



[Citation: Azad, M. J., & Bosri, R. (2022). Identity Crisis: A Comparative Study between Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. *Journal of ELT and Education*, 5(3), 55-59.]

Literary Research Paper

IDENTITY CRISIS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE* AND MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE*

*Md. Jahidul Azad¹ & Rabeya Bosri²

Abstract

Culture usually shapes our values, morals, habits, thinking, social relations, and living patterns. But identity crises are mostly encountered by the immigrants nowadays as the sheer outcome of cultural clashes. We all know that immigrating to another nation is a typical occurrence in today's society. In recent years, people have been moving from one nation to another in search of a brighter future. Every year, a large number of individuals migrate from South Asia to the Western world. They have a common experience abroad, regardless of their native nation or class. They have issues with language, culture, ritual, cuisine, and, most importantly, their identity in a new nation. As a result, a person's transition from one culture to another is a traumatic experience. Some people adapt well to culture shock, while others have a strong desire to return to their cultural roots. They are caught between their hometown's cultural identity and the new environment. Immigrant difficulties are a source of concern for many authors throughout the world. The current study looks at the subject of identity crisis through cultural tensions depicted in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. In their books, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali, both international writers, address the issue of immigration. The purpose of this study is to analyze the difficulty faced by immigrants in other countries when both first and second-generation immigrants confront cultural conflicts and choose to remain in the middle.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Social Adjustment, Split Psyche, Appropriation

In today's society, increased migrations and migratory lives have raised concerns about a variety of issues. However, the major motivations for migrating for South Asians are education and economic gain, or political exile, yet they all confront the challenges of establishing, integrating or assimilating in an increasingly hostile environment. Furthermore, finding their place in their new house is a challenge. Tradition is unimaginable without a person. No one can deny the importance of culture in the financial arena, the disposition of gender discriminative attitudes and partiality, and the function of distributed subjectivities and identities on the global market for the ruling and ruled classes of recent times, according to the Marxist worldview. People in faraway lands absorb new objects, abandon language, and acculturate rites throughout this transnational period of voluntary movement. Language and new cultural desires in-betweenness are abrogated by the exchange of cultures and new objects. *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali deal with the diasporic experience of the immigrants. Being immigrants the characters of these novels (both the first and second generation) have split psyches and conflicted identities. This paper is attempting to project the

*Corresponding Email: jahid_azad10@yahoo.com

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Prime University, Dhaka-1216, Bangladesh

² Lecturer, Department of English, Rokeya Ahsan College, Demra, Dhaka, Bangladesh

in-between psyche of the immigrants (first and second generations) who are apparently foreign citizens but inwardly bearing the hidden seed of nostalgic emotion for their respective native culture.

Belonging to two countries creates a split psyche. As the first-generation immigrants like to cling to their mother culture, the generation immigrants feel it difficult to adjust. As they have a dual identity (Like Gogol an Indian and an American in *The Namesake*) they are in a constant dilemma. This dilemma begins with keeping the name. Bengali parents like to keep two names –“*valo nam*” and “*dak nam*” to signify the formal name and nickname. But in America, they have only one name.

The Namesake begins with the diasporic experience of a couple- Ashima and Ashoke living in America from India. In fact, migrants live a "complex existence" that forces them to confront and rework different hegemonic construction of identity developed in their home or new nation-state (s) and “re-territorialize” their practices as well as their identities." (Ashcroft et al., 2004). For example, being a Bengali, in *The Namesake* Ashima and other immigrant people feel de-territorialized in the United States and they celebrate Christmas festivals in their own style to restructure the territory to reform the territory by starting to celebrate Christian festivals in their own way. They celebrate Christmas and Thanksgiving the way they would deserve Hindu festivals like Dipawali and Durga Pooja. By doing so, they integrate US culture that crosses national boundaries. They assimilate culture and ritual in their own way. When a minority people gradually become able to adjust to the customs and attitudes of the dominant culture and tradition are acquainted with Assimilation. Full assimilation occurs when new members of a society become inappreciable to members of the other group though it is not anticipated for an immigrant group to assimilate is often doubtful by both members of the group and those of the dominant society. For that, the second generation gives up their parental culture and traditions for catching their aim at total assimilation (Pataki, 2005, p. 3).

