

Isolation and identity in the namesake



The Namesake explores the themes of isolation, identity, clash of cultures and the immigrant experience. Through the Ganguli family Lahiri looks at how the immigrant experience is different for the two generations of immigrants, Lahiri does this by first introducing us to Ashima's experience and her feeling of alienation which is representative of most of the first generation immigrants. Lahiri contrasts Ashima's experience to Gogol's experience as a second generation immigrant when the perspective changes to that of Gogol. Lahiri illustrates the problems he faces like lacking an identity and feeling isolated from his two cultures. The book starts with Ashima's perspective, which gives us an insight about her feeling of isolation, homesickness and alienation from her new home. Ashima has a difficult time letting go of her Bengali culture, she tries to hold on to it as much as possible, whereas Gogol tries to disconnect himself as much as he can from his roots as he has grown up seeing and accepting the American culture, which he feels he cannot be fully apart of if he accepts his Bengali heritage, so in order to fit in the American society he goes out of his way to forget all about his Bengali roots. Lahiri shows us the journeys of the Ganguli family members, and us how the parents slowly start accepting the American culture through their children, while the second generation try to figure out which culture they belong and discover their true identity.

In the very beginning of the novel we can tell that Ashima is feeling very homesick, and Lahiri makes this clear when Ashima says " nothing feels normal" to her in this alien land. We find out that Ashima is "... terrified to raise a child in Country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare.", this presents one of her

biggest fears of raising Gogol in a place where there is a different culture and different people, that she does not understand and she knows nobody here which strengthens the theme of isolation and the immigrant experience. We also know her night at the hospital is “...the first time in her life she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers”, which again stresses upon the theme of Ashima’s isolation, as it shows us how important family is to her and now in this new land she does not have them with her by her side. Ashima tries to hang on to her beloved Bengali culture through symbols of her home such as her “ tattered copy of Desh magazine... “, the watch she got as a departing gift, her group of friends, Bengali books, letters from her family back home and traditional celebrations and practice. Her group of friends “...all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends.”, which shows us what a strong bond and connection sharing the same values and norms of the Bengali culture can bring about in first generation immigrants, as they feel like they can after a long time relate to someone. Even after the culture shock, the Ganguli parents have to go through a lot of other hardships as they are now isolated from their loved ones, and Lahiri tells us that “... Ashoke and Ashima live the lives of the extreme aged, those for whom everyone they once knew and loved is lost... Even those family members who continue to live seem dead somehow, always invisible, impossible to touch.”, and so all the loved ones they have loved behind are lost to them since they hardly communicate and even if they do ones in the while it is impossible to truly connect and feel their presence over the phone. “... Ashima is beginning to realise, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy — a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. “, here Lahiri describes how Ashima feels a lack of belonging, and is constantly waiting for

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some connection to be formed, she tells us assimilation is a “ constant burden” and living in this environment surrounded by an alien culture she feels “ out of sorts.”, and it is for this reason that she wants to go back to her loved ones in Calcutta and raise Gogol there, but does not for Ashoke’s sake. Even when they go to visit India the trip is “...put behind them, quickly shed, quickly forgotten... irrelevant to their lives”, which reinforces the theme of isolation from ones home Country and the immigrant experience.

A little later on in Ashima’s journey, she started to feel more settled and in control of her new life, although she does not assimilate fully into her new culture she is learning to come to her own terms with it. We see that“ By and by she comes to her own, takes pride in rearing up the child, moves out alone in the market with her baby in the pram, communicates with the passers-by who smile at her and goes to meet her husband on the campus, thus growing confident...”, so she starts to become more confident and less intimidated by the new culture and people. Ashima and Ashoke make a very active effort to preserve their culture in their new home, they teach their children they language and teach them about their traditions and beliefs. One example could be the rice ceremony they had for Gogol, and when they asked him to memorize a four-line poem by Tagore. However, Ashima and Ashoke realize that for Gogol his American culture is also important to him, but they do not realize just how much until later on. Ashima gets her first job in the library, “... she is friendly with the other women who work at the library...They are the first American friends she has made in her life.”, so we can tell that Ashima is really growing and becoming more comfortable with the American society, and is breaking out of her isolation by diversifying her

