

IDENTITY CRISIS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'THE NAMESAKE' AND V.S. NAIPAUL'S 'A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS'

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Abstract: Since the dawn of human civilization, the urge and the longing of human beings for 'Identity' is unique. The efforts made by each person lead to the goal of 'Identity.' Without identity, a human being is nothing. In order to ascertain one's own identity here on the earth, human beings prefer different mediums such as name, house, fame, property, popularity, etc. Of all these elements, 'Name' and 'House' have an effective part to instill the sense of identity among people. Jhumpa Lahiri has said, "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." Lahiri, not only speaks of her elements of Identity Crisis faced by the people who migrate from the native land to other country, but also of all people in general. V. S. Naipaul's outstanding novel, 'A House for Mr. Biswas,' taking the most common thing 'House' as a medium, brings us the concept 'Identity.' 'Naming a child' is the first and foremost task that the parents of a child consider with utmost interest. A person's identity has direct relevance to the name how the person being used to address by others. It is inconceivable to think of people of this world without names. Attaching the autobiographical elements of their personal lives, the two writers have presented this concept in an excellent way. Through this paper, I present the issue of Identity Crisis making use of characters and situations of the selected novels of Jhumpa Lahiri and V. S. Naipaul in the most comprehensive manner

Keywords: Identity crisis, Longing for independence, Quest for identity, Social Content.

Introduction: The psychological term 'Identity Crisis' is defined as 'a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. Ericson, a German born psychologist and psychoanalyst known for his theory on 'psychological development of human beings,' coined the term. Identity develops through experiences of the crisis and contradictions which every individual had to overcome, in order to rise to the next development phase.

The question of identity has remained a source of conflicts and has led to wars in history. The search for and discovery of identity has been a recurrent journey throughout humanity's history, defined and explored in literary works. Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer prize winner for her debut short story collection 'Interpreter of Maladies' in 2000, in her novel 'The Namesake' illustrates this humanity's pursuit of self. The novel explores the dilemma of name and immigrant's sense of identity and belongingness through the characters- Ashima, Gogol, Ashok and Sonia.

Identity Crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake':

JhumpaLahiri: Lahiri, an Indian American author, was born in London on July 11, 1969. She is the daughter of Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was two. The present novel 'The Namesake' definitely has some autobiographical elements. Lahiri expresses all her feelings of 'identity crisis,' 'trauma' and 'longing for the homeland' through Gogol, the central character of the novel. The novel is a representation of immigrants' lives who feel displaced and homesick, floating in an anonymous land, far away from home. The vital question for them is that of identity and their ongoing quest for it.

Elements of Identity Crisis: The novel narrates the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into American culture, the cultural dilemmas experienced by them, and their American born children in different ways; the special, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle 'home' in the new land.

The identities of diaspora individuals and communities can neither be placed only in relation to some homeland to which they all long to return nor to that country alone where they settle down in. The main characters of this novel face the crisis of hybrid

or dual identity, which makes their existence all the more difficult.

The novel talks about the journey of an Indian woman Ashima, the central character of the narrative, who moves from India to America after her marriage and in the process, suffers a lot by missing her country every now and then. She belongs to a traditional Hindu Brahmin family which lives in Calcutta. In fact, the novel opens with the agony of Ashima, in her advanced stage of pregnancy, feeling miserable to be away from the family members.

.....But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she has arrived in Cambridge, nothing has left normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: Motherhood in a foreign land...It was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved.

The question of identity is a very difficult one. AshimaGanguly was born and bred in India and had been to America after her marriage. She feels that living in a foreign land is like a lifelong pregnancy. She tries to settle in and adjust herself to her surroundings, but she feels strange and lost in this country and spends hours remembering her parents and family, and reading the same five Bengali novels time and again. While waiting for the child to be born, she relives the past until the point of her departure for Boston.

Lahiri says, 'The names we have, there is so much about them: who are we and they are the one world that exists that represents us. And yet we don't choose them. These are from our parents.' Lahiri expresses this aspect through 'Gogol' who has two names -one for family and the other for others. In fact, Gogol spends much of his time in his teenage thinking of his name. He wants to escape from being called 'Gogol.' This is another aspect of identity crisis. Gogol thinks that his identity lies with the name he likes much. As a child he did not oppose anybody calling him 'Gogol,' but quite contrastingly, in his teenage, he did not like anybody calling him with the same name 'Gogol' as he wanted to be called 'Nikhil.' The incident at kindergarten school brings to our notice how Gogol wanted to be called by other people in his childhood. Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis which she herself has faced acutely. She contradicts the idiom "What's in a name?" Rather she is obsessed with 'it's everything that matters in a

name.' The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of his identity.

Gogol looks down at his sneakers. The way the principal pronounces his new name is different from the way his parents say it, the second part of it longer, sounding like "heel."

"No, no, it's not a middle name" Ashoke says. He is beginning to lose patience. "He has no middle name. No nickname. The boy's good name, his school name, is Nikhil."

