

Comparative Analysis of Identity Crisis in The Novels Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Roshni. A. A.*
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Najath Arts & Science College, Mannarkkad
(Affiliated to University of Calicut)
Palakkad, Kerala.

Abstract

*In today's interconnected world, immigration has emerged as a key element in our social dynamics. Individuals' cross borders in search of economic benefits, political stability and economic opportunities. Immigrants often face identity crises as they strive to maintain cultural roots or adapting to the dominant culture for acceptance. The theme of identity crises is explored in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are prominent writers in the postcolonial era. With their evocative writing both authors provide valuable insights into human experience. The theme of identity crises is poignantly expressed in their novels. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai uses multiple narrative structure to link to the narratives of characters from diverse backgrounds. In *Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri employs a more straightforward chronological narrative with third person omniscient narration. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in England to Bengali parents and brought up in united states. Her immigrant experiences are deeply reflected in the novel *The Namesake*. Kiran Desai was born in India and led her formative life in both India and United states. Her transnational background and multicultural exposure is reflected in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The theme of identity, cultural displacement, immigrant experience, impact of colonialism are very well depicted in their novels.*

Keywords: Globalisation, Post Colonialism, Immigration, Identity Crisis, Cultural Displacement, Exploitation, Alienation, Isolation.

Introduction

The novels, *The Namesake* and *Inheritance of Loss* delves into the intricate themes of identity, cultural heritage and immigrant experience highlighting the complexities of belonging and challenges individuals face while balancing traditional values and new cultural environment. Through their narrative, Lahiri and Desai give a vivid image about the emotional and

* Corresponding Author: Roshni. A. A

Email: roshnisubairm@gmail.com

Received 10 Feb. 2025; Accepted 21 March. 2025. Available online: 30 March. 2025.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



psychological impact of immigration, colonialism and globalization in search of self-identity. The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is set in the mid-1980 s in the northeastern Indian town of Kalimpong, located in the foothills of Himalayas. The novel is framed by 1980 s Gorkhaland movement in Northeastern India emphasizing the enduring impact of British colonialism and influence of globalization on characters. The novel *The Namesake* is primarily set in the various locations in the United States including Massachusetts and New York city with occasional flashbacks in Calcutta.

Character and Their Struggles

In *The Inheritance of Loss* Biju, Sai and Judge confront identity crises due to the cultural displacement and colonial influences. Sais Western education conflicts with her traditional Indian background, while Biju grapples with his life as an illegal immigrant in the US torn between aspirations and harsh realities. The Judges internal strife originates from his adopted western identity and his disdain for his cultural heritage. Sai was educated in a western convent school. In a tragic accident Sai lost her parents. So she came to Kalimpong to live with her grandfather Jemubai Patel. Sais education in a convent school instilled her with western ideals made her feel disconnected from her traditional Indian background. Her grandfathers autocratic bossy attitude creates an oppressive atmosphere within the household. Moreover, her grandfather's inability to show affection made Sai feel isolated and emotionally distressed. Further Sais relationship with her Nepali tutor Gyan intensified her emotional stress. Gyans involvement with Gorkha National liberation Front created political and cultural tensions in their relationship. Moreover, Gyans refusal of her western influenced lifestyle made a rift between their relationship. She felt alienated and isolated. Jemubai Patels English education influences his personal identity and outlook. He internalizes colonial views. He gives superiority to western culture. In England he faces severe racial discriminations resulted in his disdain for Indian heritage. The judge's assimilation of western culture leads to his alienation from Indian roots. The cultural alienation faced by judge is the experience of colonized individuals who struggle between two worlds. His autocratic behaviour towards the family members reflects the sovereign rule made by colonizers on colonized people Judges views and experiences is the impact of. Colonial past and his attitude to others echoes the influence of colonial history in relationship

Biju's character is a poignant representation of the experience of the immigrants. Biju is the son of a cook in the house of Sai grandfather in Kalimpong. In U.S. he faces many challenges

as an undocumented immigrant Due to his illegal status he shifts from one low paying job to another working in the kitchens of various Restaurants. There he undergoes severe exploitation and harsh realities and threatening life conditions. Biju struggles to make ends meet in America; Biju spent days in America with a constant fear of deportation. Gyan struggles with his Nepali heritage and western influence around him His involvement in GNLf creates a crack with his relationships with Sai Gyan is also aware of financial status of Sai. Moreover, Sai's privileged lifestyle and political background made a break in their relationship. This gave Gyan emotional stress. Pannalal, the judges cook, struggled from bitter treatments from judge. Lola and Noni are two sisters who stayed near the judge's house. Their struggle to live in a politically agitated atmosphere was depicted in the novel

