

Names Forming and Deforming Identities: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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ABSTRACT:

The article studies the calamities the migrants face in western societies. It uses Frantz Fanon's ideas of psychoanalysis to critically read and examine Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. The novel narrates the events that occurred to an Indian family abroad for thirty-two years from 1968 to 2000. The cultural clashes a newly arrived couple from Calcutta, India encounter in Cambridge, America to the calamities their children later face are meticulously depicted in the story. Most of the novel's events revolve around Gogol Ganguli, who suffers from a duality of personality and develops double consciousness because of his Indian name. The study finds that although they distance themselves from their traditions and embrace the western culture, the migrants can not fully assimilate to the white culture and eventually develop identity crises.

Keywords: *The Namesake*, heritage, double consciousness, Fanon, migrants.

Introduction

Since Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is about immigration and cultural clashes, it is very natural that identity crisis and duality of personality are the most significant themes of the book. Identity issues are one of the most ubiquitous and reoccurring themes in postcolonial novels, particularly novels depicting migration and one's departure from their roots (Nurisyana 2017: 135). The immigrants' children are usually lost between two cultures as they are born in a white country like America or European countries, but their parents are from non-western societies. To cope with this reality, these children develop twoness of personality or in Fanonian terms, double consciousness; which indicates having two personalities and mindsets, i.e. wearing a white mask while they are out among the white people and removing it as soon as they are home in their familial atmosphere. However, this

is not as easy as it sounds and very often leads to a chaotic state of mind and a shattered sense of self. The characters lose their sense of belonging and in turn suffer a great deal of anguish. This sense of non-belongingness and double consciousness is originally brought about by colonization and the differences between the colonizers and their colonies, or the torturer and the tortured (Burman 2016: 265).

In *The Namesake*, although Gogol and Sonia are born in America and have received American education, they still suffer from cultural clashes and develop identity crises. Being born in America makes them forget about their Indian roots and their tendency to embrace the American culture is more powerful than their willingness to observe their parents' nationality (Jindal). Moreover, being American sounds more prestigious to their ears and seems to give them the freedom they have long wanted to experience. Though they do not despise their Indian heritage, they tend to rid themselves of it as it seems to restrict their freedom and stands in their way of becoming wholly American. In other words, they are ready to desert their original culture completely to be validated and accepted as equals in the white culture. Therefore, Sonia denies her parents' identity and stands herself as American and Gogol changes his name to Nikhil to be more American (Král 2013: 93). The protagonist (Gogol's) struggle to come to terms with his original name is a perfect example of what Frantz Fanon refers to as wearing a white mask or looking at one's self through the gaze of others (Fanon). The present article examines the identity crisis in *The Namesake* in the light of Fanon's theory of double consciousness and finds that names are of great significance in forming and deforming the identity of individuals.

The research problem

The main problem that this research addresses is how migration and leaving one's homeland and heritage would lead to identity issues and tortuous life.

The significance of the study

The research demonstrates that naming is extremely significant in the formation of the identity of individuals and they inevitably define them.

The research objectives

Through reading Fanon's theory of double consciousness, the article studies the consequences of having a non-English name in a western country.

The research question

The research aims to answer how the migrants cope with their new life in foreign countries and how likely they are to win white approval by wearing a white mask.

Methodology

The study uses Frantz Fanon's ideas of psychoanalysis and applies them to the incidents that occur in the lives of the main characters in the novel. Fanon uses the term double consciousness to refer to the duality of personality that the migrants and black people face in white societies. Black people in white societies are mandated to wear a white mask to conceal their true identities and to appear as white people. In the novel, Gogol changes his name to Nikhil to seem more American and thus develops double consciousness. The term double consciousness was first coined by William Du Bois. De Bois, an American sociologist, civil rights activist, author, and historian, in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), introduced the term double consciousness to the political and social arena. The term denotes the internal struggle that black Americans undergo on daily basis; the twoness of personality and/or duality the Afro-Americans encounter in America because of their color and lack of likeliness to the white people. The racial segregation and constant oppression of black people in America incline them to disvalue themselves and succumb to the white dominant culture (Salama and Alqadi 2022: 31). Very similar to Du Bois' elucidation of the struggles of the colored people in America, Frantz Fanon also elaborates upon double consciousness. After five decades of Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folks* (1903), Fanon published his first major book, *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952, which contains very identical ideas to Du Bois' theories.