Mrs. Lapidus asks, "Are you happy to be entering elementary school, Gogol?" "My parents want me to have another name in school." "And what about you, Gogol? Do you want to be called by another name?" He nods. "Yes." "Then it's settled."

Gogol's conversation with his suitemates, Brandon and Jonathan, both of whom had been notified by mail, reveals us another aspect of the identity that is tied to the name 'Nikhil'.

"Is Gogol your first name or your last?" Brandon wants to know. Normally that question agitates him. But today he has a new answer. "Actually, that's my middle name," Gogol says by way of explanation, sitting with them in the common room to their suite. "Nikhil is my first name. It got left out for some reason."

Eventually, Gogol refers back to his name to find his identity, a name he shirked since adolescence because of its hated oddity. Because of the peculiar link between his name and his father's salvation, he discovers a sense of identity in his namesake, and a connection to his father, his father's past, and indirectly, his own past, through the survival of his father. This correlation is an embodiment of Ashoke's immigration and acculturation to America, because when Gogol asks his father, "Do I remind you of that night?" Ashok answers, "Not at all," his father says eventually, one hand going to his ribs, a habitual gesture that has baffled Gogol until now. "You remind me of everything that followed" says Ashoke.

Of the eight main identity crises- five in the childhood and youth ages, and three in the adulthood, the two aspects namely 'identity-role of confusion' and 'identity-isolation' are much evident in the novel. In connection with Gogol and Sonia we have many incidents with regard to the aspect of Ericson 'identity-role of confusion.' Ashima is an apt character for the second aspect of Ericson 'identity-isolation.' Ashima's longing for her family, native place and native country supplement this aspect.

Sonia, Gogol's sister, completely assimilates into American culture with ease, while Ashima's forbearance against the same culture is meticulously sustained until the end of the novel.

The quest for identity as an incessantly altering world is a daunting task for the immigrant. Lahiri has explored in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death, dying and love. She has tried to answer all these questions in Indians at heart, having familial ties, bonds that last long than all the physical relations they build around themselves.

V.S. Naipaul's 'A House for Mr. Biswas'

Elements of Identity Crisis: Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is highly acclaimed in the history of the postcolonial Indian Diasporic literature. Though the question of identity is not new, and much work has been done on this theme of identity but still a few very important strands of identity are still untouched. **'House' as a Symbol of Identity:** In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the story is portrayed through a series of homes which symbolize Mr. Biswas's personal identity. Mohun Biswas continually meets obstacles and challenges and even failures in his endeavors. His life is difficult and traumatic from the very beginning. After his father drowns, Mohun and his family are forced to live with wealthy relatives. This again emphasizes the theme of loss of freedom and humiliation. It should also be taken into account that the society and culture in which the novel takes place is a much big issue of caste and class-consciousness. Mr. Biswas never has an opportunity to develop a sense of self. He finds himself in situations that made him feel powerless. He is always in situations where he is having people tell him what to do. He never has any personal power. Mr. Biswas realizes that with money and possession a person tends to have more power in society. In fact, a house is a symbol of which illustrates his ability to realize a self identity and gain personal power to take control of his personal life.

Although Mr. Biswas is an ordinary man with no outstanding features, Naipaul succeeds in giving him a heroic status. He is in many ways an archetypal figure in that he embodies a universal theme - the

search for identity and meaning in life. Mr. Biswas fights to maintain his independence and feels confident that life will eventually yield to him its sweetness and romance. The effort to achieve the ownership of the house, reflected in the very little of the novel becomes his passion and motive of life. The element of vulnerability and lack of certainty helps to make Mr. Biswas into a human and sympathetic person as well as a kind of everyman whose identity crisis is never ending story.

During his forty-six short years, Mr. Biswas has always struggled to seek and define his sense of self but to no avail. 'A House for Mr. Biswas' masterfully evokes a man's quest of autonomy against the backdrop of postcolonial Trinidad. Mr. Biswas is no comic buffoon. Despite being buffeted by economic, social and cultural forces, he tries to emerge from the trauma of life. He explains his words to his son during the breakdown of Green Vale when Anand asks him in a bewildered way, "Who are you?" Mr. Biswas replies:-

"I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know."

Mr. Biswas made repeated attempts to build a house - a place which gives solace, comfort and satisfaction to the dweller. In the book the house also symbolizes status and property. It is somewhat sign of success. The house symbolizes the aspirations, sweet desires and it is related with Mohun Biswas' future prospects which keep him alive till his death.

Conclusion: The novel, 'The Namesake' deals with the clashes between the two different worlds that Ganguli family simultaneously inhabits. The quest for identity is an incessantly altering world is a daunting task for the immigrant. Lahiri has explored in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death, dying and love. She has tried to answer all these questions in Indians at heart, having familial ties, bonds that last long than all the physical relations they build around themselves. The novel, 'A House for Mr. Biswas' mirrors how an individual fights relentlessly to have his own identity in the society.

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