



## IMMIGRANT CONUNDRUM OF THE SELF IN A DISLOCATED TERRAIN

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### Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri elaborates upon the nuances and intricacies of the everydayness associated with migration juxtaposing it with the multitude of occurrences that shape their family and essentially their self in a dislocated, terrain. Jhumpa Lahiri's *the Namesake (2003)* and *The Interpreter of Maladies (1999)*, a collection of nine scintillating short stories that revolve around migration and the construction of one's identity around it, fruitfully puts forth the conundrum that any second generation immigrant is susceptible to, in the labyrinth of a dislocated terrain. Jhumpa essentially in most of her works focuses on international migration where the migrants are torn between two diametrically opposing cultures and worldviews, one that they have voluntarily left behind, and one that they are reluctant and yet to embrace. The discussion is prone to raise a very articulate and a very poignant point, which is the fact that by simply migrating to a place or by even gaining a permanent citizenship of where one has migrated, one doesn't become one of them.

A plethora of writers have taken it upon themselves to elucidate upon the discourse of migration in society, bringing to the fore in its ambit its myriad facets. However, perhaps no other author of the contemporary times, save for a handpicked few elaborate upon the nuances and intricacies of the everydayness associated with migration juxtaposing it with the multitude of occurrences that shape their family and essentially their self in a dislocated, terrain. Born in the year 1967 to a Bengali couple who were immigrants to the United Kingdom from Calcutta (as it was colloquially known back then), India, Jhumpa Lahiri went on to attend Bernard college in New York, majoring in English Literature, following it by joining the student body of Boston University, and subsequently earning three consecutive literary masters' degree prior to receiving her doctorate in Renaissance studies.

Jhumpa's childhood is perhaps a catalytic reason of her being able to fruitfully put forth the conundrum that any second generation immigrant is susceptible to in the labyrinth of a dislocated terrain, where she essentially in most of her works focuses on international migration. In most Bengali households, the children are given two sets of names, the *dak naam* (which is the nick/ pet name) and the *bhalo naam* (which is the official and the registered name) is a nomenclature that is associated with the public domain, and is essentially to articulate and represent the qualities of a person that are "dignified and enlightened"; Jhumpa's *bhalo naam* was Sudeshna Nilanjana. This dichotomy and also subsequent discomfort with one's nomenclature, which essentially had shrouded a young Jhumpa, is instrumental in shaping the central theme of her bestseller novel, *The Namesake (2003)*, which is Gogol Ganguli's story wherein one of the central praxis that the novel revolves around is the association and subsequent disassociation and final reassociation that the protagonist aligns with his name.

This paper will unfold in its due course a brief and a hopefully, scintillating discussion and analysis of two of much appreciated and bestselling novels of Jhumpa Lahiri; firstly, *The Namesake (2003)* and secondly, *The Interpreter of Maladies (1999)*, a collection of nine scintillating short stories that revolve around migration and the construction of one's identity around it. Apart from the aforementioned celebrated and well- adulated novels, the author has several other muses to her credit- the *Unaccustomed Earth (2008)*, and then *The Lowland*, in 2013, where the author was inspired by real life political events, and with the same in its backdrop, captures the tale of two brothers, Subash and Udayan, wherein the former goes to the States from his native place, Calcutta in order to pursue his doctoral studies and the later chooses to tread the unconventional yet the highly popular path of *Naxalism*, a political doctrine heavily influenced by Mao-Tse Tung's and Lenin's brand of Marxism.

*The Namesake (2003)* is essentially the tale of an American youngster, Gogol /Nikhil Ganguli, chronicling events through his birth leading up to his unsuccessful marriage that ends up in a divorce. Arguably, however, it's also equally and significantly the saga of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli who are Gogol's parents, and also along with it are first generation immigrants from the east Indian state of Calcutta, married by the means of an arranged marriage, a union arranged by their respective parents. The couple travel to New York, where Ashoke is pursuing his doctoral studies at MIT in electrical engineering, one of the several "Bengali youth" whose escape to a foreign land is propelled by the need for a better life and better opportunities that a first world nation like the United States of America has to offer. The couple is essentially torn between two diametrically opposing cultures and worldviews, one that they have voluntarily left behind, and one that they are reluctant and yet to embrace.



