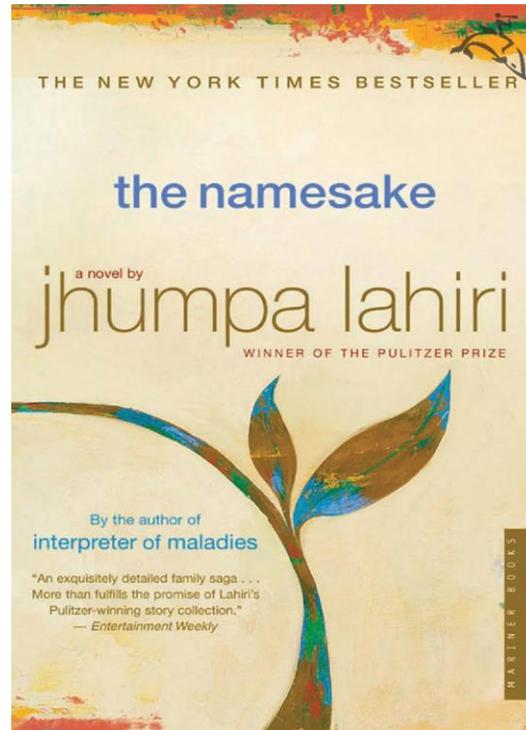


## Diasporan Souls in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri

J. Sheela & Dr. N. Geethanjali

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### Abstract

The term 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek word meaning to "scatter about." Diaspora refers to the movement of the people from one country to another and the diasporans refer to the people undergoing the movement. The diasporans migrate to different countries across the globe in search of greener pastures. Wherever they go, they take with them a profound sense of home land (native land) with them. Either they have gone there for economic settlement or permanent settlement, they have their roots in their native land. They are highly patriotic towards their mother land. These diasporans are called as first generation immigrants. They have split souls and they try to etch a space for themselves. But on the other hand their children, called as second generation immigrants could not confront with reality and they refuse to accept their parents as their saviors in their diasporic sickness. Jhumpalahiri, a second generation immigrant acts as a

true representative of displaced voices and dislocated identities. This paper focuses on the diasporan souls in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Name Sake*.

**Key words:** Diaspora, rootlessness, migration, identity crisis and immigrants

### **Jhumpa Lahiri**

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London, as the daughter of Bengali Indian immigrants. When she was three, her family moved to the United States. Lahiri considers herself an American stating, "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been." she grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father works as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, and so her family often visited relatives in Calcutta.

Her real name is Nilanjana Sudeshna and her teacher called her by pet name 'Jhumpa' because it was easy to pronounce. Lahiri recalled "I always felt so embarrassed by my name ... you feel like you're causing some one pain just by being who you are." This ambivalence of Lahiri was the inspiration for the ambivalence of Gogol, the protagonist of the novel *The Namesake*.

### **Diaspora**

A Diaspora is a large group of people with similar heritage or homeland who have been scattered across the world. This immigration can have many reasons. It can be economical, political or social. The Indian diaspora is a general term to describe the people who migrated from India. Globalisation across the world has taken many Indians to move for greener pastures. These people are often displaced or dispersed from their homelands. They also share a collective memory and nostalgic reminiscence of "home" ("Imaginary home lands "to use Rushdie's term) They inherit the ideology of 'home' and it becomes a personal identity. They are not rooted in the location they live. Instead they negotiate their culture and that of the host nation. The term 'diaspora' refers to the movement of the people and the people who migrate from country to country. In this paper the people who undergo this movement is referred as 'diasporans'. The souls of these diasporans are found to be divided and they live the sense of loneliness.

### **Autobiographical**

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This novel taken for study is an autobiographical one. The novel opens with Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli's shift to the United States after their marriage. Ashoke reaches there when he is about to complete his doctoral studies in Engineering at the MIT. Initially, the details of their married life, birth of their son are explained. The baby is named 'Gogol' by his father Ashoke, since the letter from Ashima's grandmother never reaches them. The baptizing of the name 'Gogol' is due to the train accident for Ashoke, where he was saved by his book by the Russian author Gogol.

*The Namesake* is a novel rendering the conflict of Americanism and Indianism. Ashoke and Ashima belong to the first generation diaspora whereas Gogol and Sonali (Gogol's sister) belongs to the second generation diaspora. The parents long for their home, feel rootless and displaced but the children being born and brought up in the host country feel less intense. They keep struggling for cultural identity which sways between the host land and motherland.

