

# Navigating Pain: Individual Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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## Abstract

Over the last twenty years, Jhumpa Lahiri has become a notable voice in both Indian and American literature, especially with her work *The Namesake*. Lahiri explores cultural identities, the desire for one's home country, and the challenges faced by Indians in America. Influenced by her own experiences and family stories, much of her writing reflects her parents' keen observations and their commitment to Indian customs. This paper focuses on the psychological trauma experienced by individuals, especially the character Ashima. Ashima, an expatriate's cultural displacement, social isolation, and separation from family, personifies the struggles faced by Lahiri's female protagonists. Lahiri often depicts these women grappling with memories of their homeland and being caught between two worlds. In *The Namesake*, Ashima vividly portrays this dichotomy, illustrating the psychological trauma, migration, and cultural dislocation between Calcutta and America. This paper aims to unravel the complex layers of psychological trauma faced by Ashima in Lahiri's narrative novel *The Namesake*. This phenomenal feeling is a shared experience that enhances the research paper.

## Keywords

Jhumpa Lahiri, individual psychological trauma, pain, cultural dislocation, assimilation, dual identity and emotional struggle

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Jhumpa Lahiri, an American writer with Indian roots, analyzes the multifaceted roles of women in society, family, and nation through her works. Her fiction deeply portrays everyday lives of people at specific periods, emphasizing the significant roles played by women, whether dominant or subaltern.

Lahiri's diasporic writing reflects a deep sense of nostalgia buried deep in her Indian heritage. Her exploration of woman expatriates in her works delves into their feelings, suffering and trauma. Lahiri sheds light on the struggles and challenges faced by the immigrants with Indian background in America.

In her debut novel, *The Namesake*, Lahiri gains the national bestseller status, earning recognition as the 'Best Book of the Year' in 2003. Her collections of short stories, such as "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Unaccustomed Earth," further amplify immigrant narratives, revealing the complexities of cultural dislocation, assimilation, dual identity, and psychological trauma within individuals and families.

Lahiri's writing style, characterized by journalistic and simplistic tones, deliberately avoided complicated sentence structures, phrases, and figurative language, resulting in accessible and poignant narratives. The overarching theme in her works revolves around the sufferings of Indian immigrants settling in America, providing an insightful exploration of their individual and familial traumas.

This paper delves into the specific individual trauma of Ashima, a first-generation immigrant who embarks on a journey from Calcutta to America following her marriage.

This novella unfolds as a Bildungsroman, revolving on

Gogol Ganguli, born in USA to parents of Bengali immigrants. Named after his father Ashoke's favourite writer, Nikolai Gogol, Gogol's identity journey begins with an unpredictable event through which his father's survival in a train accident - due to the visible book, "The Overcoat." As Gogol enters his teenage years he rejects his pet name "Gogol", finding it neither Indian nor American he adopts the name Nikhil, to his father's disappointment. Despite embracing American culture with numerous girlfriends, when his father unexpectedly passes away, Gogol undergoes a transformation which makes him realize his Bengali identity.

In navigating his dual identity, Gogol grapples with the complexities of being both American and Indian with special mention to Bengali. His marriage to an Indian American woman, chosen by Ashima, proves challenging. This experience prompts Gogol to recognize the nuanced nature of identity and belonging.

Ashima is portrayed as a sensible and traditional housewife, subtly infuses her life with glimpses of exoticism in her marriage. Despite projecting a subdued behaviour, she satisfies her commitments silently, expecting nothing in return. The narrative explores the intricacies of cultural and personal identity against the backdrop of familial expectations and the pursuit of happiness through marriage, emphasizing the complexities within the immigrant experience.

At the age of nineteen, Ashima emerges with an innocent character, unfamiliar with the outside world. When Ashoke, an Indian Bengali studying in the United States, visits her

house as a perfect groom, her eyes like a camera lens focuses on the brown leather shoes with black heels and off-white laces left at the entrance as a tradition. Succumbing to a childish impulse, she attempts to fit her foot into a stranger's shoe. She was questioned of her stay in the United States under various weather conditions instead of asking her willingness in which Lahiri depicts that subalterns were asked to act as per the wish of their parents and Ashima is no exception. She innocently questioned everyone, "Won't he be there?"(9). The transformation from Ashima Bhaduri to Ashima Ganguli marks her shift to becoming the matriarch of the Ganguli family.

Though, settled in Cambridge her mind revolves with profound personal trauma, feeling increasingly alone in this foreign land. Embodying the role of a typical Indian wife, she adheres to traditional routines, eagerly awaiting her husband's return from the university to cook for him. The initial absence of calls is replaced by late-night ones, delivering news of family members' deaths, evoking audible sobs that even Ashoke's consolation cannot quell.

Ashima follows her Indian beliefs and rituals in the foreign land, maintaining her authenticity. Her daily life includes cooking Indian meals, wearing saris, Bata sandals, and applying sindoor in her parting, expressing of her cultural identity. She also restricts herself from uttering her husband's name even when she was in her delivery pain which is contrast to American culture. Ashima's character serves as a portrayal of the immigrant experience, juxtaposing traditional values with the challenges of adapting to a new life in a distant land, the United States.

During her initial stage of pregnancy, Ashima experiences cravings and a profound sense of isolation, yearning for the familial celebrations which she misses in that unaccustomed land. Her food habit during her pregnancy was "combining Rice Krispies and Planters Peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds lemon juice, thin slices of green chilli pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix "(1). In the hospital, during her delivery, separated from Ashoke, she struggles with fear, longing for the comforting presence of her mother and grandmother, who could guide her through the pain and tolerance she anticipates. Patty, a compassionate nurse, aids Ashima in childbirth and guides her on parenting.