Literature review

The cultural clash and the crisis of identity in *The Namesake* have been the topic of several scholarly articles, most of which seem to focus on the generational gap between the first and second-generation members of the Indian migrants in America. Munos states that cultural inheritance to American-born descendants of Indian immigrants, like Gogol, are composite and not as purely Indian as that of their parents, which distances the children farther from their parents and eventually leads to internal outbursts in the Indian families, who want their children to stick tight to their Indian heritage. Ilyas and Afzal claim that *The Namesake* is a diasporic immigrant fiction of an Indian family who traverses between acculturation and deculturation. The characters and events of the novel oscillate between two extremely different cultures, neither Indian nor American culture can shape the identity of these people as they keep shifting.

On the other hand, Nagaraju and Rajkumar approach the novel from a feminist perspective and claim that Ashima's tolerance of American culture is another example of Indian English fiction that invariably works to depict women as silent sufferer and upholder of the family tradition. Ashima, being the first generation immigrant and

a woman, carries huge respect for their Idinan heritage and always remembers and obeys the words of their family elders in India. Although her name ‘Ashima’ means ‘free or without borders’, she abides by the rules of her family and performs the role of a homemaker. Ashima is overwhelmed by the sense of isolation she experiences in America and she misses home, family and Indian food, yet she remains true to the role assigned to her as a daughter, granddaughter, wife, and mother. Nurpermadi conducts a qualitative and sociological study of *The Namesake* and after a structural analysis of the text concludes that the plot, characters, point of view, style, and setting form the unity of a good qualitative novel. In terms of the sociological study, the research finds that the first-generation Indian immigrants in America prefer to use Indian culture, but the second-generation immigrants prefer American culture. This present article examines *The Namesake* from a psychoanalytic perspective and scrutinizes the causes of the migrants’ calamities through conducting a Fanonian reading of the story.

Names forming and deforming identities: A psychoanalytic approach to Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*

Being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding (Lahiri 2003: 48).

The novel opens with Ashima’s pregnancy, which symbolically represents the adversities of being black and a foreigner and the inevitable alienation the immigrants and their children encounter in the West. In Lahiri’s own words, being a foreigner is “*a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts and a perpetual wait*”. She aesthetically compares the mental state of the foreigners to a pregnant woman who is carrying a heavy burden inside her belly and waits for its release. Like pregnant women, foreigners are always waiting for a chance to be accepted and seen as equals in white societies. One of the most difficult moments in Ashima’s life, since she has arrived in Boston, is her pregnancy because she regrets not being surrounded by her mother and family when her first child is born (Kacprowska 2014: 42). She does feel out of sorts in the hospital as she is the only Indian woman and all around her are Americans. Besides, she is worried about the future and preoccupied with the fact that she has to raise her son alone without the help of her mother in a foreign country; “*a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little and where life seems so tentative and spare*” (Lahiri 2003: 10).

Although English had been her subject and she used to help her neighbors learn the English language, now she realizes even the English she speaks is different from the English spoken in America. When Patty, the attending nurse, asks them which gender they like for their baby, Ashima replies “*as long as there are ten finger and ten toe*”, they would be grateful. The nurse smiles and Ashima immediately realizes that she has made a mistake “*ten finger and ten toe*” must have been “*ten fingers and ten toes*”, but in Bengali, Ashima says “*a finger can also mean fingers and a toe toes*” (Lahiri 2003: 11). This error pains her almost as much as her last contraction.

