

The namesake



Cultural traditions, migration, family and identity are issues which emerge throughout the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. How have various literary techniques been used to show that these issues play a major role in an individual experiencing a sense of belonging or not belonging. It is evident that a number of issues can greatly affect a person's sense of belonging in particular personal experiences and cultural background. Throughout Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* a number of these issues emerge and have been presented to play a major role in an individual discovering their true identity while concurrently experiencing a sense of belonging or not belonging.

A range of various literary techniques including intertextuality, motifs and juxtaposition have been utilised throughout the novel to illustrate the factors that influence a person's sense of belonging and in some cases a person's sense of isolation. The reference to the short story *The Overcoat* written by Ashoke's favourite author Nikolai Gogol has been used as both a motif and a form of intertextuality throughout the novel. *The Overcoat* is first mentioned in chapter one when Ashoke recalls his near death experience in a train accident. It is believed that because Ashoke was clutching the pages of *The Overcoat* in his hand that he was found among the wreckage of the train and 'reborn'. This personal experience played an important role in shaping Ashoke's identity which in turn allowed him to develop a great sense of adventure which enabled him to travel to a land far away from his own and be 'Born twice in India and once in America'. It can also be suggested that this personal experience influenced Ashoke's ability to experience a strong sense of belonging wherever he goes. *The Overcoat* is again mentioned

numerous times throughout the novel mainly in relation to Gogol Ganguli's personal sense of belonging.

Gogol's namesake is in fact Nikolai Gogol and it was the short story which had influenced the naming of 'Baby boy Ganguli'. Although there is no connection between Gogol Ganguli and Nikolai Gogol, Ganguli's sense of belonging is greatly affected by Nikolai's own identity. Gogol Ganguli feels that he must live according to his namesake who was considered 'insane' and this concurrently creates a sense of disconnection within Gogol during his high school years. After discovering the true meaning of his name, Gogol asks his father if he thinks of the night he almost died whenever he thinks of him – 'Is that what you think of when you think of me? , 'Do I remind you of that night? ', to which his father reassures him that he does not. However because of this Gogol forms a sense of isolation and regret towards his father while simultaneously realising the importance of life and family. This sense of isolation is then contrasted to the sense of belonging that is developed later in the novel when Gogol Ganguli changes his name to Nikhil Ganguli in order to gain acceptance and a stronger sense of belonging within the American community. The Overcoat is also a motif that is used to symbolise the importance of identity and personal experience and the role these two factors play in securing a person's sense of belonging or not belonging.

It is evident throughout the novel that there are a number of motifs used that represent issues surrounding the main character and his family. The first of these motifs is manifested on the first pages of the novel where Ashima is said to be making a concoction of 'Rice Krispies and Planters Peanuts and

chopped red onion in a bowl' to which ' she adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili peppers'. It is said that this snack created by Ashima is a humble approximation of the snack that is sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and railway platforms throughout India. This food motif emphasises the isolation that Ashima is currently experiencing as a result of her recent migration to a land foreign to her, America. Although Ashima's craving of the snack commonly found in Calcutta emphasises her disconnection and isolation from her homeland, this sense of isolation is eventually replaced with belonging as her community of Bengali friends begins to grow later in the novel. Later the food motif is once again made evident through the gathering and sharing of traditional Bengali food between the Ganguli's and other Bengali families. These recurring references to traditional Bengali foods reinforces the idea that migration, cultural background and traditions plays a major role in creating a sense of disconnection and eventual belonging.

Similarly trains are a key motif within the novel and are first introduced in chapter two when Ashoke recalls his near death experience in a horrific train accident which did physically immobilize him momentarily but eventually acted as source of independence and crucial motive in his want for a better life away from his homeland. The motif of the train is then manifested when Ashima gains independence for the first time when riding it alone, although she is alone Ashima feels a sense of belonging to the American community to which she now belongs to. This event is eventually contrasted to her leaving behind presents she bought for her deceased father on the train. Because of this Ashima now creates a great sense of loss as well as

disconnection from her homeland, culture and family. For Gogol the train acts as a setting for which his most important relationships have been established in turn providing him with a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is then contrasted to the sense of disconnection and hurt he later experiences when he discovers the affair between his wife Moushimi and another man whilst on a train. The key motif of the train within *The Namesake* can be seen as a symbol for change and advancing.

This motif is also used to express how personal experiences and relationships can greatly affect a person's identity and in turn influence their sense of belonging or isolation. The use of juxtaposition throughout the novel *The Namesake* to contrast each character's sense of belonging. It is also used to emphasise the affect cultural traditions, migration, family and identity have on a person's sense of belonging. The American culture is greatly contrasted to the traditional Bengali culture to which the Ganguli's belong to. The two cultures are vastly different in many aspects of life including food, morals and family simply to name a few. The Ganguli's diaspora from Calcutta has resulted in their sense of disconnection and isolation from society as well as from their family back home. Their lifestyle back home within the Bengali culture has been greatly compared to the lifestyle which they now live in America.

Juxtaposition has also been used throughout the novel to contrast the different identities in which the characters have. It can be noticed that Ashoke has a rather strong sense of identity as does Sonia, however Ashima can be viewed as a person who is torn between two worlds whilst Gogol's identity is rather confused. From this it can be gathered that each character

identity shapes their sense of belonging and this is once again reiterated through the use of juxtaposition. By utilising literary techniques including intertextuality, motifs and juxtaposition Jhumpa Lahiri has successfully addressed issues such as cultural traditions, migration, family and identity while concurrently demonstrating how such issues play a major role on influencing a person's sense of belonging or not belonging. It is palpable to acknowledge the fact that personal experiences, relationships, time and cultural traditions play an important role in shaping a person's personal identity that can in turn influence a person's sense of belonging and in some cases not belonging. By using the previously mentioned literary techniques, Jhumpa Lahiri has effectively represented this idea in her award winning novel *The Namesake*.