

## Dual Identity and Estrangement in Diasporic Literature: A Psychological Analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

**Bidduth Kumar Dutta<sup>1\*</sup>**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English  
Prime University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

**Lamia Islam<sup>2</sup>**

MA in English  
Prime University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

### ABSTRACT

The concepts of cultural identification, alienation, and the dual nature of immigrant psychology are frequently examined in diasporic literature. Jhumpa Lahiri explores the complex lives of first- and second-generation immigrants in *The Namesake*, highlighting the challenges associated with assimilation, identity formation, and cultural displacement. This paper offers a psychological interpretation of the book, focusing on how the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, copes with an identity crisis. It applies psychoanalytic theories, such as Freud's concept of the "uncanny" and Erikson's theory of identity, to examine how names, cultural heritage, and societal expectations contribute to diasporic estrangement. The intergenerational conflicts between immigrant parents and their children are also explored in the study, with an emphasis on the psychological toll of navigating two different cultures. Lastly, this study provides insights into the challenges of cultural hybridity and the ongoing quest for self-definition in a globalized world by examining *The Namesake* through the lenses of psychological theory and diasporic literature.

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Psychological Estrangement, Dual Identity, The Uncanny, Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake, Immigrant Experience, Identity Crisis, Intergenerational Conflict*

### 1. Introduction

Immigrant experiences, particularly in diasporic communities, have long been explored in literature, shedding light on issues of identity, cultural dislocation, and psychological estrangement. Diasporic literature often explores the challenges faced by first- and second-generation immigrants as they strive to balance their cultural heritage with the expectations of their host country. *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri serves as a poignant representation of these themes, particularly through the journey of its protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, who grapples with a dual identity rooted in his Bengali heritage and American upbringing (Kumar, 2020). The novel illustrates the psychological turmoil of names, cultural hybridity, and intergenerational conflict that many immigrants face (Macwan, 2018). From a psychoanalytic standpoint, Freud's (1919) concept of the "uncanny" is particularly applicable to the experience of cultural estrangement. The uncanny, defined as something simultaneously familiar and strange, manifests in Gogol's discomfort with his name an identity marker that is neither fully Indian nor American (Freud, 1919). Furthermore, Erikson's (1968) identity

theory provides a framework for analyzing the adolescent and adult crises of second-generation immigrants, who frequently face conflicting expectations from their families and the broader society. This intersection of psychological theory and diasporic literature offers a compelling way to examine *The Namesake*.

Numerous scholars have examined the themes of identity crisis and cultural hybridity in Lahiri's work. Kumar (2020) highlights the profound cultural dissonance experienced by Ashima Ganguli, who feels isolated in the United States and longs for the familiarity of India. This sense of displacement extends to her son, Gogol, who feels ashamed and alienated because of his name and struggles to integrate into American culture. Similarly, Hemamalini (2019) discusses the cross-cultural struggles in *The Namesake*, emphasizing how Lahiri portrays the tension between tradition and assimilation, a recurring theme in diasporic narratives.

Further, Macwan (2018) examines the psychological impact of diaspora, noting that characters like Gogol experience identity fragmentation as they attempt to balance two cultural frameworks. Mohammed (2021) elaborates on this topic by employing W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of 'twoness,' which describes the constant negotiation between inherited traditions and contemporary Western influences. Freud's (1919) concept of the uncanny is also relevant, as Gogol's name causes psychological alienation, reminding him of his Bengali roots while also feeling foreign to his lived experience. Similarly, Erikson's (1968) notion of identity versus role confusion is particularly important, as Gogol's struggle with his name represents a broader search for self-definition.

Other scholars, such as Banerjee and Sharon (2021), have explored intergenerational conflicts in Lahiri's work, emphasizing the emotional toll on children of immigrants who feel torn between their parents' expectations and their own aspirations. Their study aligns with Rosyada's (2022) research on identity crises among second-generation Indian Americans, which highlights the psychological consequences of cultural duality, including alienation, confusion, and the struggle for intimacy. This body of literature focuses on the broader sociological and psychological aspects of identity negotiation in diasporic communities.

While earlier research has thoroughly examined the themes of cultural displacement and identity crises in *The Namesake*, it is still necessary to employ a comprehensive psychoanalytic framework for interpreting the protagonist's psychological issues. Although Freud's concept of the uncanny and Erikson's identity theory has been mentioned individually, a more integrated approach is required to fully grasp Gogol's identity crisis. Furthermore, while existing studies examine the impact of names and cultural markers on immigrant identity, there has been little emphasis on the long-term psychological effects of cultural hybridity and intergenerational conflict from a psychoanalytic standpoint. This study aims to close this gap by providing a nuanced psychological analysis of *The Namesake*, examining the interaction of alienation, dual identity, and self-definition through both literary and psychological perspectives.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs psychoanalytic theory and identity development models to analyze the psychological struggles of diasporic individuals in *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2003). Sigmund Freud's (1919) concept of the "uncanny" provides a crucial lens for understanding Gogol Ganguli's detachment from his name and cultural identity. The uncanny refers to the psychological discomfort experienced when something familiar becomes strange, a phenomenon evident in Gogol's aversion to his Bengali name, which simultaneously connects and alienates him from his heritage (Freud, 1919). Additionally, Erik Erikson's

(1968) psychosocial theory of identity development sheds light on Gogol's struggle with self-definition. Erikson's framework highlights the dilemma of identity versus role confusion, which is especially significant for second-generation immigrants who must navigate conflicting cultural norms. Gogol's attempts to redefine himself by changing his name and distancing himself from his Bengali roots exemplify the psychological turmoil of identity development in a diasporic setting (Erikson, 1968).