Alienation is one of the burning problems of the diasporans. Once Ashok and Ashima land in the Massachusetts they start experiencing alienation. Ashoke manages this situation to a certain extent, because he is the breadwinner of the family. He meets many companions in his work place. Ashima Ganguli, on the other hand is confined to the kitchen and bedroom more in the early stages of their married life, experiences the trauma more. As an expecting mother she was hospitalized. There was no one to be with her. Had it been in India, there would have been more relatives beside her. Lying in the hospital she wonders "she is the only Indian person in the hospital" (TNS 03). Her watch, gifted as a *bon voyage* one, by her parents remind her loved ones. "Twenty-Six members of her family" (TNS 04) bid her a warm welcome. Dr. Ashley, gauntly handsome obstetrician tells her. "Everything is looking perfectly normal" (TNS 05.) But nothing has been normal to Ashima. The couple had arrived eighteen months before and from that time everything was abnormal to her. She was very much worried to undergo "mother hood in a foreign land" (TNS 06).

Most of the Indian American characters are caught between the two worlds. One of the native land (India) and the other the alien land (America). They are unable to enter the cultural heritage of the host land as they have strong and indelible ties to their native visions. Finally they learn to understand and retaliating the alien voices in order to preserve and cultivate their cultures. Their diasporic identity is inevitable in every stage of their life and they have to decide

their future. The first generation diasporans have the dilemma and they finally confront with reality. When Ashima was admitted for delivery in the hospital, she was astonished by her body's ability to bring out a new life into the world just as her mother and grandmother have done. Her worry is that it is "happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those who loved." (TNS 06). She is frightened "to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she know so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (TNS 06).

Ashoke having obtained a Ph.D in Boston, has been researching in the fibre optics. The emotion of the diasporic state of Ashoke is not expressed in the novel. But the emotions of Ashima and Gogol Ganguli is portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri at every stage. There is no Assimilation and cultural conflicts in Ashoke as he spends much of his time in research. The only trauma he undergoes is his train accident, in which he thought he was dead in such event. When his train mate was dead, he was surprised to be alive. In the moment of crisis "He remembers believing that he was dying that perhaps he was already dead" (TNS 18). At that time some rescuers say "Let's Keep going" (TNS 18). This became a driving force for Ashoke. The diasporan soul learns to live lonely even in a strange atmosphere is a remarkable thing. Ashima, another diasporan soul face the loneliness, to the wonder of everybody when her husband gets a research grant and moves to Ohio from Massachusetts, everybody thinks that the Ganguli's would rent out their houses to the university students and move to Ohio. But Ashima stays there itself with her son Ganguli. To her "being a foreigner, is a sort of life long pregnancy a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts." (TNS 49). She accepts the diasporic state and stays all alone in the house.

### **Lead a Double Life**

Diasporic individuals are destined to lead a double life - living a Bengali life in foreign land. The first generation preserves their culture, and teaches their children the Bengali tradition, language and history. The baby grows with the circle of Bengali acquaintances. The families drop by one another home on Sunday afternoons." "They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore" (TNS 38). The occasion of Gogol's annaprasan - his rice ceremony is one such example of the first generation preserving their culture in a foreign land. Time and space slowly transform the diasporic individuals towards a perfect understanding of the settled country.

## Adopting New Names, Customs and Systems

Gogol, another diasporic soul after matriculation, gets a fellowship. His parents think that he will choose MIT, like his father, but he chooses Columbia University for his architectural programme and moves to New York. The novelist Jhumpa Lahiri shares the same dejection of her own having a peculiar name. Gogol realizes that his name is quite unusual and he refuses to accept as a name. Annoyed by the Bengali customs of his parents, Gogol totally embraces American popular culture. The pains he undergoes because of his peculiar name, the burden of heritage are explained in detail. The summer before he leaves to attend college at Yale, he officially changes his name to Nikhil. Everyone but his family called him Nikhil.

Ashoke Ganguli gives the name Gogol to his son after the Russian author whose book had saved his life. He and his wife had to give a name for the discharge from the hospital. They were unaware that the name would become an official name. Gogol gets a new identity with his new name and gains girlfriends. This identity is short lived because he had to return to his family on his father's sudden demise. Finally he returns to his cultural heritage, searches his roots and finds it.

## Diasporic Souls

*The Namesake* deals with the life of the diasporic souls. Diaspora is a journey of realising, recognising and defining their own selves. Through the characters Ashima and Gogol, Lahiri brings a crystal clear message that displacement of people demands greater adaptability in terms of both climate and culture.

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