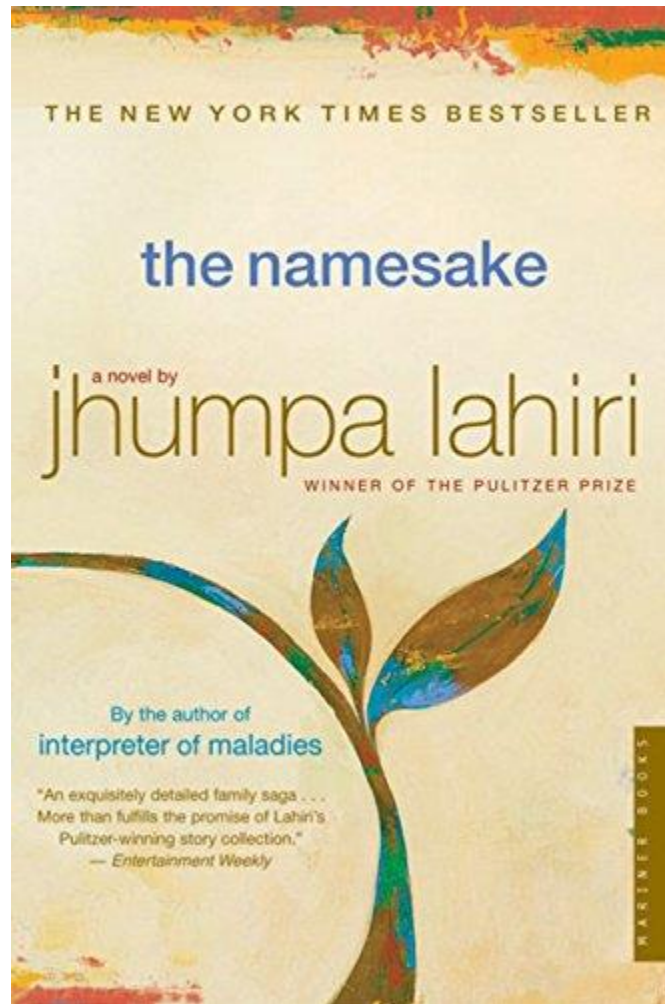


**Immigrant Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and
Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai belong to the second-generation expatriate writers and deal with the manifestations and consequences of different aspects of diaspora. Jhumpa Lahiri is

an Indian American author. *The Namesake* deals with the issues of adaptation, adjustment and accommodation in a world where the boundaries are thinned or often blurred. Her novel brings to the fore many of the issues that Indians, settled in the promising land of opportunities, face in America. The narratives revolve around the problems faced by a couple in a different country- the clash of cultures, the relationship between parents and children, the generation gap and identity crisis, etc. Kiran Desai being a modern expatriate Indian novelist had herself experienced displacement, dislocation and cultural clash. In her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, she writes of the cultural hybridity of the post-colonial migrant and the expatriate condition of hybridity. This novel deals with Desai's own situation of migration, expatriation and alienation from the mother country.

Key words: Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*, Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, alienation, cultural dilemma, identity crisis, nostalgia

Expressing Indian Consciousness

Generally Indian immigrant writers in America express Indian consciousness. It refers to the group of writers in America who write about Indian culture, tradition and social changes. Most of the Indian writers in America are expatriates and their experience on hand is almost authentic. This fact is luckily not affecting the quality of Indianness presented by them in their novels. The writers are varied in dimensions but writing under the label of Indian immigrant writers. Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are both diasporic writers who have had to balance their identity between two countries. This experience is reflected in their writings and is thus, an inevitable byproduct of their common history. Both the writers Lahiri and Desai depict the immigrant experiences in *The Namesake* and *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri's stories and her novel are set in India and America and establish a certain Indo-American cultural link. *The Namesake* continues to develop further the themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity depicted in the *Interpreter of Maladies*. In her debut novel Lahiri tries to capture the experiences and cultural dilemmas of thirty-years struggle of the Ganguly family, for their integration and assimilation into alien culture. She follows the story of Gogol,

born to an Indian immigrant couple who have come to create a new life of opportunities for themselves in the university suburbs of Boston. The name Gogol is taken from his father's obsession with reading Russian novels, especially the author Nikolai Gogol. His father's miraculous escape in an Indian train crash is credited to a bulky copy of a Nikolai Gogol's work so that the parents decide that Gogol is the perfect name for their first born boy. The seeds of cultural dilemma start germinating as Gogol grows older and becomes more eager to fit in with his peers, he begins to hate his name- it isn't American, it isn't even Bengali. It is one more thing he hates that sets him apart from his American friends. So when he is old enough Gogol changes his name to his formal name, Nikhil, which sounds far more sophisticated and most importantly, could pass as a Western name.