Cultural assimilation can be observed in the case of American Asians and British Asians as well as all over the world where immigration happens. In the case of British and American immigrants mostly they are from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These people face a new kind of adjustment to the new culture forgetting their motherland. They go through the process of cultural assimilation. These things create confusion in their identity. Our culture and human beings are turned into a subject by Foucault's objective of making a history of the different modes (Besley et al., 2007, p. 50).

This line tells the basis of the novels *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, where characters are made into subjects within a framed context. In this respect, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* undeniably shed some light on how culture affects the dislocated body but also the mind identity and thereby creates the sentiment of empathy with its spectators. In *The Namesake* it is shown, that Ashima and Ashoke's son Gogol does not think of India as his country or 'desk', he sees himself as purely American. He is considered, ABCD (American Born Confused Deshi). Though Gogol considers himself an American, he is brought up between two diametrically different cultures, similar to Bhabha's in-between space where people can, to a firm point, transport and convert within their worlds (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 1-2). But in the end, he understands knowing the name is not essential but identity. Among second-generation immigrants, Karim Amir in *Brick Lane*, whose multiple and fluid identity represents a “new way of being British” (Kureishi, 1986, p. 18) considers himself to be the first and foremost English, but at the same time, he acknowledges a sense of cultural responsibility towards his roots and learns to accept his identity confusion and hybridity. The first and second-generation immigrants face a cultural clash and they try to assimilate. About cultural assimilation, Ali writes-

It's a success story, said Chanu, exercising his shoulders. “But behind every story of immigration success there lies a deeper tragedy. I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's own sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. I'm talking –” (88)

The Namesake and *Brick Lane* are both novels that talk about immigrants' experiences abroad. Lahiri deals with Indian immigrants' experience abroad whereas Ali deals with the experience of Bangladeshi immigrants. In *Brick Lane*, 18 year's old Bengali woman Nazneen who is married to Chanu struggles to make her new position in multicultural London. Like Ashima of *The Namesake*, her marriage is also an arranged one. It is Nazneen who makes the reader acquainted with the problems of the Bangladeshi community overseas. Her life abroad portrays the emotional and cultural shock of migration, racism, immense hardship, dislocation, and above all split psyche. In a way, through the broken English letters of Hasina, Nazneen's life oscillates between Bangladesh (both urban and rural) and London. As Lahiri shows in *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke make friends abroad through their cultural attachment, and Monica Ali shows in *Brick Lane* this same idea of creating their own community in London. In a foreign land family value changes when it comes to contact with different cultures. Mainly the second-generation immigrants adopt the value of "what they see around". In *The Namesake*, the second-generation migrant Moushumi is often asked a question about whether she will marry in "a red sari or a white gown". But being a second-generation diasporic persona she with two other girls made a vow not to marry a Bengali man. Again, Lahiri projects that as the two cultures clash, values and morality change not only for the second-generation immigrants but also for the whole family. The first generation also starts agreeing with the second generation as they feel that the influence of time and culture is inevitable. So, when Moushumi announces her affair with Graham- an American despite her parent's disinterest they accept. Moushumi's parents feel that the surrounding also changed. Many of the second generations got married to Americans and produced half-American grandchildren. It is a general belief among the Indians that, in India, children think about their parents at every moment. It is a great trauma for Ashima and Ashoke that although their children adopted American culture, they do not bother to come and meet their parents on Thanksgiving, an annual celebration on which the children generally used to come and stay with their parents. The second-generation immigrants tend to adopt American culture from their childhood. Their day begins with saluting the American flag in the school. Lahiri writes the "official ritual is pledging allegiance first thing in the morning to the American flag" (60). Moreover, at least once a week the children have to take an American dinner. The impact of American culture is too intense to reject. The ideological preference of the children tends toward America. They enjoy swimming, bathing in the sun, and becoming brown than learning Bengali letters and culture. They prefer using a fork rather than a finger. The second generation prefers Americanized Indian rituals. In case of marriage, birthday, or any other occasion they prefer a fusion of American and Indian rituals. It is shown in *The Namesake*, that for their marriage, Gogol and Moushumi prefer their American friend's company, jazz music, sit-down dinner, and some garden, club, park, or Boat house as a venue. But their parents- the first-generation immigrants prefer Indian foods and Indian people as a guest. Similarly for dress also the second generation prefers the fusion one. Moushumi wears a Benarasi gown in her marriage.

