is an indication that he has started taking his identity more maturely and comprehensively. He acknowledges that his life experiences are conditioned by a variety of cultural influences and that these influences cannot be distinguished from each other.

This process of identity reconstruction is something that Lahiri demonstrates, as it makes a crucial psychological fact of multicultural identity. People born in a cross-cultural environment usually require time and experience to comprehend the importance of their backgrounds. Reflection, memory, and personal development help them to slowly gain a more balanced view of themselves.

Through this, *The Namesake* is making the argument that identity does not exist at one point in life. Rather, it keeps on changing as people undergo new experiences and redefine their history. The experience of Gogol, consequently, demonstrates that identity reconstruction can result in more extensive self-awareness and emotional awareness.

#### **XIV. Conclusion**

To sum up, *The Namesake* is an influential and powerful discussion of cultural identity and psychological conflict. Jhumpa Lahiri uses the character of Gogol Ganguli to show issues of emotional difficulties experienced by people raised in a mixed culture. The novel shows that identity is a complicated process that depends on family history, cultural tradition, personal experiences, and social setting. The issue that Gogol is having with his name, his relationships, and his belonging is the reflection of the greater experiences of numerous immigrants and second-generation people.

When I was examining the novel, I realized that identity is not a stable and fixed concept as depicted by Lahiri. Rather, she describes it as an ongoing process that is guided by experience and reflection. The fact that Gogol gradually accepts his cultural heritage implies that identity may change. Finally, the novel also highlights that the in-between culture may be confusing and emotionally straining, yet it may make a person better understand themselves. Gogol starts gaining a more balanced perception of his identity by acknowledging the importance of his family history and personal experiences. In this description, *The Namesake* brings out the psychological reality of a multicultural life in the globalized world.

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