The novel's central theme is the idea of name or nomenclature. One can here inadvertently ask, as the stalwart literati, Shakespeare once did, what's there in a name? Name, is essentially related to the person's construction of self, and his or her identity. The practice of naming like various other social practices is essentially tainted with the spatiality and temporalities of culture, religion, family, the physical environment of a person and a multitude of other contexts. The protagonist of the tale is named by his father as Gogol, after the famous Russian novelist by the same name, *Nikolai Gogol*, who is also Ashoke Ganguli's favourite author. What follows through the due course of the novel is the protagonist's naming, un-naming, renaming and the subsequent association, de-association, and finally a re-association with the name. As mentioned in the preceding passages, the process of naming in a majority of Bengali household follows a vivid pattern, falling into the dichotomy of carrying a dak-naam (which essentially is a nick or a pet name), and also a bhalo-naam (which refers to the official and the public name of the child).

One can draw parallels and also a stark disjuncture between the phenomenon of naming in "traditional" third world nations and "modern" first world nations. While it can be seen that in both the sets of nations the trend of adhering to nicknames is followed wherein Alexander gets shortened to Alex, Elizabeth becomes Liz or Lizzy, Christopher turns into Chris. However, in the modern first world nations the practice of coming up with nicknames is essentially rooted in the realm of informality wherein the nicknames are often given by the person's friends and acquaintances and the idea of addressing someone by the nickname is inadvertently flexible, anyone can address the person by calling out his or her nickname, there is no necessary boundary between nickname and the private realm and the official name and the public realm. In stark contrast, in most Bengali households the practice of addressing someone with their pet names is strictly relegated to and is associated with the private domain, where the liberty of addressing someone by their pet names is only provided to the close knit circle of the child's family and acquaintances. This has a strong impact on the concerned person's construction of the self. Gogol, as an elementary school going toddler on the first day of his school refuses to respond to his "good name", Nikhil and would only answer if the concerned "outsider" refers to him as Gogol. This is evidently made clear in the part of the novel where Gogol is told on the first day of his school, that marks the commencement of his formal education, that in school he would be addressed as Nikhil, as a child he is unable to comprehend the justifiable reason as to why his parents want him to use a new name in school when they are not even addressing him with it.

Thus, for Gogol begins the saga of a life long journey of living with a name that one is not fully comfortable or at ease with. The idea of association and de-association with one's name, especially as is the case with the protagonist is essentially linked to the person's age and location. However, during the budding adolescence years, the idea of self undergoes a stark metamorphosis, which is essentially rooted in the person's immediate physical and cultural location. For Gogol, his developing lack of association with his name and the resultant resentment towards his parents, who had given him the name is essentially rooted in a multitude of factors; Firstly, Gogol is a name that has an innocuous meaninglessness attached to it, an attribute that is essentially relegated to the realm of nicknames and is also "funny" to pronounce esp. for the Americans. Secondly, the name which was Gogol's father's favourite author's last name, is a Russian name, not the quintessential Bengali nickname that is given to a vast majority of children, is something that carries that a uniqueness for the close knit community of Bengali's that the Ganguli's have come to know and associate with over the years of living in the States, and is something which only increases Gogol's resentment towards his parents as he constantly questions his parents on several occasions on the pointlessness of his name. Throughout the due course of the novel, the sense of self for Gogol is perpetually in a state of conundrum. This sense of conundrum with relegation to the self in this novel is essentially interspersed with the location of one's generation. For Ashima and Ashoke, the sense of conundrum with one's self results from the *lack of belongingness* with the location where one has migrated to.

However this conundrum's very origin for them is essentially reversed, for a second generation immigrant, who is born with the State, is very much at ease with the "way of life" that the Western country administers and fashions. What are they not able to fathom is the absolute reason as to why their parents cannot adhere to the everyday aspects of life that is followed by their peers and their parents? In the novel, this is made evident in the portion wherein the author tries to show that Gogol's parents expectations from their ward is essentially shaped by the pattern and ethos of parenting and core values that they themselves were privy to in their native land. For instance, the very fact that Gogol doesn't date anyone during his sophomore year in high school is not a matter of grave concern for his parents.

