

## Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* as a Classic Narrative

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**Abstract:** There are many women writers, both novelists and poets, based in America and Britain. Some, like Jhabvala and Anita Desai, even Rushdie are late immigrants, while others, like Jhumpa Lahiri, belong to the second generation of Indians abroad. Jhumpa Lahiri's stories reveal a fine awareness of the problems of adjustment faced by Indian emigrants; the postcolonial situation as a primary concern. The stories set in Boston, such as "Mrs. Sen's" and "A Temporary Matter" are better than those set in Calcutta, which sometimes ring a false note when describing the Indian' milieu.

**Key Words:** second generation, fiction, expatriate writers, intercultural, Indianness, Lowland, Namesake.

Jhumpa Lahiri, born in 1964, is an American (India) writer of repute. She is a well-known author of short stories, novels and essays. Her debut collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) is made into a popular film. Her next novel *The Lowland* (2013) was a finalist for the Man Booker Prize, winning her US \$ 50,000 DSC Prize. Here Lahiri explores the Indian immigrant experience of America. *Dove mi trove* is her Italian novel as she has lives in Rome now. She was a professor of creative writing at Princeton University from 2015 to 2022 and later at Columbia University.

The diasporic Indian writer Jhumpa Lahiri created history in becoming the first Indian author to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in America for her collection of short fiction *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999).

There are many women writers, both novelists and poets, based in America and Britain. Some, like Jhabvala and Anita Desai, even Rushdie are late immigrants, while others, like Jhumpa Lahiri, belong to the second generation of Indians abroad. It is said, "Most expatriate writers have a weak grasp of actual conditions in contemporary India, and tend to recreate it through the lens of nostalgia, writing about 'imaginary homelands' (to use Rushdie's phrase). (Naik 107) Their best work deals with Indian immigrants, the section of society they know at first hand.

Jhumpa Lahiri's stories reveal a fine awareness of the problems of adjustment faced by Indian emigrants; the postcolonial situation as a primary concern. The stories set in Boston, such as "Mrs. Sen's" and "A Temporary Matter" are better than those set in Calcutta, which sometimes ring a false note when describing the Indian' milieu.

The Lahiris were basically from West Bengal, India. Her father settled down first in England and then in Rhode Island, USA where she had her higher education. That way, Lahiri has nothing to do with India by nationality. Hence, she calls herself an American. She has edited the *Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories* besides a novel. Lahiri's father had enough Hindu experience.

Her father's cousin was involved in a train wreck and was only saved when the workers saw a beam of light reflected off of a watch he was wearing. Similarly, the protagonist's father in *The Namesake* was rescued because his peers recognized the book that he read by Russian author Nikolai Gogol. The father and his wife emigrated to America as young adults. After this life-changing experience, he named his son Gogol and his daughter Sonali. The two grew up in a culture with different mannerisms and customs that clash with what their parents have taught them. A film adaptation of *The Namesake* was released in March 2007, directed by Mira Nair and starring Kal Penn as Gogol and Bollywood stars Tabu and Irrfan Khan as his parents. Lahiri herself made a cameo as Aunt Jhumpa.

*The Namesake* is made into film.

Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "The Namesake" was expanded into a novel later. The story explores many of the emotional and cultural themes as the author's book *Interpreter of Maladies*. It is said,

The novel moves between events in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City, and examines the nuances involved with being caught between two conflicting cultures with distinct religious, social, and ideological differences. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Namesake\\_\(novel\)#p1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Namesake_(novel)#p1))

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The plot of the *Namesake* is intercultural and stunning too.

The story begins as Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, a young Bengali couple, leave Calcutta, India, and settle in Central Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashoke is an engineering student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Ashima struggles through language and cultural barriers as well as her own fears as she delivers her first child alone. Had the delivery taken place in Calcutta, she would have had the baby at home, surrounded by family. The delivery is successful, but the new parents learn they cannot leave the hospital before giving their son a legal name.

In India the family names its child, 14 days later with a celebration and ceremony, which, however, is not possible in America. The traditional naming process in their families is to have an elder who will give the new baby a name, and the parents wait for the letter from Ashima's grandmother. The letter never arrives, and soon after, the grandmother dies. Bengali culture calls for a child to have two names, a pet name to be called by family, and a good name to be used in public. Ashoke suggests the name of Gogol, in honor of the famous Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, to be the baby's pet name, and they use this name on the birth certificate. As a young man, Ashoke survived a train derailment with many fatalities. He had been reading a short story collection by Gogol just before the accident, and lying in the rubble of the accident he clutched a single page of the story "The Overcoat" in his hand.

The family calls him Nikhil to be his good name.

Gogol grows up perplexed by his pet name. Entering kindergarten, the Gangulis inform their son that he will be known as Nikhil at school. The five-year-old objects, and school administrators send him home with a note pinned to his shirt stating that he would be called Gogol at school, as was his preference. Gogol resents his name gradually. He thinks that he cannot bear a strange writer's name. The parents, even the teachers understand that Gogol is a good name. But he decides to change his name from Gogol to Nikhil Gonguli.

This change in name and Gogol's going to Yale, rather than following his father's footsteps to MIT, sets up the barriers between Gogol and his family. The distance, both geographically and emotionally, between Gogol and his parents continues to increase. He wants to be American, not Bengali.

He loves American girls with dating. He smokes cigar and marijuana and attends parties. He has an affair with a series of girls. One day the father explains his son the significance of the name Gogol. But this troubles Gogol.

After graduating from Columbia University, Gogol obtains a very small apartment in New York City, where he lands a job in an established architectural office. He is stiff, perpetually angry.

Gogol meets Maxine and has an affair. Maxine lives with her parents in New York City. Gogol stays with the family. They picnic in the mountains of New Hampshire. He introduces Maxine to his parents too.

Shortly after that Ashoke dies of heart attack while teaching in Ohio. Gogol collects his father's belongings. Gogol leaves Maxine, finding happiness in the company of his mother and sister.

Later Ashima, the mother suggests Gogol to marry a Bengali girl Moushumi, a divorcee from Graham. Both are married. Both reveal their affairs and divorce each other. So Gogol is alone finally. Mother returns to India, and Gogol picks up Russian writer Gogol's short stories to read for solace. Critics think this is the irony of the book. The novel is translated into many languages of the world.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an important short story writer of our times. She has gained much name and fame by her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*. She is also honoured with the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for this collection. Later she switched over to novel writing with *The Namesake*. The novel got much success and the famous film producer and director Mira Nair made a film on that. But once again Lahiri switched over to short story writing which seems to be the natural mode of her creative expression. Her second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* is published in the year 2008. The plot of Lahiri's stories and novel revolve round the Indian characters and more so the Bengali characters because she herself belongs to a Bengali family. Indian characters living in America face a lot



of problem when they come in contact with American culture. Lahiri's characters strongly stick to their tradition and get success in retaining their Indianness. The oriental culture is strong enough to negate the onslaught of the occidental culture. Indians living in America always remember their motherland and even create a mini-India there. This has been the theme of Lahiri's first collection of stories *Interpreter of Maladies*. But the publication of her second collection *Unaccustomed Earth* brings a change in theme. The stories revolve less around the assimilation experienced by their children—who while conscious of and self-conscious about their parents' old-world habits, vigorously reject them in favour of American lifestyles and partners.(Singh 147)

Lahiri is one of the best Indian diasporic writers today. Nilanjana Chatterjee thinks “She chooses the realistic narrative mode – the purpose of which is to illustrate the absolute essentiality of likelihood in the depiction of time.” (Chatterjee 105)

#### References:

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