In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon claims that black people in western societies are locked in a suffocating reification. Reification is the act of changing something abstract into something real, i.e. the black people want to change the wrong perceptions of the white people about them. They appeal to the white people to smooth their rough gazes, accept them as equal Beings, and take them out of the world and put them back in their world. However, as they get to the other slope, they stumble and the Other fixes them with their gaze, their gestures and attitude, the same way one fixes a preparation with a dye. At this stage, the black objects lose their temper and demand an explanation, but as they can not do anything, their fragments are put together and they are made according to the white man’s wishes. As long as the black man remains in his home territory, Fanon claims, they will not have to experience their being for others. There is actually a ‘being for others’ that the black man experiences, which does not have any ontological bases and is falsely imagined in the white man’s gaze (Fanon 1952: 89).

Experiencing this being for others and since she realizes that she cannot alter the white people’s perception of her, after the baby is born, Ashima’s inside is empty but her outside is still misshapen and she is constantly preoccupied with the fear of raising a child alone in this foreign country. She perpetually asks Ashoke to finish his studies soon in order for them to return to India. “*I’m saying hurry up and finish your degree... I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right. I want to go back*” (Lahiri 2003: 33). Fanon refers to this psychological dilemma that Ashima is experiencing and claims that blackness is the main reason for the imprisonment of black people in the white society. While describing the experience of the Antilleans, Fanon asserts that the black Antillean is a “*prisoner on his island, lost in an atmosphere without the slightest prospect*” (Hilton 2011: 50). These groups of black people in Antilles are surrounded by their white colonizers on one hand, and the lighter-skinned blacks of themselves, on the other hand. Therefore, they think they are out of place and completely isolated on the island. Similarly, Ashima and

Ashoke, since they are foreigners in the country and come from different backgrounds, everything seems strange to them and they cannot form a part of the American culture, in which they are living now.

As their son, Gogol grows to an adolescent, he develops a strong hatred for his name and does not feel happy or secure about it. His name commences to alienate him in society, from which he desperately needs to form a part. The older he gets the more disappointed and less confident he becomes. He hates questions pertaining to his name and cannot stand having to explain it constantly. He shuns every activity that requires students' names and does not even sign his name at the bottom of his drawings in the class. He thinks that his name has nothing to do with his personality and the way he thinks or behaves. Very often he wishes that he could disguise himself and/or shorten it in some ways to be accepted in the white community and attain similar opportunities as those of his American friends:

He's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to wear a nametag on his sweater at Model United Nations Day at school. He even hates signing his name at the bottom of his drawings in art class. He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is (Lahiri 2003: 67).

This desire for disguising is what Fanon means by wearing a mask. In the dominant culture, Fanon claims, the non-dominant people are forced to disguise themselves and hide as many aspects of their personality as possible in order to be validated by their white peers. The colonized are thus shaped by the dominant culture and the dominant ideologies. The psychological inferiority that the colonized feel, Fanon claims, grows in size as they keep thinking about it and begins to paralyze their thoughts and logic (Karadag 2006: 1467). Because of his name, Gogol does not attend any social gatherings; such as dance groups or parties and he suffers a few crushes quietly. One day a girl in the schoolyard gets close to him and introduces herself as Kim, but Gogol, although he has been watching her moves recently and genuinely desires her, is reluctant to introduce himself because of the peculiarity of his name. "*Aren't you going to introduce yourself to me?*" Kim asks. "*Oh,*" he says. "*Yeah.*" But he doesn't want to tell Kim his name" (Lahiri 2003: 82).