Later in his life, when Gogol begins courting Maxine (an American girl), and gradually starts spending a lot of his hours in her company, the author portrays through recurrent passages the sense of comfort, kinship and belongingness that Gogol feels with Maxine and her family, in a way that he has not felt with his own family. Here again through an in-depth reading of the profoundly written novel, the reader is able to gauge that the sense of self, its construction and the subsequent conundrum is



resultant of the physical and cultural environment one is situated in. The above discussion is prone to raise a very articulate and a very poignant point, which is the fact that by simply migrating to a place or by even gaining a permanent citizenship of where one has migrated, one doesn't become one of them.

The author, above all through her nuanced and intricate understanding of immigrant families' *ad nauseum* states that one cannot simply become an American by the virtue of being there in flesh and blood, one only becomes a "true" American by being there in *spirit*, by feeling a sense of commonality with the way of life of that particular nation. Though, while they (Gogol's parents) are the inhabitants of a two-storey bungalow in Pemberton road, nothing can tell them from a "true-blue" American apart from the nameplate that has they have up at the entrance of their house, which identifies their last name. However, throughout the novel, a reader can essentially gauge through an insightful reading that both Ashima and Ashoke are essentially and fastidiously nurturing a ruptured "self" that is torn between two cultures, one which they both have reluctantly but willingly left behind, and one where they have made their lives, yet haven't embraced it in a full-fledged manner.

Apart from the almost visually palpable emotional overtones that the novel brings to the fore, the three main characters of the novel in discussion are also torn betwixt and between the traditionalism and the modernity of the two starkly contrasting cultures which shrouds and encompasses them. Ashima's character is a brilliantly put example of such a conundrum.

In conclusion it can be argued that the novel is a beautifully nuanced trajectory of numerous facets of an immigrant couple and their children's day to day lives, especially their son, Gogol. It beautifully captures with surprising efficiency the emotional overtones and undertones, the metamorphoses of each character and also the dense themes of the interstices between migration, family and cross cultural mechanism through a third person narrative.

The second novel, under discussion is **The Interpreter of Maladies (1999)**, also the debut novel of the author, a collection of nine scintillating short stories which also in its ambit brings to the fore the intricacies of the conundrum that the self is confronted with in a dislocated terrain.

The first short story, **A Temporary Matter**, is the tale of an Indian origin couple, Shukumar and Shoba, residing in the United States, the tale essentially chronicles their five day journey which revolves around a confession game they play with each in the all of the five days when the electricity gets cut off in their locality for an hour, due to an electric line that had gone askew due to the snowstorm, and the repairmen had chosen a time in the evening to repair the same. As is consistently seen in most of Jhumpa Lahiri's ventures, marriage and the paucity of emotions situated within it play a key role in stringing together all the vital emotions in the concerned short story under discussion. Shoba's character is shown to be a ruthless and a relentless "workaholic" in the initial pages of the novel. A proof-reader by profession, Shoba is essentially consumed by long working hours and in turn ends up neglecting the household chores that are earnestly taken care of by her husband, Shukumar, a doctorate student.

Through the preceding discussion, the author successfully attempts to draw a disjuncture between tradition and modernity with respect to the construction of masculinity and femininity in the Indian context. Although globalization and westernization today have uprooted much of the fundamental traditional ethics of the traditional Indian society, in most of the Indian households, the connotations of chastity and domesticity are attached to the ideal construction of femininity, whereas, on the contrary, the prime connotation attached to manhood is that of a bread-winner. Such notions are what the author attempts to evade in this short story thereby *deconstructing the conventional models of masculinity and femininity, by merging the connotations of tradition and modernity*.

