



A Critical Study on the Existential Crisis present in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Literature is an explication of what it witnesses and observes in everyday life because every writer is a sensitive and gifted neurotic who cannot abandon the backdrop and inter-socio-cultural scenario that encircles him. Existentialism is defined as the theory that shows the relationship between existence and essence. Existentialists believe that existence takes precedence over essence; they also believe that human beings are totally free and are completely responsible for the choices they make as well as their actions. This article aims at tracing out the psychological impact of existential crises, reality, and cultural discrepancies on the protagonists of the novel *The Namesake*, especially examining the novel in the light of Existentialism.

Key terms used in the article

Existentialism, Nativeness, Culture, Tradition, Feminist, Illusion

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I. Introduction

JhumpaLahiri, the Putlizer Prize winner for the year 2000, is a significant writer of the Indian diaspora who has enriched international writing in English. She is one of the Indian American authors who are much admired as chroniclers of the Bengali immigrant experience. She is also a short-story writer whose works illuminate the immigrant experience, in particular that of East Indians. She was born to Bengali parents from Calcutta who moved to London and then to the United States, settling in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, when she was young. Though she started to write during her precollege school years, she did not embrace a writer's life until after she graduated (1989) with a B.A. in English literature from Barnard College, obtained three master's degrees in English, creative writing, and comparative literature and arts, and a doctorate in Renaissance studies from Boston University in the 1990s.

Lahiri published a number of short stories in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Harvard Review*, and *Story Quarterly*. She included some of those stories in her debut collection, "Interpreter of Maladies" (1999). The nine stories, some set in Calcutta and others on the U.S. East Coast, examine such subjects as the practise of arranged marriage, alienation, dislocation, and loss of culture and provide insight into the experiences of Indian immigrants as well as the lives of Calcuttans.

She published the novel *The Namesake* (2003), a story that examines themes such as personal identity and the conflicts produced by immigration by following the internal dynamics of a Bengali family in the United States. She published a collection of short stories, "Unaccustomed Earth" (2008), whose subject is the experience of immigration as well as that of assimilation into American culture. Her novel *The Lowland* (2013), narrates the diverse paths of two Bengali brothers. The tale was nominated for both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award and earned Lahiri the 2015 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, a prize established in 2010 by infrastructure developers DSC Limited to honour the achievements of South Asian writers and "raise awareness of South Asian culture around the world." Lahiri was presented the 2014 National Humanities Medal by U.S. President Barack Obama in 2015. She published her first book written in Italian, *Inaltre parole* (In

Other Words) in the same year, a meditation on her immersion in another culture and language. Lahiri continued writing in Italian, and in 2018 she released the novel *Dove mi trovo (Whereabouts)*. She translated the work into English, and during this time she also began translating Italian-language books by other authors. These experiences inspired the essay collection "Translating Myself and Others" (2022).

The aim of this article focuses on the emotional experiences, existential crisis and the sense of meaninglessness of the immigrant settler's life in the new land, especially in the light of Existential theory. Existentialism is defined as a philosophic stand point which gives priority to existence over essence. It also insists that philosophy should be connected with the individual's own life and experience. This research work explores the protagonists of the novel *The Namesake*, who face alienation, identity crises, meaninglessness, and existential crises in the new land.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Style

Jhumpa Lahiri mostly talks about the cultural clash and the question of the identity of human beings as a whole in her writing. She tries her best to describe some proper native characters living in India from her own perspective. Even though she was born and brought up in a foreign land, she is never rooted in her nativeness, which still exists in her blood, and that is something very significant about Diaspora writing in literature. Since Lahiri is either directly or indirectly interested in the experience of the diaspora, her works are essentially connected. For instance, one distinctive quality of her characters is the tension that they experience as a result of their alienation and displacement issues and the "sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and yet at the same time being an outsider to another creates" (Chakrabarti p.30). She talks about displacements as well as the uproot of the immigrants and their alienation from the foreign place, and she thinks that almost any American can connect to some degree to a family background of having come across some ocean, as it is with almost everyone once in life. Lahiri largely wishes to write about the human condition of the Indian diaspora in the USA. Lahiri presents the intricacy of her characters and to explore psychological complexities of human relationships, particularly those of a class of characters who live in the west but have parents born and raised in India.

The Namesake

The novel *The Namesake* is a vivid presentation of several issues and problems experienced by immigrants in new land. The story reflects how man becomes the victim of cultural discrepancies and disparities as he starts to establish himself in a new land. Consequently, identity crises, depression, and suffering push him back to the fine memories of his previous home. He becomes alienated and home-sick. Though he resists new values, he gradually tries to adopt himself. The story is focused on Gogol, the son of Ashima and Ashoke. The novel opens with Ashima Ganguli. She is a young bride to Ashoke who struggles through language and cultural barriers as well as her own fears as she delivers her first child alone.