To save himself from the inevitable humiliation and not lose the chance of befriending Kim, Gogol thinks of the other name, the one that his parents wanted to give him as a good name and sounds more English, in Bengali tradition everyone has two names; a pet name for his family and close ones, and a good name for formal reference. He

tells Kim “*I’m Nikhil*”. To Gogol’s astonishment, Kim accepts the name and says: “*Nikhil! That’s a lovely name*” (Lahiri 2003: 82,83). This is a triumphant moment in Gogol’s life and his self-esteem increases as he thinks that he is being protected by an “invisible shield”, which is the name “Nikhil”. Gogol is now having another character, which is completely different from the one he has within his family; he thinks and acts like his American friends, and kisses Kim and spends the entire afternoon with her. Later when he reports this incident to his friend, he is stunned and exclaims “*I can’t believe you kissed her, Gogol!*” (Lahiri 2003: 83). Gogol wanted to say that it was not him, it was Nikhil who kissed her but he could not. “*He doesn’t tell them that it hadn’t been Gogol who’d kissed Kim. That Gogol had had nothing to do with it*” (ibid).

As long as one can conceal his non-white origin and take in the white customs and traditions, they will not face many difficulties in their daily interaction with the whites. The extent to which the colonized and the black people are accepted is dependent on how far they distance themselves from their original culture. As Tuck and Yang explain, it is a form of internal colonialism where unstable identity causes marginalized people to distance themselves from their indigenous ancestry. In this type of Colonialism, an influence of control, including minoritizing, is implemented in order for white elitism to ensue (Tuck and Yang, as cited in, Garcia-Olp 2018: 26). From this day on, Gogol considers changing his name formally to break the shackles the Indian name has brought with itself.

Despite his parents’ refusal Gogol prepares all the required documents to change his name and he feels an air of triumph as he begins the process. He compares the change to a recovery from a chronic disease, a weight loss for a fat person, and a prisoner who has been granted freedom. He is exuberant about the entire process and wants to tell everyone that his name is Nikhil. For the first time in his life, he does not hesitate to fill in the forms for various club memberships and he is genuinely enthusiastic about his driver’s license, which says the name is “Nikhil” not “Gogol”(Lahiri 2003: 88). Fanon claims that since blackness is related to vice and whiteness to virtue, there is only one destination that black people desire to achieve, which is to be white. “*As I begin to recognise that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro*” (Fanon 1952: 189). Now that Gogol is getting close to that purpose (detaching himself from his Indian or black heritage by changing his name), he is overwhelmed with joy and very triumphantly commences the process.

Nikhil gives Gogol the freedom he has been yearning for and he indulges himself in all the gratifications the seemingly English name seems to provide him. He lives in a new state, has a new telephone

number, eats his meals with other students, and even shares the bathroom with other students. However, living a luxurious life of Nikhil means ignoring his parent's advice and getting rid of their Indian heritage as these two conflicting cultures always cancel each other out, and for Gogol to live the American life, he has to distance himself from the Indian culture. "*Now that he's Nikhil, it's easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and please*" (Lahiri 2003: 90). However, as Gogol moves forward and embraces the opportunities that Nikhil seems to give him, he realizes that the shift is not as easy and natural as he hoped. People who know him as Nikhil do not have any ideas about Gogol and are only familiar with his present character. Sometimes, he feels lost and puzzled between Gogol and Nikhil, the two months that he has been living as Nikhil cannot replace the eighteen years of Gogol. He feels as if he is acting and playing the role of twins, who are very similar from the outside but are fundamentally different in personality (Lahiri 2003: 91).

The situation becomes more startling when those who normally call him Gogol refer to him as Nikhil. For example, when his parents call his friends' houses and ask about him they refer to their son as Nikhil. Although he himself has asked them to do this precisely, it troubles him and alienates him from his family, he feels that he is not related to them. Stranger even is the circumstance when, in front of his friends, one of his parents speaks with him in English, and the other addresses him in Bengali and calls him Gogol. Ashoke says "*Nikhil, show us the buildings where you have your classes*" (Lahiri 2003:91), but Ashima slips and says: "*Gogol, have you decided yet what your major will be?*" (ibid). This troubles Gogol and he feels hopeless and helpless in the mess that he himself has made. His character keeps shifting as he changes names and places; when he is at home "*Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again*" (ibid), yet he cannot blame anyone except himself. Fanon claims that this loss and unstable identity is a natural and inevitable consequence when the colonized forsake their own culture and desperately seek the approval of the west (Fanon 1961: 313).