An Ill-Fated Marriage

After graduating and going through a number of relationships with American girls, it is his father's sudden death which forces Gogol to look back his own culture that he had earlier dismissed. In order to please his mother and friends, he attempts an ill-fated marriage to a Bengali childhood friend. It ends in disaster as he struggles to try and balance the American and Bengali cultural backgrounds of his life. Lahiri's focus is on the hidden layers of the psyche and the inner turmoil of the characters who find them entrapped in the midst of two cultures. The displacement and its consequences can be seen at two levels, first, from the point of view of the parents, Ashima and Ashoke, and second, from that of the children, Gogol and his sister Sonia, the American born second generation Indian-Americans.

Ashima

Ashima feels upset, homesick and alone in their apartment that is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, far removed from the descriptions of houses in the English novels she had read. She feels emotionally dislocated from the comfortable home of her father. She spends her time re-reading Bengali short stories, poems and articles from the Bengali magazines she had brought with her. After the birth of her son Gogol, she longs to go back to Calcutta and raise her child there in the company of the caring and loving family members but decides to stay back for Ashoke's sake. Later two years, like immigrants of other communities, Ashima and Ashoke make

their circle of Bengali acquaintances. They become friends with other Bengali's only for the reason that they all come from Calcutta. These Bengali families gather on different occasions like the 'rice and name' ceremonies of their children, their birthdays, marriages, deaths and Bengali festivals. They try to preserve their culture in a new land. Although the immigrants try their best to preserve their heritage and culture, they cannot help but imbibe the social and cultural traditions of the host country. Though initially Ashoke does not like the celebration of Christmas and Thanksgiving yet as Gogol recalls that it was for him and for Sonia, that his parents had gone to the trouble of leaning these customs.

Training Children

In order to preserve their culture in the foreign land, the first-generation immigrants train their children in the Bengali language, literature and history expose them to their religious customs, traditions, beliefs, food habits and social mannerisms. Along with this, they also train them in the ways of the new land and its social customs. In the novel, Ashima teaches Gogol to memorize a child poem by Tagore and the names of deities adorning the ten-headed Durga. Every afternoon, before going to sleep, Ashima switches on the television and makes Gogol watch "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company" in order to make him get used the American way of speaking language.

Cultural Dilemma

The cultural dilemma in language begins when the doctor asks her questions in a language with which she is not comfortable. "She is told that she is still in early labor three centimeters dilated, beginning to efface. "What does it mean dilated?" She asks," (N 3). At the American Departmental Store, Gogol's parents are not properly attended and the cashier's smirk at his parents' English accents and the salesman prefers to talk to Gogol, as if his parents were either incompetent or deaf.

The Bengali families retain their culture by wearing the Bengali dresses. Though the natives wear jeans and sweaters because of cold Ashima likes to wear sari. On puja and marriage occasions, Bengali women wear Banarasi sari, gold jewellery and men wear dhoti and topar.

Some sari clad Bengali women become Gogol's honorary aunts and dhoti clad Bengali men become his honorary uncles in Gogol's annaprasan, the rice ceremony.

There is no baptism for Bengali babies. Instead, the first formal ceremony of their lives centers on the consumption of solid food. During Gogol's rice ceremony, he is "dressed as an infant Bengali groom. He is in pale pajama-panjabi from his grandmother in Calcutta (N 39). In Gogol and Moushoumi's wedding, the groom wears a parchment-colored Punjabi top that had once belonged to his father, a prepleated dhoti with a drawstring waist, a pair of nagrai slippers with curling toes. Though Moushoumi belongs to a Bengali background she lives in the Western country and suffered through silently in a sari.