Furthermore, W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) concept of “double consciousness” adds to the analysis by emphasizing the psychological duality experienced by diasporic individuals. Du Bois highlights the internal turmoil that comes with belonging to two cultural worlds, which is reflected in Gogol's oscillation between his Indian origin and American upbringing. This theoretical framework integrates psychoanalytic, developmental, and sociocultural perspectives to provide a comprehensive description of the identity crisis and psychological estrangement in *The Namesake*.

### 3. Discussion and Findings

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* depicts the psychological challenges associated with dual identity, particularly through the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli. The novel clearly portrays the contradiction between his Indian heritage and American upbringing, resulting in an internal conflict that aligns with Erikson's (1968) concept of an identity crisis. Erikson posits that identity development is a critical process, especially during adolescence and early adulthood, when individuals must integrate their cultural background with their social experiences to develop a coherent sense of self. Gogol's journey symbolizes this conflict, as he is torn between his Bengali roots and the dominant American culture in which he was raised.

Gogol's name is a profound symbol of this identity crisis. He sees it as a symbol of his foreignness rather than an integral part of his identity. This emotion is reflected when he expresses frustration about the need to explain the origin of his name, stating that “he hates having to explain that his name is neither Indian nor American but, of all things, Russian” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 76). The act of rejecting his given name and then legally changing it to “Nikhil” illustrates his attempt to reconstruct his identity in a way that aligns with his Western surroundings. His discomfort with his name underscores his broader struggle to navigate his dual cultural existence, mirroring the experiences of many second-generation immigrants who feel torn between familial expectations and societal assimilation (Chatterjee, 2017).

Furthermore, Freud's (1919) theory of the “uncanny” offers a compelling lens through which to examine Gogol's sense of estrangement. The concept of the “uncanny” refers to the return of the repressed, in which something familiar but long forgotten reappears, triggering anxiety. In Gogol's case, his efforts to distance himself from his Bengali heritage by adopting an Americanized persona ultimately prove futile because his cultural background remains inextricably linked to him. This is particularly clear following the death of his father, Ashoke, which serves as a turning point in his perception of his heritage.

The loss compels him to re-evaluate his identity, prompting a reconnection with his Bengali roots. As Lahiri (2003) poignantly illustrates, “For the first time in his life, he realizes that his name is a link to his father, a gift rather than a burden” (p. 289). This moment represents the resolution of his internal battle, though it comes at the cost of severe mental distress. Finally, Lahiri's *The Namesake* addresses the psychological distress that accompanies dual identity, illustrating the dissonance felt by second-generation immigrants as they navigate different cultural influences. Gogol's journey of self-discovery, marked by rejection, estrangement, and finally acceptance, exemplifies the complicated and frequently cyclical nature of diasporic

identity formation. His struggles underscore the broader discourse on cultural hybridity and the emotional challenges associated with forging an authentic sense of self in a multicultural society (Bhabha, 1994).

### 3.1 The Role of Names in Identity Formation

Names serve as a key motif in *The Namesake*, representing the duality and fluidity of diaspora identity. Throughout the novel, Jhumpa Lahiri (2003) examines how names serve as both markers of cultural heritage and tools for self-definition, especially in the case of the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli. Gogol's dissatisfaction with his given name, as well as his eventual legal change to "Nikhil," reflects a psychological attempt to detach from his Indian heritage and assimilate into American culture. His dilemma mirrors the greater issues that second-generation immigrants face as they navigate the cultural expectations of their heritage and the societal conventions of their host nation.

Erikson (1968) defines identity development as negotiating the personal and societal dimensions of oneself, a process that is particularly challenging for people from immigrant backgrounds. According to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the formation of identity is crucial during adolescence and young adulthood, when individuals strive to integrate many parts of their experiences into a cohesive self-concept. Gogol's transition from "Gogol" to "Nikhil" demonstrates this negotiation, as he seeks to create an identity that conforms to his perceived societal expectations. By adopting the name "Nikhil," he seeks to have control over his self-presentation and escape the cultural baggage associated with his real name. However, this transformation does not provide him with the sense of belonging he seeks; rather, it leads to further fragmentation of his identity.

Lahiri (2003) poignantly illustrates this internal conflict, stating that "Nikhil evaporates at home, becomes a shadow" (p. 105). This passage emphasizes the ephemeral nature of Gogol's chosen identity, as his reinvention proves to be superficial rather than transformative. The name "Nikhil" helps him navigate American society more easily, but it does not provide him with true psychological fulfillment. Ultimately, Gogol's journey demonstrates that identity cannot be entirely formed through external affirmation or the mere adoption of a new name. His journey exemplifies the enduring power of cultural heritage and the complex process of self-discovery that many people in the diaspora must undergo.