Nikhil forsakes all the Indian traditions, masters the language very well, and plans to make a family with an American girl, however, he is not yet seen as a complete American. One day Maxine's family goes on a vacation and they take Nikhil and Maxine with them. While they are sunbathing, Nikhil is worried that he may get sick and wants to leave the seashore, at that point Pamela, who is Maxine's neighbor and is present with them on the vacation remarks: "*But you're Indian, I'd think the climate wouldn't affect you, given your heritage*" (Lahiri 2003: 134). Maxine's mother, Lydia corrects Pamela and says: "*Pamela, Nick's American, he was born here*"(ibid). She wants to

rescue Gogol from Pamela's mischievous observations, however, she does not seem to be sure yet and turns to Gogol and asks him "*weren't you Nikhil?*" (Lahiri 2003: 134). Gogol could see through Lydia's expression that after all these months, she herself isn't sure about Nikhil's Americanness. At that point, he realizes that his efforts are all in vain and no matter how far he distances himself from Gogol and his Indian heritage, white people only see him as Gogol, which is a result of color prejudice and the racist policies of the western societies.

Nikhil then befriends Moushumi, an Indian American girl and together they plan to marry and therefore they often go out together. One day, while in a restaurant they are disgusted that the waiter does not look at them when he explains the menu; "*It annoys Moushumi that the waiter, perfectly attentive, looks neither of them in the eye as he describes the menu, speaking instead to the bottle of mineral water positioned between them*" (Lahiri 2003: 212). However, it is not the first time, Moushumi feels this disappointment, a few weeks ago something similar happened, while she was sitting in the chair of an expensive hair salon, she walked out after the apron had been tied behind her neck because the stylist had gone to check on another client, who was American. In these circumstances, Nikhil calms Moushumi down and tells her it is about the personality of these people they have happened to encounter and it is not because of their Indian heritage or character. Nevertheless, Moushumi does not feel secure with Nikhil and believes that if she can be with a white man these worries will vanish and she would live the life that she wants, as American as possible. She leaves Nikhil and befriends Graham, who is their friend and Moushumi and he have been together since high school.

Fanon theorizes this, interracial sexuality or interracial union, in the second and third chapters of his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, and he explains its motivations and effects. Interracial desire, in Fanon's perception, is "*a form of self-destruction in the desire to be white or to elevate one's social, political, and cultural status in proximity to whiteness*" (Fanon 2019: 80). Fanon states that interracial sexuality (exclusively heterosexual) is fundamentally pathological; the black woman, like Moushumi, who desires a white man falsely believes that his body is a bridge to wealth and validation. Similarly, a black man who wants to be with a white woman suffers under the delusion of what her body offers: purity and innocence. Fanon expresses this delusion clearly in the voice of a black man: "*A white woman, by loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble world that leads to total realization*" (Fanon 1952: 81).

As Moushumi leaves him, Nikhil comes back to his mother's house, who after living in America for nearly three decades feels that she is new to the place and considers making some changes in her life. Firstly, she contemplates leaving the place and going back to India for good, yet as she weighs the pros and cons of the process she is reluctant as life in India is harder economically and socially. Eventually, she decides to spend half of her life in America, as it provides her the economical freedom, and the other half in India, which offers her some psychological relief. "*Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States*" (Lahiri 2003: 231). However, when the time comes she feels overwhelmed by the move that she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. She feels both impatient and indifferent for all the days she still must live. "*For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked*" (Lahiri 2003: 233). This state of in-betweenness is one of the prominent features of postcolonial studies and most of the scholars have referred to it; the postcolonial theorists claim that once the colonized and their younger generations are uprooted from their homes, they can never find their true home elsewhere, nor can they return to their main lands and start life anew (Sajed 2010: 363).