Gogol Ganguli is the main character in the novel *The Namesake*. Gogols struggle to reconcile to new culture is reflected throughout the novel. Gogol was born in America to Bengali immigrant parents. Gogols conflicts with his Bengali heritage and American upbringing. He dislikes Bengali tradition and tries to keep away from its customs and culture. But he felt alienated from both cultures. Gogols name was a symbol of identity conflict. He often feels irritated with his name amidst American culture. Gogol received that name because of his father's admiration for the Russian author Nikolai Gogol. He even feels humiliated by this name. So, he decided to change his name to Nikhil. The changing of name symbolizes his eagerness to escape from his cultural heritage, but it didn't end there. Through the narrative, Gogols journey is characterized by continuous struggle with acceptance, belonging and identifying a position in the world. Gogol's conflict with his name is a symbol of dual identity and his pursuit for self-acceptance. His parents Ashoke Ganguli and Ashima Ganguli are first generation Immigrants.

Ashoke Ganguli, a central character in Jhumpa Lahiris novel *The Namesake* face many challenges in his life as an immigrant. Ashoke came to the US to pursue higher job opportunities and better life. As an immigrant. He faces many struggles gaining recognition in the professional field and achieving financial stability. In the US, Ashoke experienced cultural clashes. He struggles to maintain Bengali heritage while adjusting to American lifestyle. Sometimes he feels this balancing act challenging and often seems caught between two worlds. He often feels isolated as he is living far away from his family circle. A detached family life in a new environment fueled a sense of loneliness in him. An important twist took place in his life is a fatal train accident. This event instilled endurance and gratefulness in him. It changed the outlook of his life. Ashoke always tries to reconcile with the two worlds., his Bengali

identity and his lifestyle in America. Raising his children Gogol and Sonia in a new country is another challenge he faced. He tries to induce traditional values and culture in their children and at the same time appreciate them adapting to new culture. Ashoke's introvertedness and cultural differences between him and his children resulted in communication barriers. This created confusion and a gap between them, particularly with his son Gogol. Ashoke often find difficult to adjust his demanding academic career with his responsibility as the head of the family. Ashima Ganguli, a prominent character in Jhumpa Lahiris *The Namesake* belongs to first generation immigrants. She faces many challenges throughout her life as an immigrant in the U. S. One of the main challenge Ashima faced is the struggle to assimilate to a new culture and way of life. Her shifting to America from Calcutta is a turning point in her life. She felt as if she was caught in a new world with everything unfamiliar. Ashima experienced loneliness and isolation as an immigrant in America. She felt deeply isolated from her family and friends. Ashimas physical distance from her dear ones contributes to her loneliness in America. Adapting to American customs and lifestyle became a challenge to Ashima. Ashima struggles to balance his Bengali tradition with her new environment. The unfamiliar environment and customs created a conflict in Ashima. Ashima struggles from homesickness. She desires a life in her native land.

Ashima's homesickness is reflected throughout the novel. She yearns for her native atmosphere, its sights, sounds and smell. This homesickness makes it difficult to fully adapt to America. Ashima felt a sense of alienation in her new country. Her inadequate command over English language fueled her alienation. This affects her communication with Americans. Like Ashoke Ganguli, raising their children in a new environment is a challenge for Ashima. She induced Bengali tradition and culture in their children at the same time enabling them to adapt to American culture. This attempt is a great challenge for her because of the generation gap between herself and children. The death of Ashoke became a great shock to Ashima. She felt a deep emotional burden in the absence of Ashoke. But she tried to reconcile this situation and became self-sufficient. She takes responsibility for her family and started to live life independently. Ashima's struggles and challenges contribute to her personal growth and became more adaptable to a new environment. Sonia also struggles to reconcile her dual identity as an American born to Indian immigrants. Following her father's death, Sonia provides an unwavering support for her family. Moushumi's identity crises is driven by her effort to reconcile Indian lifestyle and American culture Moreover her unfulfilled marriage and broken engagements intensified her sense of identity crises.