The second short story, **When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine** is an enticing and a serenading short story that chronicles the feeling of belongingness in a "foreign land", the protagonist the story is Mr. Pirzada, a Bangladeshi origin doctoral student of Botany who was in the States for a year by the virtue of securing a grant from the Pakistani government to study the foliage in New England. The central theme of the story is that of creating and recreating a the sense of a community-like feeling in a land that is alien to Mr. Pirzada and the East Indian couple who warmly and unfailingly host him each night for supper. The author attempts to generate, yet again the frail yet powerful idea of conundrum that a person is faced with when they find themselves in a dislocated terrain which is quite in contrast to "their" native culture. The short story also seamlessly draws to the attention of the reader the fact that by retaining certain practices of one's roots one is able to retain a sense of rooted identity in a foreign land, it could be by meticulously eating and preparing traditional Indian food, or it could also be sticking to certain hospitality traditions common in their traditional household.



Mr. Pirzada, a married man and a father to five girls, who reside in Dhaka, is palpably traumatized by the precept of war and, the threat that his family essentially faces by the virtue of staying in a war torn land and also, his helplessness about it, since he can't fly to be with them in under the pathological circumstances. It is under such traumatizing circumstances that the host family is a source of comfort, solace and also a site of "home away from home" for Mr. Pirzada, the essence of which is singularly captured in the succeeding passage, The idea of dining in the short story doesn't merely relegate to the act of eating or consuming a meal, rather it goes much further. The idea of dining is shrouded by the related aspects of "solidarity", "diaspora" and "irony".

The subsequent short story, which is also the name of the novel, *Interpreter of Maladies*, is a cathartic, intricate and a nuanced saga of a couple torn apart from each other and also torn between two starkly distinct cultures. Subsequently, the author also provides to explain the multi-layered understanding of the title "*Interpreter of Maladies*". Who is essentially the Interpreter of Maladies? It is Mr. Kapasi, who is the tour guide in the Odisha state of India during the weekends and also works as an interpreter for Gujarati patients who come to the doctor with their ailments and need him (Mr. Kapasi) to relay their ailments to the doctor since there is a language barrier between the two parties. The title also has a symbolic connotation since Mr. Kapasi is asked by Mrs. Das, one of the tourists, Bengali in origin who comes along with her husband (Mr. Das) and their two sons (Ronny and Bobby) to take in the sights and smells of the picturesque beach town, Odisha. It is during one such event that, a deeply anguished Mrs. Das while engaging in a tête-à-tête with him, pouring unto his presence which includes a string of her *interlinked and deep-reaching maladies*, which essentially includes a profound revelation- be it her extra-marital affair with her husband's Punjabi friend and the subsequent birth of their second son, who is born out of wedlock. Herein she essentially expects Mr. Kapasi to be able to understand the depth and the core of her maladies, something which she is unable to share with anybody else, not even her husband.

The particular short story is also emblematic in its narrative, as it captures the duality of emotions that a person goes through while being torn between two cultures and also the poignant and nuanced detail that lies behind the seemingly "usual" story of a tourist couple, who are tourists in their own native land.

*A Real Durwan*, the succeeding short story, is a gut wrenching tale of an old woman, *Boorima* who earns her "bread and butter" by the virtue of sweeping the stairwell and acting as a *de facto* watchman for the very same dilapidated building. It is the theme of diaspora, however whimsical that is starkly visible throughout the continuity of the novel, this vivid presence of diasporic disposition is visible and is elucidated poignantly throughout the story.

In this short story one can also find the faint, however poignant occurrences of **transcendence between tradition and modernity**, Boorima's services for the building comes to resemble or rather substantiate over the years that of a "real" *durwan* or a watchman, a job which in most societies is inimically associated with a man, a job that the old woman fastidiously does over the years, keeping the inhabitants of the building safe at night, keeping it free from the clutches of miscreants, be it robbers, be it drunkards, and anyone else who fell into a similar category. The Real Durwan is then indeed a scintillating short story, based on the turmoil faced by a particular person, a person who is essentially and dextrously torn between two separate lifestyles, two distinct nations and most importantly between conditions of destitution and also that of "fabled" opulence.