group of friends to more than just Bengalis. Lahiri tells us “ she has learned to do things on her own”, and we can see this as she has her own job, a bigger group of friends, and learns to do different tasks. Towards the end of the novel when Ashima decides to stay in India for six months every year and is packing up her home, we come to know that “ She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign.”, this shows us that she feels like her name suggests “...without borders”, and she feels that because it’s been such a long time in India which was once her home without any doubt, is also starting to feel “ in its own way foreign”, this also highlights the themes of the importance of names and the immigrant experience. Lahiri makes it clear to us that “... she does not feel fully at home within the walls of Pemberton Road she knows that this is home nevertheless...”, for Ashima this is her home as well, for which “...she is responsible.” again showing us how much she has grown over the years, and it tells us that she has made a lot of effort to make Pemberton Road home for herself and her family, and feels proud to have done that successfully.

Ashoke embraces their new life, while Ashima clings to her culture with full force, and Gogol and Sonia feel like they don’t belong in either culture and try their best to fit in to their American surroundings. Ashoke is quite settled as he has a job he is proud of, “ what a sense of accomplishment it gives him to see his name printed under “ Faculty” in the university directory”, here the theme of the American Dream is touched upon, how Ashoke is now working his dream job and living in America it was possible for him to find such a perfect job. Ashima is not willing to change herself and her culture,

and “ Though Ashima continues to wear nothing but saris and sandals from Bata, Ashoke, accustomed to wearing tailor-made pants and shirts all his life, learns to buy ready-made.”, and so we can tell that Ashoke is quickly assimilating into the American culture and making little changes that make him feel more apart of the American culture. He is also informed about the politics in the US, as “ He reads about U. S. planes bombing Vietcong supply routes in Cambodia...”, and now has more exposure to the outside world and US itself. Although the Ganguli parents try to raise their children in the Bengali way, Gogol and Sonia are both very influenced by the American culture outside of their home. Sonia and Gogol try to find themselves and what culture they fit into, and because they are exposed to the American culture and grow up surrounded by it, they think of it as their best match. When ‘ Nikhil’ calls his New haven hostel his home, Ashima does not approve and does not understand this need for distance or Gogol’s very American behavior. Ashima does not force her future upon her children, but teaches them about it hoping they will learn to accept it and eventually follow it. We know that the children face an identity crisis and Lahiri sums this up when she says: “ The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are who grow up in two worlds simultaneously”. The children of the migrants face their own problems that are different from the ones of their parents, as they do not feel they belong fully to either culture, and Lahiri shows us this through mostly Gogol and Sonia in some cases. It is due to their children that Ashoke and Ashima reluctantly start embracing the American traditions and culture, and“ For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrated with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event children look forward to more

than the worship of Durga and Saraswati.”. Lahiri also tells us that the children prefer the American culture over the Indian, because they are more familiar with this culture. The children help their parents assimilate to the American culture, and here the theme of clash of cultures also comes about. Even when Gogol falls in love with various American girls, although his parents do not approve, they are almost forced to accept it for the sake of their children. This also makes it clear that there is a big cultural gap between the first and second generation of immigrants. Food is an important symbol of the Bengali culture, and soon they make sacrifices when it comes to Bengali food since “ In the supermarket they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume.”, which emphasizes on the clash of cultures and the cultural gap between the parents and the children. So, it can be said that the children bring both their parents closer to and help assimilate them into their American culture.