Gogol, on the other hand, had been trying to correct the error all his life in America, the error of being called Gogol randomly and he was trying to fully reinvent himself, although all in vain. The pet name Gogol, which had been accidentally chosen for him, has been defining and distressing him for so many years, and though he had worked so hard to break from the mismatched name he could not. His marriage with Moushumi had been another misstep that he genuinely regrets. However, given a full perception of the situation and applying Fanon's ideas, it is crystal clear that the struggles Gogol and his mother have been facing in America are not solely because of their names, it is rather the heritage, culture and the non-Americanness that bring about the chaotic state of mind and the unstable mood of the characters (Chika 2018: 50).

Conclusion

Issues of identity are very easily found among the immigrants who have left their country and their children who are constantly experiencing the state of finding identities. They are hesitant about which part or nationality they must claim; their parents' origin or the culture where they were born and raised. This phenomenon usually leads to forming of two identities or double consciousness. Double consciousness is a means through which the immigrants and their children attempt to find a place for themselves within their host

country, (i.e., the white and their own culture). However, the process is arduous and requires them to change many aspects of their lives and wear a number of masks. In the story, Gogol begins to gradually suspend the Indian culture and as he dives deeper, he realizes that he would have to constantly adjust himself to his surrounding. Not only this, he must negotiate within his own self to shift on cultural and social demands. The first step is when he decides to change his name from Gogol to Nikhil and considers the circumstances where he would be called Gogol or Nikhil. Gogol is used when he is among his family and Indian friends, whereas Nikhil is for outside use and with non-Indian people. However, the shift from Gogol to Nikhil or vice versa does not happen naturally and Gogol starts to have inner conflicts to find his true self. Nikhil seems to give him some freedom and some room within American society, yet he cannot completely rid himself of Gogol. Thus, Gogol becomes his self and Nikhil his other self, but as for his true self, he is not able to decide, which ultimately brings about low self-esteem.

However, it is not only the name that Gogol constantly shifts, he is also obliged to perpetually compare the two cultures and decide which one suits him better. While among his American friends, Gogol is concerned about the way he eats and talks and he does not know how to express his affection towards the girls he seems to be interested in. Gogol and his sister, Sonia have developed this twoness or duality of character as they are second-generation immigrants. Unlike his mother, Ashima who still considers herself a foreigner, Gogol calls America home and is proud of his Americanness but he simultaneously maintains some aspects of his Indian culture. When his father dies, Gogol seems to be more accepting of the Indian culture and is eventually able to reconcile with his parent's heritage. For Ashima one plus one does not equal two, as the two conflicting cultures kept canceling each other out, but for Gogol one plus one is two and eventually, he decides to live through both cultures and names, albeit with difficulties and wearing the white mask for the times he is Nikhil and removing it when he is Gogol.

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المستخلص

يتناول البحث المصائب التي يواجهها المهاجرون في المجتمعات الغربية، وقد استعمل أفكار التحليل النفسي لفرانتز فانون لقراءة وفحص رواية جومبا لاهيري "The Namesake"، "الاسم" بشكل نقدي. تروي الرواية الأحداث التي حدثت لعائلة هندية في الخارج لمدة اثنين وثلاثين عامًا من عام ١٩٦٨ إلى عام ٢٠٠٠. وقد تم تصوير المصادمات الثقافية التي يواجهها الزوجان اللذان وصلا حديثًا من كلكتا بالهند إلى كامبريدج بأمريكا إلى المصائب التي يواجهها أطفالهما لاحقًا بدقة في قصة تدور معظم أحداثها حول Gogol Ganguli ، الذي يعاني من ازدواجية في الشخصية ويطور وعيًا مزدوجًا بسبب اسمه الهندي. و توصلت الدراسة إلى أنه على الرغم من إبعادهم عن تقاليدهم واحتضانهم للثقافة الغربية ، فإنهم لا يستطيعون استيعاب الثقافة البيضاء بشكل كامل وبالتالي تطوير أزمات الهوية في نهاية المطاف.