Generational Conflict

The generational conflicts stem from the clash of cultural values, traditions and expectations. This factor is well illustrated in Jhumpa Lahiris *The Namesake*. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli belongs to the first-generation immigrants. They stick on to Bengali traditions and culture and tried to instill their cultural norms and practices in their children. But Gogol and Sonia being American born to Indian immigrants are deeply influenced by American lifestyle. Gogol even changed his name to Nikhil to become more adaptable to American culture. The generational conflict is reflected in marriage choice. Both Ashoke and Ashima's marriage were arranged. But Gogol and Sonias relationship reflect their American lifestyle. The generational gap leads to emotional distance and misunderstanding. Gogol and Sonias opposition to Bengali tradition created a conflict within the family. The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* highlights the older generation like Judge adherence to colonial values and younger generation Sais quest for personal and cultural identity. Moreover, Sai has been raised in postcolonial India finds it difficult to cope up with his grandfather's view. The judge's adherence to colonial values makes him detached from the Political movements and class distinctions from post-colonial India. Sais quest for personal contentment and Gyan's involvement in political movement are the major concerns of younger generation.

Unique Features of Identity Crisis in The Novels *The Namesake* And *The Inheritance of Loss*

The Namesake focus on the identity crisis between first generation immigrants and their children. But *The Inheritance of Loss* probes the impact of colonialism on identity. It gives importance to characters inheritance of colonial values and further cultural alienation as a reaction of colonization. As a second point Lahiris novel reflects personal identity crisis and the inner struggles of an individual. within the family but in Desai's novel identity crisis is viewed in the background of historical, social and political factors. In *Namesake*, Lahiri employs personal symbols like Names and cultural artifacts to stress the importance of identity crisis. Desai in order to indicate collective struggle in a post-colonial context he employed symbols which indicate colonialism, cultural displacement and political movement *Inheritance of Loss* characters identity crisis remain unresolved but in *The Namesake* Gogol towards the end of the novel starts to embrace his cultural heritage and name which denotes Resolution and personal transformation.

Homogeneous Views on Identity Crisis

Cultural Displacement is a key factor for identity crisis in both novels. Charters endure cultural displacement within India and abroad. In the *Inheritance of Loss* Bijus life as an undocumented immigrant emphasize the harsh realities and emotional strains of seeking a better life abroad. Sai encounters' cultural displacement in an attempt to merge her western education with her Indian background. The judge Jemubhai Patels adoption of British customs and values while in England results in cultural displacement on his return to India. Gogols cultural displacement in *The Namesake* is an internal struggle as he strives to balance his Bengali heritage and American identity. Gogol's search for belonging is linked to his name, his relationships and his family expectations. Several character in the novel faced cultural displacement as they traverse in search of identities and relationship in the context of Indian American Diaspora. Both novels emphasize the importance of cultural heritage in shaping characters identities. In *The Namesake* Ganguli's family deeply influenced by Bengali tradition whereas characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with the impact of colonialism the character of each novel undergoes Internal conflict. They confront the feelings of belonging and the stress to reconcile their cultural roots and new environment they inhabit. Gogol's struggle with his. name in *The Namesake* and Jemubhai's self-loathing in *The Inheritance of Loss* Both novels face lasting consequences of colonialism and influence of western culture. Both novels emphasize generational divide causing a conflict between old and new concepts resulting in identity crisis. Resolution and Transformation is echoed in these two novels. The Theme of Loss is pivotal to both Jhumpa Lahiris *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Loss of culture, Loss of tradition Loss of clear sense of self.

Conclusion

Both works *The Namesake* and *The Inheritance of Loss* reveal a fundamental truth: the quest for self -identity is a universal and inherent voyage. These narratives illustrate that identity is not static, it is continually shaped by variety of factors including cultural heritage, historical events, and personal experiences. The characters struggle emphasize the uncertainties in search for identity but also illustrate the strength and resilience needed to overcome these challenges. Both *The Namesake* and *The Inheritance of Loss* echo the universal pursuit of journey to find identity in an intricate and dynamic world. Both novelists highlights that the essence of humanity lies in our power to relate, understand and support each other despite our diverse

backgrounds. In our interconnected world compassionate treatment of immigrants is vital to make the world more inclusive and better place for all.

Works Cited:

1.The Inheritance of Loss- Wikipedia

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Inheritance_of_Loss

2.*The Namesake* – Wikipedia <https://www.themistressofbooks.com/reviews/review-the-namesake-by-jhumpa-lahiri>

3.The Inheritance of Loss. Goodreads.com

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/95186.The_Inheritance_of_Loss

4.. Indian Writing in English – Shakthi Batra. Ramabrothers.in

<https://ramabrothers.in/product/indian-writing-in-english-by-shakti-batra/>

5.Postcolonial Literature books. Google.co. in

https://books.google.co.in/books?id=yGP2KORMViYC&printsec=copyright&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false