The succeeding short story titled *Sexy* is a title that is apt both in the literal sense and also metaphorically. Before delving into the mechanics of why's and how's, it would essentially be prudent at this juncture to delineate a brief character sketch of the myriad poignant characters involved. It is essentially the story told through the eyes or through the perspective of Miranda, an American girl who grew up in the Midwestern state of Michigan, and lived a solo life in Boston, working as a public radio station, soliciting pledges. In the due course of the tale the author brings to the fore the portrayal of an affair, albeit extramarital between Miranda and Dev, an Indian origin investment banker who was married. The affair commenced when the latter's wife was on a vacation to India.

On the peripheries, the author seamlessly weaves the tale of another Indian family who are immigrants to the United States of America, Laxmi (the wife) who is Miranda's colleague at the public radio station and her husband, and also their teenage boy, wherein the initial pages of the story portray the ongoing of the "**quintessential**" companionship that is prevalent in the traditional Indian society, peppered with flecks of modernity that gradually comes with residing in a foreign nation, which is essentially the epitome of westernization.



Why the author does then goes to extent of christening the title of the anecdote as **Sexy**? Indeed, as one might pose a prudent question, what does the title connote? Is the term solely relegated to being an adjective that is attributed to the outer demeanour of a person? Can the term be attributed to a world view or state of things, thus imbuing a metaphorical disposition in its ambit?

As the author usually unravels through the serenading narrative, which is essentially third person, the reader can gauge that the Dev's cognitive yardstick of the idea of feminine beauty is what essentially comes to tout her (Miranda) as **sexy**; the particularity of his perception is laconic in its expression in the succeeding passage, wherein he is addressing Miranda after a session of almost ravenous lovemaking, "You're the first," he told her, admiring her from the bed. "The first woman I've known with legs this long." (pp. 50).

The tale also brings to the fore the quintessential conundrum of the mind, or rather more substantially of oneself. The conundrum in this context is causally due to the occurrence of "out of ordinary" occurrences, such as has a romantic affair with a married person and the essential effect that it seems to have on the self of a person. This short scintillating story, again a fireball in Jhumpa Lahiri's literary arsenal is one which needs to be re-read *ad nauseam* in order to be understood and well appreciated in its full scope and nuance.

The sixth story in the novel goes by the name of the protagonist of the story, **Mrs. Sen**, a young married woman of Indian origin who comes to stay with her husband in the United States post their betrothal, Mrs. Sen primary occupation, other than assuming the role of a wholesome home maker is that of a *babysitter*, a person who took care and for a brief period of time assumed the role of a "guardian" and a "protector" when the child's own parents were out running other errands. The story of Mrs. Sen is essentially located in the interstices of migration, diaspora and the poignant theme of motherhood. The protagonist in the due course of its proceedings has fastidiously assumed the role of a babysitter for a young American boy, Eliot who came from a broken home and lives with his mother.

Lahiri through this short story again brings to the fore the fact that it is she who can manage with the daunting skill of an expert has she managed to juxtapose the ordinary and the normative with the transcendental.

**Mrs. Sen** in conclusion is the story of how the person's notion of self is deconstructed and reconstructed in consonance with their location in a dislocated terrain.

The concluding three stories, **This Blessed House**, **The Treatment of Bibi Haldar** and **the Third and the Final Continent** respectively are essentially distinct in their trajectories yet overlapping in their disposition as all three of the tales are essentially remnant in their narrative of the conditions of the "conundrum" which a person essentially is privy to in a dislocated terrain, which might be physical or metaphorical in nature. The first short story narrates the tale of an Indian origin couple who move in flesh and blood (though the wife also moves in spirit) to a new house after their marriage. The house is loaded with a plethora of Christian paraphernalia, consisting of statuettes of Christ, idol of Madonna and several other items and how their marriage is essentially shaped and reshaped by those findings, which is essentially commemorated in the couples' ideological difference between the display of the "coveted" showpieces wherein the husband is vehemently opposed to its display in the public view of the house as he doesn't want his university friends to believe that they are practicing Christianity.

The concerned novel thereby is Jhumpa Lahiri's fastidious attempt to garner together the strings of migration, human emotions and culture and tying them into a beautiful necklace of a captivating prose.

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