Second-generation immigrants try to make a balance between two cultures. But they prefer to have an American identity and go far from their roots. Like every immigrant child, Gogol in *The Namesake* faces a real challenge while securing identity in the midst of differences influenced by the US lifestyle. Gogol tries to distance himself from his parents and adopt an American identity. He longs to escape from his cultural roots and venture into his US girlfriend's life. "He spends the night with Maxine, sleeping under the same roof as her parents, but a thing that Ashima refuses to admit to her Bengali friends" (166). By contrasting the lifestyle of Gogol's and Maxine's parents, Lahiri suggests that the immigrant's children are fascinated to adopt the American lifestyle. Gogol's engagement in his girlfriend's life is a signal of a second-generation immigrant's child's realization that America is their original identity. It is Gogol's ability to understand the difference between the lives of his parents and Maxine's that prompts him to desire Maxime's lifestyle. He is surprised to find the warm welcome from Maxine's parents. Gogol finds a sense of freedom and independence even at the dinner table at Maxine's house. 'A bowl of small, round, roasted red potatoes is passed around and afterward a salad. They eat appreciatively, commenting on the tenderness of the meat,

and the freshness of the beans. His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest....' (Lahiri, 2003, p. 133). Insisting someone empty the plate or requesting to eat more, which is a common practice in Indian culture, is something that irritates Gogol. This freedom and individualism activate Gogol to adopt the US way of life. Though Gogol makes a conscious effort to be different from his parents and he wants to live in a world free from the Bengali culture (he does not join the Indian association in America) but being a sensitive child, he experiences the cultural dilemma and identity crisis on a number of occasions.

The theme of nostalgia is a dominant thing in any post-colonial work of art. Though in recent times the idea of homeland is not confined to one particular place, it includes a special politics of home where inclusion and exclusion, placement and displacement, self and other exists. According to the critics like Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah and Stuart Hall, the floating nature of home and fluid identity have replaced the age-old concepts of fixed 'home' and identity as well. But the first-generation immigrants often go back to their homeland through memory. In the foreign land, Ashima in *The Namesake* continuously misses the presence of his parents. In Gogol's 'Annaprasan' (his rice ceremony), Ashima is unable to control her emotions- Ashima's eyes fill with tears as Gogol's mouth eagerly invite the spoon. She can't help wishing her own brother were here to feed him, her own parents to bless him with their hands on his head (Lahiri 40). In *Brick Lane*, a migrant named Nazneen when pregnant becomes bored with being alone at home. She gets out of the house on her own for the first time and explores the *Brick Lane* area with the fresh eye of the total stranger-

"Nazneen walked. She walked to the end of *Brick Lane* and turned right. Four blocks down she crossed the road (she waited next to a woman and stepped out with her, like a calf with its mother) and took a side street. She turned down the first right, and then went left. From there she took every second right and every second left until she realized she was leaving herself a trail." (Ali, 2003, p. 44).

Generally, immigrants attempt to linguistically bind themselves with their original homeland. Nothing but the Bengali language makes Ashima and Ashoke attach to other people. Though they try to make their children true Americans by appearance but inside they want to inject Bengali seeds inside. Thus, though Ashoke while admitting Gogol to school insists that his son knows English – "My son is perfectly bilingual" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 58), at home, he and Ashima speak in Bengali to Gogol while Gogol replies in English.