### 3.2 Intergenerational Conflict and Psychological Estrangement

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* delves into profound psychological themes, particularly the intergenerational conflict between first-generation immigrants and their children. This tension stems from the disparate experiences of cultural assimilation and identity building. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, first-generation immigrants, maintain their Bengali heritage, while their children, Gogol and Sonia, struggle to reconcile their parents' customs with their American upbringing. This dynamic generates psychological estrangement as the younger generation navigates a dual identity, caught between their cultural inheritance and the pressures of assimilation into mainstream American society (Das, 2011). Lahiri (2003) encapsulates this experience through Ashima's reflection that "being a foreigner is a lifelong pregnancy, a perpetual wait, a constant burden" (p. 49). This metaphor vividly captures the existential limbo that immigrants face, emphasizing the persistent psychological strain that comes with belonging to two cultural worlds simultaneously.

Ashima's nostalgia and commitment to her Bengali heritage are shown in her home customs, which range from making traditional foods to maintaining close ties with other Bengali expatriates. She struggles to adjust to the American way of life, seeing her new surroundings as intrinsically alien and distant. On the other hand, as a second-generation immigrant, Gogol

views his parents' cultural preservation as restrictive, prompting him to oppose their expectations.

Scholars argue that such generational conflicts are common in diasporic literature, where the first generation prioritizes cultural continuity while the second generation seeks integration and acceptance in the host society (Bhattacharya, 2012). Gogol's name itself becomes symbolic of his internal struggle. Named after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, a decision influenced by his father's personal history, Gogol experiences a deep sense of dissonance regarding his identity, ultimately changing his name to Nikhil to assert his autonomy (Lahiri, 2003).

Gogol's romantic relationships reflect his psychological detachment. His association with Maxine represents his desire to fully embrace an American identity while distancing himself from his Bengali heritage. He embraces Maxine's rich, liberal lifestyle, which contrasts sharply with his background. However, as Lahiri (2003) notes, "his immersion in her family's world is seamless, effortless. Here he feels free of the obligation to say his name out loud" (p. 137). This moment depicts his brief escape from cultural dualism, but his subsequent realization of the impossibility of breaking ties with his roots exacerbates his internal conflict.

Later, Gogol's marriage to Moushumi, another Bengali American, offers an alternative way to reconcile identity. Unlike Gogol, Moushumi consciously resists traditional Bengali expectations, preferring an autonomous, cosmopolitan lifestyle. Her infidelity and eventual separation from the marriage demonstrate the limitations of shared cultural heritage as a compatibility factor. Lahiri (2003) poignantly observes, "he had assumed she understood him, that they were bound by their shared background. Instead, he finds himself more isolated than ever" (p. 250). This realization underscores the complex nature of diasporic identity, illustrating that cultural commonality does not necessarily equate to personal understanding or fulfillment (Chatterjee, 2014).

Ultimately, *The Namesake* portrays intergenerational turmoil and psychological estrangement as unavoidable aspects of the immigrant experience. Lahiri's subtle depiction of these contradictions echoes larger diasporic challenges, in which identity formation is a continuous, often painful balance between tradition and assimilation.

### 3.3 Cultural Hybridity and the Search for Self-Definition

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) is a compelling investigation of the psychological challenges involved in cultural hybridity, particularly as experienced by those of diasporic origin. The novel thoroughly depicts the difficulties between assimilation into a dominant society and preserving one's ethnic background, a dilemma that the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, faces throughout his life. Lahiri (2003) clearly portrays this internal conflict through Gogol's evolving relationship with his name a symbol of his identity that he initially rejects but later comes to embrace. One of the most moving scenes in the novel occurs when Gogol finally reads Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* after his father's death. In this instance, he considers the significance of his name from a fresh perspective: "Without his father's presence, it means something different now" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 291). This moment is an important turning point in his quest for self-definition, illustrating his transition from denial to the embrace of his cultural duality. Scholars have noted that identity formation in diasporic literature often involves a process of negotiation between inherited traditions and new cultural influences (Bhabha, 1994). In Gogol's case, his final acceptance of his name represents his reconciled identity, illustrating that self-definition occurs through the nuanced integration of multiple cultural experiences rather than the outright rejection of one's background.

## 4. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the diasporic experience, which is central to *The Namesake*, is deeply influenced by psychological struggles, including dual identity, estrangement, and intergenerational conflict. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Lahiri's narrative suggests that the process of identity formation in the immigrant context is not fixed but rather a continuous negotiation. Gogol Ganguli's name and his relationships serve as symbols of the psychological tensions between assimilation and heritage, highlighting the complex process of self-definition. His journey reflects the challenges of reconciling one's cultural background with the demands of a new environment. Gogol's eventual acceptance of his name and his identity signifies that identity is not about choosing between two distinct worlds, but about finding a balance that incorporates both cultural heritage and personal experiences. This highlights the idea that identity in the diasporic context is fluid, evolving, and shaped by an ongoing interaction between past and present influences.

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