Lahiri's experiences growing up as the child of immigrants resemble those of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. In the novel, Lahiri tells the story of how an Indian immigrant family lives in America, which has a different culture, and also shows that the first generation defends Indian culture but the second generation of Indian families prefer and assimilate the American culture. She also reflects on the Indian Diaspora and creates a narrative that reveals the concept of identity, existential crisis, angst, and cultural difference in the space of the Diaspora.

The novel also highlights the confusion, homesickness, and loneliness of the first-generation Indians in a foreign country. The title, *The Namesake*, reflects the struggle of Gogol Ganguly, who goes through it to identify with an unusual name. It also represents the experience of a very specific community that has no name. The novel centres on a couple and community of Bengali origin who immigrated to the USA for various reasons. They are the first and their children are second-generation South Asian immigrants, narrating the story of Ashok and Ashima Ganguly, Lahiri focused on the cultural dislocation of a family of immigrants from Calcutta who settle in Boston to study and work. This novel is also viewed from a postcolonial perspective by P.S. Ramana, a research scholar who asserts that "Novels like *The Namesake*, no doubt, bring out the hardships and tensions that immigrants undergo in their adopted homes in general and in the western countries in particular, yet they fail to draw attention to the marginalized position of the migrants in socio-political terms" (Ramana 51)

The novel moves quietly from the birth of a son to the death of a father. In her fiction, memory, nostalgia, loss, and longing are some of the prominent themes. Her works tell how people moved countries in the hope of a better life, but the past remains there as a shadow to remind them of their original roots. This novel is a documentary of such experiences, a glowing miniature of a tiny family making the voyage between two worlds.

Existential crisis

Existentialism is a set of philosophical outlooks developed in 20th-century France. It emerged as a philosophical and cultural movement that aimed to explain the complexities of human nature and its existence. The existentialist philosophy was popularised by Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, but having historical roots in the Danish theological philosopher Kierkegaard. It is a profoundly personal philosophy because the evidence of man's existence can be reached only through one's own personal experience. Existentialists concur that identity derives from the human psyche. Jean-Paul Sartre explains the principle of existence preceding essence in his "Existentialism and Humanism":

"If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself after already existing as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself this is the first principle of existentialism".

(Sartre, 1948, 28)

Existentialism is the affirmation of a subjective self by an individual while disobeying or challenging accepted customs, traditions, and so-called reason. This philosophy is about the search for meaning in life and is particularly concerned with the condition of men, their state of living, their freedom, their decisions in life, and finally the challenges that they face throughout their lives. Jacob in his book *In Search of Authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus* (1995) states that:

When people are confused as to their self-identity, a serious quest for genuine self can begin. When one is painfully conscious of the danger of abandoning one's self, a cry for authenticity is heard. Indeed, given the negative sense of the notion of authenticity, discussed above, and commonsense psychology, one might dare to put forward the following rule . . . The role of these existential predicaments explains the tendency of the philosophers of authenticity to engage in self-questioning and self-analysis; to probe the innermost layers of their selves and their turbulent lives. Continuous self-examination helps one to see that, to use Sartre's words, one is not what one is, and one is what one is not .. (Jacob 21)

The existential crisis also includes the inner conflicts and anxieties that accompany human responsibility, independence, freedom, issues of purpose and commitment. Jhumpa Lahiri examines a complex picture of Diaspora lives, *The Namesake*, reveal the alienated people suffering from existential angst - a persistent sensation of having lost one's sense of meaning and purpose in life - in a strange setting. The Gangulis in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* are facing existential crises that emerge mostly because they are immigrants, compromising with or adapting to a new culture, location, and ideologies. Ashoke being an immigrant of the 1960s, Gogol being an American of Indian origin, and Ashima having an unwished married life in a foreign land, all have faced the core questions regarding their belongingness.

All the family of Gangulis in the novel try to escape the reality of life, death, and ultimate nothingness and constantly try to make their lives happy. The reason behind Ashoke's willful choice of his own career and settlement in Boston is somehow related to his attempt to escape the memory of witnessing from so close range the thin and fragile borderline between life and death in a train accident while returning from a visit to his grandfather. By scheming to go abroad, he wants to escape the morbid, irrational, and paralysed but yet inevitable life that he literally faces for almost a year after the accident and Ashoke alone seems to be somewhat assimilated and balanced of the new circumstance after settling in the new land in comparing with other characters. As Judith Caesar's claim that, "Ashoke is the only character among the Indian- American characters of the novel who has found the balance in himself and is able to live comfortably in a foreign land" (118).

