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## Existential Angst and Diasporic Ambience in Jhumpa Lahiri's the Interpreter of Maladies and the Namesake

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### **Abstract**

This research paper examines the philosophy of Existentialism and Diasporic challenges in the streak of post-modern era of Indian English Literature. Literature is an elucidation of what it witnesses, confronts or observes in everyday's life because every author is a sensitive and gifted neurotic who cannot discard the backdrop and inter socio-cultural scenario encircles him. Indian English Literature is indeed a juxtaposition of all such psychological experiences wore by numerous continental authors since it began after the rise or advent of reason and rationality in the lives of common man that brought identity crisis and many psychological maladies

to him. In consequences, Existential writing became an outlet for the psychological assertions and accumulations. This present research paper natters only an impound period of Indian English literature; especially the period of Post-Modern Indian English novel and more specifically the writing of Jhumpa Lahiri. Her two huge accomplishments *The Interpreter of Maladies* (Pub.1999) and *The Namesake* (Pub.2003) are the area under discussion of this research paper and it maps out the psychological impact of existential reality and cultural discrepancies on the protagonists of the selected novel and story-book. Their existential angst, sense of loneliness and alienation are explained up to an extent.

**Keywords:** The philosophy of existentialism and Diasporic challenges, Existential Angst, Diasporic Ambience, Jhumpa Lahiri, The Interpreter of Maladies, The Namesake.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most reputed and versatile Indo-American writers. Her works being diasporic hold strikingly fresh Indian sensibility to abroad. She has portrayed the characters both in the light of native and foreign culture. Magnitude of family affiliation and existential angst have been experienced by her protagonists on the adopted homeland, Jhumpa Lahiri has also experienced the trauma of failing to find her identity in the new land where she could never have a sense of belonging. Though these displaced realities and self-imposed exile are in many ways a calamity, this existence acts as a stimulus and enables Jhumpa Lahiri to excel in fiction writing. As a popular young writer of Indian backdrop, she is a sort of representative figure for the female predicament in

Diaspora. She explores the ideas of cultural and personal isolations and identities.

Jhumpa Lahiri in her works, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Lowland*, travels through her antagonized experiences of Indian characters across the world. She finds out the complex cultural encounter and shifts along with emotional imbalance and relationship between parents and children, lovers, siblings, husband and wife and determination of identity in general. As a Diaspora writer, she deals with a multicultural society both from inside and outside, seeking to find her native identity as well as the new identity in the adopted country. Jhumpa Lahiri shows how this second generation is able to get acculturate in the new country, embracing its socio-cultural values, at the same time experience a sense of nostalgia for the Indian culture and sensibilities, experiencing alienation and up rootedness.

This research paper examines the philosophy of Existentialism and Diasporic challenges especially in her popular novels; *The Interpreter of Maladies* (Pub.1999) and *The Namesake* (Pub.2003) are the area under discussion of this research paper and it maps out the psychological impacts of existential reality and cultural discrepancies on the protagonists of the selected novel and story-book. Their Existential angst, sense of loneliness and alienation are explained up to an extent.

*Interpreter of Maladies* is accurately diagnosed and misinterpreted, matters both temporary and life changing, relationships in flux and unshakeable, unexpected blessings and sudden calamities, and the powers of survival – these are among the themes of Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning

debut collection of stories. Travelling from India to New England and back again, Lahiri charts the emotional voyages of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations, cultures, religions, and generations. Imbued with the sensual details of both Indian and American cultures, they also speak with universal eloquence and compassion to everyone who has ever felt like an outsider.

*The Namesake* takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Ashoke does his best to adapt while his wife pines for home. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name. He stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs.

### **A Temporary Matter**

The story unbolts with a notice about an electrical outage which calls this inconvenience 'a temporary matter'. Shukumar and Shoba, a married couple, had been living as strangers in their own house until this electrical outage does not become a medium or an outlet for their composite desolation. Six months ago, the husband and wife had got their first baby stillborn; though they grieved for this loss but not collectively. They became alienated to each other and tried to console each other by not talking on the matter.

*“...he thought of how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. He thought of how he no longer looked forward to weekends...” (pp.4-5)*

This traumatic loss casts a tone of melancholia for the rest of their lives. This electrical outage brings them together when all of sudden they become able to talk graciously to each other in the darkness. Shoba a thirty three year young woman had been married to Shukumar. Shukumar, a thirty five years research scholar had been working on his Doctoral thesis- 'Agrarian Revolt in India'. Shoba and Shukumar have quietened down in the new land so called the land of new possibilities and dreams. But their world is deeply shaken up and all their dreams and possibilities have been eaten up by this miserable incident. However, there is some hope for the couple to rekindle as during each night of blackness, they confess more and more to each other—the things that were never uttered to each other concerning with the demise of new born.

Shukumar and Shoba are victims of their inner environment. We soon find out that both characters' worn outward appearance results from their internal, emotional strife that has caused such deeply woven alienation from each other and their existential angst is the only reason of the distance in the marriage. The pain and the anguish is evident in the words of Shukumar,

*“Their baby had never cried, Shukumar considered. Their baby would never have a rice ceremony, even though Shoba had already made the guest list, and decided on which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl.” (p.11)*

The couple has socked up to the new value system of life but India looms in their descriptions and memories. They feel home-sick and ennui. They build up a strangle ambience around; especially Shoba who fails to keep her soul and body together and always haunted by the nightmare of the stillborn baby. Shukumar reminds her about the stillborn child,

*“Our baby was a boy”, he said. “His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night.” (p.22)*

She reluctantly cherishes the interest in their marriage while she had given it up six months ago. They always leap into the bits and pieces of their past memories of homeland just to avoid the confrontation of their mundane reality but there was nothing which compensates or comforts them of their loss.