Create a Mini Calcutta

Ashima tries to create a mini Calcutta in America with the help of Bengali friends. She continues to prepare the Bengali snack 'Jhalmudi' sold in the streets of Calcutta with the American ingredients like rice krispies and planter peanuts but always finds something missing in the dish as well in life. Though the first generation likes the Indian food their children relish the American food than the Indian food.

The problems such as longing, rootlessness, estrangement are experienced by Ashima, who at a young age has migrated to a country where she is related to no one. As she is in the hospital, admitted for labour, she finds herself placed amidst a group of women who are strangers to her, also in a sense that they are Americans. She feels a stranger among these women. It is the 'American seconds' that tick as she endures the labor pain, but she calculates the Indian time on her hands, visualizing her home in Calcutta and assuming the events that would be unfolding at that moment as she lays in a hospital, thousands of miles away from home. There is a deliberate, constant comparison of the India ways with that of the American. For instance, in the beginning of the novel, Ashima compares the atmosphere that would persist when a child is brought into this world. The child's birth was a lonesome celebration and the realization that his entry in the world was, unaccompanied and deprived laid the foundation of that predicament that small child had to experience throughout his life. Ashima's struggle to adjust in a foreign country, to become accustomed herself to the newly found atmosphere is the

struggle of every immigrant to expose their self-identity in an alien land. Feeling lonely and displaced in a foreign land, Ashima begins to feel that: “Being a foreigner is a sort of life-long pregnancy- A perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an on-going responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding like pregnancy being a foreigner Ashima believes, is something that elicit the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect” (N 49-50).

Sense of Nostalgia

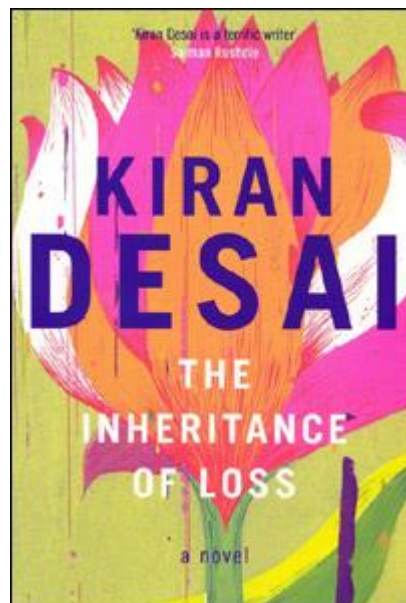
This sense of nostalgia stays with her throughout the novel. This feeling is so deep that she retains the Indian magazine, *Desh* for a very long time and the letters printed in Bengali become her source of comfort. Ashima maintains address books in which she has recorded the names and addresses of every Indian whom she comes across. She feels proud on each entry and feels fortunate to have the fortune to share rice with them in a foreign land. Her discomfort with the life around her represents the incomprehensible world of American immigrants who are born in one country but squander their life either gracefully engrossed or completely drowning in the civilization of another people. The anxiety, the fear of losing one’s identity in an entirely foreign land, is passed on to the next generation also.

Ashima carefully titles the envelopes of greeting cards from the address book that has all the addresses of Bengali residing in India and America. She is extremely conscious of her accent, as in the beginning she uses incorrect plural forms and feels embarrassed. This pain of embarrassment is so severe that she compares it to the pain of her last contraction during pregnancy labour. Language becomes her first means of hindrance as she finds it hard to communicate with the natives. She feels ashamed of herself and feels embarrassed in many circumstances. In fact, the title *The Namesake* reflects the struggle of Gogol Ganguli who goes through identity with his unusual name. His struggle for establishing his individuality becomes a burden for him. It does not give him an identity but puts him in a dilemma, regarding his original identity. Secondly, as a child of immigrants in America, he persistently has to fight with conflicts arising due to his sense of belongingness and loss of identity. Gogol who hates his name, for the first time in his life, takes an independent choice and decides to get it changed to Nikhil. It is as

Nikhil, Gogol faces the predicament of establishing his real identity. He finds it complicated to acknowledge that Gogol and Nikhil are both a part of his own individual self and torn between this struggles. He is having two aspects regarding his change of name in fact Gogol, the son of Indian parents behave and act according to Indian culture and values, Nikhil on the other hand, is the free open minded person, who has left his past behind and has nothing to do with Gogol.