Gogol wants to change his name in order become more like his American classmates and people outside of his home, however to do so he tries to get rid of his past and he does this by avoiding any reminders of the past like his family. Eventually he gets rid of the name Gogol and tries to become someone else. Lahiri still calls him Gogol so we know that Gogol is his real self, but Gogol doe not know this at the time. Gogol feels like his name alienates him from both his cultures “ For by now, he’s come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain and tell people that it doesn’t mean anything in Indian...”, Lahiri is trying to show us that Gogol feels like his name holds him back from being apart of both the American and Bengali culture. Gogol starts to think about changing his

name, and “ In history class, Gogol has learned that European immigrants had their names changed...Though Gogol doesn’t know it, even Nikolai Gogol renamed himself...”. Lahiri also emphasizes the similarity between Gogol and his namesake, since even his namesake had changed his name. Gogol does not understand the point of having two names, Ashima replies saying “ It’s our way”, it almost implies that Gogol does not know understand the Bengali way and does not want to follow it, however it is still the “ way” of his parents.

He manages by entering university far from his parents to separate himself from his family geographically. So now he can create his own world and personal identity for himself in a place where everybody would know him as Nikhil. In his new world he finds Gogol uses their relationship as an escape from finding out his own identity, and from his past. He starts living with Maxine in her parental home, and begins to distance himself from his own family as much as possible. He stops responding to his mothers phone calls, partly because he does not want to be reminded of his past of who he was before and how different that is from who he has become or is trying to be. “ He is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine’s family is a betrayal of his own”, he knows that he is being distant from his family and by spending so much time with Maxine’s family where he feels like he fits in, but he knows his parents would not; “ He cannot imagine his parent’s sitting at Lydia and Gerald’s table... And yet here he is night after night... doing just that.”. By spending so much time with Maxine’s family who are so different from his own and who he prefers to spend time with, he feels by doing this he is being disloyal to his own family. The word “ betrayal” and the fact that

he is thinking about being disloyal to his family, hints that he is feeling guilty about it and knows he is doing something wrong. However, “ he feels free of expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his own life”, this relationship is an escape for him. This life that he creates becomes nothing more than an escape from the old one, and with Maxine and her family he celebrates his twenty-seventh birthday, “ the first birthday in his life that he hasn’t spent with his parents either in Calcutta or Pemberton Road.”, which goes to show how much he has distanced himself from his family, and almost completely replaced them with this relationship that serves as an escape from his parents and the culture they used to share. On his birthday “...he remembers that his parents can’t possibly reach him... That here at Maxine’s side, in this cloistered wilderness, he is free.”, this verifies that Gogol views their relationship as a retreat from his old life and in the process he feels “ free”.

Everything changes for Gogol after his father passes away, his attitude towards his family completely changes and so do his priorities. Maxine cannot understand what Gogol’s going through and does not realize how much this effects him, she asks him to get away from his family for a while, but he replies saying “ I don’t want to get away.”. His priorities shift from Maxine to his family, and “ He does not want to be with someone who barely knew his father, who’s met him only once”. He begins to reflect on his relationship with his parents, and he realizes he should not have tried to escape them. His father is gone now and he knows that it is too late to get to know his father better now, so he begins to search for his father by finding whatever is left of him, so he can find a sense of connection with his father.

He now wants to get in touch with his family and embrace the Bengali part of him, he does this by coming together with Moushumi, spending time with his family and trying to understand his parents and their culture. He starts looking up to his parents now, as “ He knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing left to do ...”. He also starts to grasp some of the Bengali traditions, “ Years later Gogol had learned the significance, that it was a Bengali son’s duty to shave his head in the wake of his parent’s death.”, Lahiri shows us that Gogol has after all this time connected to his parents and their culture. Finally, he starts to also accept and try and understand his name, “ The name he had so detested, here hidden and preserved — that was the first thing his father had given him”. By doing this he is also finding another way to connect to his father through the name that his father had given him.

In *The Namesake* Lahiri records the journey of the Ganguli family members to finding their own identities (personal and cultural) and finding a sense of belonging. Lahiri looks at the immigrant experience in depth using the experiences of the Ganguli family. Lahiri also looks at the different problems the first and second generation of immigrants face. Ashima represents the first generation immigrant who feels homesick and displaced, Lahiri tracks her journey and towards the end we see just how much she has grown. Then we the novel switches to Gogol’s perspective, who is the second generation immigrant and looks at all the problems he faces with confusion about his identity