However, descriptions of Shukumar and Shoba's changed physical appearances begin to hint that there may be the possibility of their get-together. Shukumar and Shoba become closer as the secrets combine into a knowledge that seems like the remedy to mend the enormous loss they share together. Shoba and Shukumar start sharing their secrets with each other in that hour of electric outage soon this secret-sharing becomes a medium of their pain exposure. They have been trying to cope with the loss by consoling each other. Each night they share their secrets and on the fourth night, we are given the most hope at their reconnection but just as to be stillborn is to have never begun life, so too does the couple's effort to rekindle their marriage fail at inception. One last confession is given first by Shoba, then another by Shukumar at the end of 'A Temporary Matter'. In full

confidence with one another, they acknowledge the finality in the loss of their marriage and "They weep for the things they now knew." (p.22)

## **The Namesake**

*The Namesake* is a presentation of several issues and problems experienced by immigrants on new land. The story reflects how man becomes the victim of cultural discrepancies and disparities as he starts to institute in new land. Consequently, Identity crisis, ennui, depression and sufferings push him back to the fine memories of preceding home. He becomes alienated and home-sick. Though he resists to new values but gradually soaked up or eaten up by them. The story is focused on Gogol, son of Ashima and Ashoke. The story opens with Ashima Ganguli. She is a young bride of Ashoke struggles through language and cultural barriers as well as of her own fears as she delivers her first child alone.

*"That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miracles still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare."* (p.6)

She imagines if the delivery had been taken place in Calcutta, she would have had her baby at home, surrounded by family. The delivery is successful, and the new parents are prepared to take their son home when they learn they cannot leave the hospital before giving their son a legal name.

Ashoke suggests the name of Gogol, in honour of the famous Russian author [Nikolai Gogol](#), to be the baby's pet name, and they use this name on the birth certificate. Though the pet

name has deep significance for the baby's parents, it is never intended to be used by anyone other than family but when Gogol turns 14, he starts to hate the name.

*"From the little he knows about Russian writers, it dismays him that his parents chose the weirdest namesake. Leo or Anton, he could have lived with. Alexander shortened to Alex, he would have greatly preferred. But Gogol sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity or gravity. What dismays him most is the irrelevance of it all." (p.76)*

His father tries once to explain the significance of it, but he senses that Gogol is not old enough to understand. As Gogol progresses through high school, he resents his name more and more for its oddness and the strange genius for whom he was named. When he informs his parents that he wishes to change his name, his father objects to the idea but reluctantly agrees. Shortly before leaving for college, Gogol legally changes his name to Nikhil Gogol Ganguli.

*"At first he says nothing, unprepared to give any further explanation. He wonders whether to tell....but instead he takes a deep breath and tells the people in the court room what he has never dared admit to his parents. I hate the name Gogol. I always hated it." (p.102)*

The distance between Gogol and his parents continues to increase. He wants to be American, not Bengali. He goes home less frequently, dates American girls, and becomes angry when anyone calls him Gogol. During his college years, he smokes [cigarettes](#) and [marijuana](#), goes to many parties, and loses his virginity to a girl he cannot remember.

After graduating from [Columbia University](#), Gogol gets a job in an established architectural office in New York. He is rather stiff personality-wise, perpetually angry or else always on the

lookout for someone to make a stereotypical comment about his background. At a party, Gogol meets a very attractive and outgoing girl named Maxine, with whom he begins a relationship. Maxine's parents are financially well off and live in a four-story house in New York City, with one floor occupied entirely by Maxine. Gogol moves in with her, and becomes an accepted member of her family. When Maxine's parents visit her grandparents in the mountains of New Hampshire for the summer, they invite Maxine and Gogol to join them for a couple of weeks.

Gogol introduces Maxine to his parents. Ashima dismisses Maxine. Gogol gradually withdraws from Maxine, eventually breaking up with her. He begins to spend more time with his mother and sister, Sonia after the demise of his father. Later, Ashima suggests that Gogol contact Moushumi, the daughter of one of her friends, whom Gogol knew when they were children, and whose intended groom, Graham, broke up with her shortly before their wedding. Gogol is reluctant to meet with Moushumi because she is Bengali, but does so anyway, to please his mother. Moushumi and Gogol are attracted to one another and eventually are married. However, by the end of their first year of marriage, Moushumi becomes restless. She feels tied down by marriage and begins to regret it. He also feels like a poor substitute for Graham. Eventually, Moushumi has an affair with Dimitri, an old acquaintance, the revelation of which leads to the end of their marriage. With Sonia preparing to marry her fiancé, an American named Ben, Gogol is once again alone. He is nonetheless comforted by the fact that Ashoke, prior to his death, finally told his son why he had chosen that name for him.

*"There is no such (name) thing...there is no such thing as a perfect name. I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen."(p.245)*

Gogol comes to accept his name and picks up a collection of the Russian author's stories that his father had given him as a birthday present many years ago. Gogol achieves new values and insight and mesmerises to his name and its importance. Hence we find a mellow and mature hero who now understands the absurdity of displacement.

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