Gogol spends his immigrant life feeling as if he is on a river with a foot in two different boats. Each boat wants to pull him in separate direction and he is always torn between the two cultures. It is while living these two lives, that Gogol realizes the need of an identity, which is not based on his roots. The predicament that Gogol experiences is the symbol of that wretchedness which every immigrant experiences when he has to respond any query based on his identity. Though he is born and brought up in America yet to Americans he is still an Indian. And so when he comes back to the country of his native, he is referred as an NRI.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*



Kiran Desai's best-known works are *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss*. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Biju is an illegal Indian immigrant living in the United States, son of a cook who works for Sai's grandfather. Sai is a girl living in mountains Kalimpong with her maternal grandfather Jemubhai, the cook and a dog named Mutt. The major

theme running throughout the novel is the loss of identity and the way it travels through generations as a sense of loss. The retired judge Jemubhai Patel is a man disgusted at Indian ways and customs, so much so, that he eats chapattis with a knife and fork, hates all Indians including his father whom he breaks ties and wife who he abandons at his father's place after torturing her and is never accepted by the British in spite of his education and adopted mannerisms.

Desai captures the vivid culture of India and depicts the lifestyle of Indian in foreign land. She touches upon many different issues throughout the novel. The judge Jemubhai has been living a peaceful life in Kalimpong, with the cook and his granddaughter Sai, to spend the rest of his day alone. His only companion is Mutt, his beloved dog. Sai becomes an orphan, when her parents died in an accident. She falls in love with her maths tutor Gyan who is a Nepali later he withdraws Sai's love and fights for his motherland. The cook has his hopes on his only son, Biju, who is an illegal immigrant trying to find work and a better life in America. Biju fails his American dream and returns India. Throughout the novel there is no peace among the individuals and their lives are not fulfilled. The sense of alienation caught in the lives of her characters and their sense of not belonging to the martial world is the core of the novel.

When Jemu was in England he tried to speak in English. If he makes a mistake in the English pronunciation, his friend Bose would correct his mistakes. Bose who showed Jemubhai what records to buy for his new gramophone and recommends Caruso and Gigli. He also corrected his pronunciation that includes Jheele, not Giggly, Yorksher, Edinburrah and Jane Aae not Jane Aiyer like a South Indian.

When Jemubhai came to England, he studied very hard to become a member of ICS. He studies hard only and only to get more acquainted with western culture and tries to adopt the British standards in his daily life. He takes afternoon tea everyday and tries to speak English in a natural way of a native speaker, covers his brown skin colour with the powder puff but he is always in a dilemma, a struggle of identity. He clears the written test, cannot impress in Viva voce because of his Indian race. His examiners chuckle at his peculiar native accent and pronunciation. Jemu's student days in Cambridge, England where he faces struggle, confusions, embarrassments, loneliness and solitude show degradation in his character. Forty-two are selected for the ICS. New list Indianize the service, Jemubhai finds his name at the very bottom

of the page. He runs home with arms folded, gets immediately into bed, and soaks his pillow with his weeping. He lies there cry for three days and three nights. Jemubhai weeps because he can impress one only through his pen and not through his face. As a result of Jemubhai's cultural dilemmas and his own inefficiency, he attempted to hide himself and so for the entire day nobody spoke to him at all. His throat jammed without uttering words and his heart and mind turned into aching things. Jemubhai forgot how to laugh.

Treated Like a Stranger

Jemubhai is treated like a stranger who do not belong to their own world and community. Jemubhai cannot protest the image of his race and ethnicity that figures in the mind of the Europeans. He works hard to prove his skill and occupy a recognizable place among his classmates. He retreats into solitude, the solitude habit, the habit becomes the man and it crushes him into a shadow. Everywhere Jemubhai finds disgust and hated by almost all the persons. He grows stranger to himself than to others around him.