Amidst the joy, Ashima and Ashoke feel the absence of their family members, rendering America "only half true" for them (25). Despite her desire to return to Calcutta for family support, Ashima sacrifices it for the sake of her husband. The second pregnancy mirrors the first. "For 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 (49). "

Ashima attempts to impart Indian traditions, gods, and culture to Gogol and Sonia in every possible situation. Despite Gogol's immersion in foreign culture influenced by friends, Ashima encourages him to embrace his Indian heritage. She sails across all the challenge of parenting by blending Ameri-

can styles with a touch of Indian identity.

Ashima faces discomfort when Gogol's school visits a cemetery as a part of their curriculum and she compares the Indian traditional practice of averting their eyes during burials, firmly stating, "Death is not a pastime and it is not a place to make paintings (70)." Lahiri skilfully portrays the delicate balance Ashima maintains, embodying American culture while safeguarding the essence of her Indian heritage for Gogol and Sonia.

Ashima finds difficulty in understanding her children's, need for personal space, feeling a growing distance that seems to bridge a gap between them. Ashima grown in a culture, where parents maintain constant control, contrasts sharply with the independence sought by her children who are raised as Americans. Accepting this cultural shift, she acknowledges that her husband's livelihood and her children's birthplace have evolved into her home finally.

As a testament to her adaptability, Ashima begins preparing American dishes, including beef, to cater to her children's preferences. When Gogol and Sonia depart for their pursuits, and Ashoke travels to Cleveland for work, Ashima builds enough courage to live all alone, it's a significant step toward embracing the evolving dynamics of her family which is also again an Indian identity. Ashima's personal trauma is primarily triggered by the unexpected death of her husband, Ashoke. In spite of the societal expectations placed upon widows in tradition of Indian culture, she chooses to remain in America, where her husband, took his last breath.

Reflecting on Ashoke's departure to Cleveland before his death, Ashima interprets it, as a lesson to self-support. In the absence of her husband, who was her constant companion in facing news of loved ones' deaths in their native India; she resists the solitude left behind after his death. While her children offer companionship, she acknowledges the reality that they cannot be with her forever. As days pass, she reaches out to non-Indian friends, nurtures meaningful connections and spending time at the library to overcome her sense of isolation.

Departing from her old, traditional self, Ashima adopts new habits, taking meals while sitting on the sofa and watching TV. Her cooking habits shift towards a simple buttered toast and dal, the pot of dal lasts a week since she is now alone at home. At times, she even adopts the eating habits of her children, standing in front of the refrigerator and consuming food without bothering to heat it or put it on a plate. This transformation reflects Ashima's journey towards independence and adaptation in the face of loss and solitude.

Maxine, Gogol's open-minded girlfriend, honestly shares her past relationships and maintaining a harmonious relationship with her parents. The absence of interference in each other's lives in Maxine's family reflects a typical American family dynamic. Regardless of Maxine's willingness to embrace Indian culture, particularly Bengali customs for Gogol, Ashima remains uneasy, primarily due to cultural dissimilarities. Maxine's custom of calling elders by names alienated

from the Indian custom of addressing elders with respect, stiffens their conversation.

Gogol finds solace in Maxine's parents, feeling freer with them than his own. However, Maxine ends their relationship when Gogol prioritizes his parents over her. Following Ashima's suggestion, Gogol meets Mousumi, whom he knows from his childhood, has a similar immigrant background. In spite of their initial belief in compatibility, their marriage reveals notable disparities. Gogol discovers Mousumi's chain-smoking habit and learns about her sexual involvement with other men, ultimately leading to her departure, professing love for her ex-lover Dimitri.

Sonia, Ashima's daughter, tussles with the complexities of Indian and American cultures. However, as she matures and completes her studies, she decisively chooses to marry Ben, her American boyfriend. Sonia's swift adaptation to the culture and perfect settlement with Ben portrays her as an obedient daughter and dutiful sister. Her journey reflects a balanced integration of cultural influences.

In the novella's conclusion, Ashima makes the decision to spare her time, spending six months in India and the next six in the United States. Lahiri skilfully captures Ashima's struggle to reconcile cultural norms, emphasizing the internal conflict and emotional strain she endures while navigating between two worlds. Aptly named, as "Ashima" means 'without boundary' in Bengali, she embodies this by acting as a bridge between her cultural identities.

Lahiri's portrayal of women in her fictional works often highlights their respect to traditional roles, even in the liberating environment of America. Regardless of the perceived freedom of choices, Lahiri's women, like Ashima, emerge as survivors. They confront the burdens of responsibilities and relationships, struggle with cultural differences and challenges. Ashima, migrating to the United States after marriage, undergoes significant personal trauma, cultural adjustments, yearning for loved ones in India, distancing from her children, and parting from her husband.

Yet, Ashima exhibits strength and bravery, making the decision to split her time between India and the United States. This choice reflects her resilience and adaptability, finding comfort in her hometown for six months and with Gogol and Sonia, in the United States for the rest of the months in a year. Ashima's story becomes a witness to the complexities of cultural identity and the strength required to navigate the challenges of migration and assimilation in unaccustomed land.

Ashima's struggle with cultural assimilation in *The Namesake* reflects the societal impact of psychological trauma. Rooted in traditional values, her initial resistance evolves into acceptance, emphasizing the importance of adapting to new surroundings. Her bias against Gogol's American girlfriend, Maxine, and favoritism towards Mousumi reveal cultural preconceptions, causing personal trauma. The narrative highlights the link between cultural acceptance, personal well-being, and harmonious relationships, emphasizing

the need for open-mindedness. Ultimately, Ashima's journey underscores how embracing change can prevent individual and societal repercussions.

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