Ashima, on the other hand, is in a bind because she is a housewife and must remain at the mailman's visit because there are no letters from Calcutta" (*The Namesake*, 34). She is always in search of her real home. She is hesitant to raise her child in the new country, even after the birth of his son, and she persuades her husband to return to the native land as,

"What are you saying, Ashima?

I am saying hurry up and finish your degree, and then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time: I am saying I don't want raise Gogol alone in this country, It's not right, I want to go back" (*The Namesake*, 33).

Even after giving birth to her child, she feels a deep sense of loneliness and frustration, and later Ashima feels suddenly, horribly, and permanently alone after the death of her husband. Thus, alienation entangles over her and unable to adjust to the new social, physical, and cultural environment, Ashima always strives hard to maintain the traditional values that she has inherited. She never breaks the psychological restrictions imposed upon her by her elders as to yielding to the foreign culture and practises. She tries her best to uphold Bengali culture in an American environment. But her children, adopting the foreign culture and

practises, do make her different from them. They adopt a different lifestyle. Ashima remains confined to her practices and thoughts, leading to her alienation. This distinction of Ashima from American life makes her an existential character in the true sense of the term.

At the end, her make-believe home is also destroyed after her husband's death and then finally, she comes to the state of mind as "she decides to spend six months in India and six months in the States" (*The Namesake*, 275), only then does she understand the dilemma of being "everywhere but nowhere" in the world. Ashima directly addresses her pungent feelings in a foreign land: the feelings of alienation, culture shock, and homesickness. Gogol feels himself stranger and alien of his name in fourteenth birthday. He starts to hate his name and wishes to change the name and determined to assimilate new culture. Except for Gogol's sister, all the other Gangulis try to avoid the barrenness of their existence. They are afraid to face the reality of life, which is a constant compromise with life itself. Gogol had romances with a variety of ethnic women and detested the label of "American Born Confused Desi" (ABCD), but ironically, he married Moushumi, who further binds him to the ethnic identity he longs to lose.

Moushumi is another character in the novel who exemplifies existential issues; she shares the ethos of second-generation Bengali immigrants. She is a research scholar working on French feminist theory. Moushumi has a peculiar sense of alienation, as she neither opts for her parental Bengali identity nor fully belongs to American culture. Rather, she goes to a third language and culture in order to formulate her identity. She involves in wayward behaviour and sexual adventures in France. During her stay in France, she had affairs with men of different nationalities. Like Gogol, she also had failed love affairs with Graham and Dimitri.

The engagement with Graham breaks up due to the cultural difference, for Graham ridicules Bengali cultural traditions that he had witnessed during his visit to Calcutta in order to ask for her grandparent's blessings, "There was nothing to drink, Imagine dealing with fifty in laws without alcohol. I could not even hold her hand on the street without attracting stares" (*The Namesake*, 217). She comes to understand that he has fooled everyone including her, after the split, Moushumi gets married to Gogol, retreating from her previous vow "never to marry a Bengali man" (*The Namesake*, 213). Her marriage is an attempt to bridge the gap between two cultures; however, it ends as she is disposed to sexual anarchy even after her marriage.

Her relations with Dimitri Desjardins vandalise her marital life. She establishes relations with Dimitri only to assert her individuality, as she does not want to be controlled by any outward agency. "In retrospect, she saw that her sudden lack of inhibitions had intoxicated her more than any of the men had." (*The Namesake*, 215), she embodies existential traits. From the beginning, she does not belong either to the place of her birth, America, or to the place of her parents' origin, Bengal. Moushumi's suffering is due to her hedonistic lifestyle. The relationship between Gogol and Moushumi is void of love and mutual understanding; rather, Moushumi is disenchanted and distracted from her marital life.

II. Conclusion

This research article explores the existential crisis present in the novel *The Namesake*. It also illustrates several issues and problems experienced by immigrants on new land. Throughout the novel how man becomes the victim of cultural and emotional discrepancies as he starts to establish himself in a new land. Crisis begins when Gogol wishes to escape the fear of death by migrating to a foreign land, and his wife Ashima encounters outmost alienation in culture, food, and religion in a foreign land; their son Gogol experiences the ultimate indifferences of life while searching for the meaningfulness of his name and life. Gogol has gone through a series of anxious moments in his life; even then, he is not so desperate as to be unhappy with his life. Without allowing his heart to break or dwelling on his past experiences, he wishes to move forward, negating the absurdities of life. Moushumi also has a peculiar sense of alienation and an unstable and meaningless life. The novel is the best example for the existential crisis, it is perfectly projects the individual's plight, agony, alienation, isolation impact on the individuals in the new land.

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