Biju, the cook's son finds a job in the Gandhi Café but it seems that the conflicts appear everywhere. He is now confronted with hypocrisy as Desai clearly demonstrates it when describing Biju's employer. Toward his staff Harish-Harry was avuncular, jocular, but he could suddenly become angry and disciplinary. But when an American patron walked through the door, his manner changed instantly and drastically into another thing and a panic seemed to overcome him. One can see that Desai points out the two-facedness of Harish- Harry. He pretends to be someone else and want to leave good impression on the American people.

Illegal Immigration

Through the character of Biju, it is shown how Americans treat immigrants and what leads to illegal immigration. Biju leaves his village to realize his dreams with the hope of winning. It is true that the most Indians crave for US permanent job and residency for very good reasons. Biju leaves to fulfill his father's long dream. Consequently he faces all sorts of troubles in America and his life is even more than that of a prisoner of his own conscience. He faces not only the sense of not belonging but also food, culture, language, poverty and racial discrimination.

Though he lives in New York he has no time to see the country, lives in poverty where he has to sleep in shifts, or on the floor of the hotel he works. When Biju is working in restaurants at New York, he writes to his father: “Angreezikhana only, no Indian food, and the owner is not from India. He is from America itself” (IL 14)

In America, Biju struggles hard to attain his Green card but the card remains unattainable. He finds everything new, and everything looks strange to him. He encounters with a number of hurdles while in America. But he does not share his anxieties with his father and he does not like to destroy the old man’s peace of mind and the old man writes to him every now and then.

He works at various restaurants to fulfill his father’s long-cherished dream, but fails and then realizes that there is a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York. He hates the people who give up Indian culture and tradition, he is amazed to see when Indian girls are trying to adapt themselves to the hostculture, language, and food.

As a representative of illegal immigrants’ problems, Biju displays various social issues but one of the most common problems of these illegal immigrants is racial discrimination. In America, Biju has to bear the racial discrimination.

The word immigrant is most often associated with minorities, the poor, the unemployed, and other groups who have limited power to bring about changes in society and other groups who have nothing to contribute to the society. They feel themselves alienated from the society, and they feel meaningless in their existence.

Biju belongs to the shadow class of illegal immigrants in New York and spends much of his time dodging the authorities, moving from one ill paid job to another in the hope of getting the all-elusive green card working in hotels and living with groups of other immigrant men, working all days of the month to chase his dreams. He finds that he has not made any friends here and he is new to this land as an illegal immigrant. He is not willing to make friends but shares his thoughts with his father through letters. The cook too warns him to beware of others.

Biju suffers from the pangs of alienation since he comes to America but he is not disheartened. He has hopes that he will manage to survive. When he meets Nandu his father's friend, Nandu advises him that he has to return to his homeland.

Unwanted Existence

Everyone knows that human existence in an alien land is better than the unwanted existence in their homeland. When Biju succeeds in getting visa, he is called the luckiest boy in the whole world, but he remains unlucky one in U.S. He sees groups of persons thronging in the basement of the bakery, all are outsiders trying hard to make money in the richest country but humiliated. He faces the same situation, earning nothing only humiliation. He understands the meaningless existence and finally he is affected by nostalgia.

After a long period of pain and humiliation Biju books his return ticket, he determines that nothing but his own soil can make him happy in an alien land. Through the life of Biju, Desai presents the status of the illegal immigrants and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates. Desai being an Indian might have experienced the same anxiety as a foreigner. In her novel there is a constant effort to establish identity.

Biju realizes the unpleasant reality and unwanted existence in an alien land. He fails to fulfill his father's desires and achieves nothing. He is a symbol of the dispossessed soul, when reaches the homeland he has the feeling of the sense of belonging and has his own roots.

To Conclude

Thus, this paper with title "Immigrant Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*" has attempted to bring out the diasporic experiences of the immigrant people. People go to the foreign country for studies and also get a well paid job. The journey towards the foreign country perhaps is successful for some people who adopt the culture, but some people struggle to find their identity in the foreign land. Some women might go to the foreign country for the sake of marriage and struggles to cope up with the culture. This is evident through the character Ashima in the novel *The Namesake*. And the poor parents in some family want their children to work in abroad. So the young generations go to the country like the

United States and want to get a luxurious life. This has been shown through the character Biju in *The Inheritance of Loss*. But Biju fails. Thus the essay gives the idea of the immigrant life in the foreign country and they are getting tried to get their identity.

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