For this reason, Lahiri may have appropriated the English language. Appropriation means the 'reconstruction of the language of the center'. It is a process of capturing and remolding the colonizer's language to the new usage. Thus, it attests to separation from and resistance against linguistic colonization. Lahiri puts Bengali words in the middle of the English language. So often the reader will find Bengali words like (pujo, topor, haleem, dal, payesh, pantua, mashi, mesho, jethu, baba, mamu, pishi, etc) for signifying Bengali foods, culture, and above all their identity. In *Brick Lane*, the narrator appropriates the English language to incorporate words and idioms from the native language to bring a regional tonality to the novel. Monica Ali places special emphasis on South Asian/Bangladeshi geographical locations by highlighting a few of her chapters (e.g., chapter one, Mymensingh district, East Pakistan, 1967; Tower Hamlets, London, 1985; chapter 7, Dhaka, Bangladesh and chapter 8, Tower Hamlets, February and 2001). Ali like Lahiri appropriates the English language to incorporate words and idioms from the native language to bring a regional tonality to the novel in *Brick Lane*. In *Brick Lane*, we discern the presence of a central consciousness, which is an experiencing soul, sharing the sense of displacement and alienation of the diasporic existence. The narrator of *Brick Lane* sounds like an inmate of first-generation immigrants coming from Bangladesh. The problem of emotional conflict is felt acutely and immediately. As the novel focuses on the predicaments of only Bangladeshi immigrants clustered in apartment complexes, it can present the lurking problems in a very intense and precise manner. This empathy brings a homely tonality to the novel, which is very much aware of the feeling of homelessness. Though the reality is made no less harsh, the narrator's virtual participation in the suffering of displaced existence makes it

more humane. Like all other immigrants, the characters of *Brick Lane* long for their motherland. After the birth of Shahana and Bibi, Chanu starts thinking to return to his golden Bengal, the land of Tagore and Kazi Nazrul. He sees Bangladesh as a safer, more dignified place for his growing daughters than the country he has made his home for decades; a country that has not recognized his true worth, nor rewarded his years of constant service, and thus doesn't deserve his commitment. To him "The pull of the land is stronger even than the pull of blood" (Ali, 2003, p. 17). But his daughter Sahana, a second-generation immigrant shows her discontent. Dr. Azad describes this desire to return as the Going Home Syndrome. Many Bengalis plan to return, he explains, but they can never raise the money that they need for such travel. Stuart Hall thus says-

"There are at least two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. One is in terms of shared culture, a sort of collective.... the second one is what we really are, or rather - since history has intervened - what we have become Cultural identity in this sense is a matter of becoming as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. Cultural identities undergo constant transformation" (Dodiya, 2006).

The Namesake and *Brick Lane* both depict this concept of a continuous process of developing and reshaping. Through recapitulation and nostalgia, first-generation immigrants strive to reconnect with their cultural roots on a regular basis. However, the second generation appears to be more interested in their new country than their ancestral homeland. They feel and act like Americans as a result of the American ideal. A hybrid culture emerges as a result of the constant confrontation between the two civilizations. In their works, Lahiri and Ali depict the process of cultural integration, language shift, and homesickness in every aspect. The class portrayal of two immigrant families in London and Boston is perhaps the most significant contrast between the characters in *Brick Lane* and *The Namesake*. Both Nazneen and Chanu are from lower-middle urban Bangladesh, whereas Ashoke and Ashima are from a more established middle class in Calcutta. As a result, we see significant differences in their adaptability and acceptance of western cultures, as well as their decision to remain in the middle, despite their strong feelings for their respective cultures.

References

- Ali, M. (2003). *Brick Lane*. London: Doubleday.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H. (2004). *Key Concept in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Besley, T., and Peters, M. A. (2022, May 27). *Subjectivity & Truth: Foucault, Education, and the Culture of Self*. <https://books.google.com.bd/books?isbn=0820481955>
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Rutledge.
- Dodiya, J. (2006). *Critical Essays on Indian writings in English*. Ed. New Delhi: Sarup & Son.
- Dhavan, R. K. (2001). *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. Ed. New Delhi: Prestige Books.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Cultural Identity and Diaspora. Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Padimini Mongia. London: Oxford University Press.
- Kondo, D. (1996). The Narrative Production of "Home". *Community, and Political Identity in Asian American Theater*. USA: Duke University Press, pp. 97-118.
- Kureishi, H. (1986). *My Beautiful Laundrette and the Rainbow Sign*. London: Faber.
- Lahiri, J. (2003). *The Namesake*. New Delhi: Harper Collins.
- Pataki, E. (2022, May 26). *Caught Between Two Worlds*. P.3. Retrieved from <https://www.theroundtable.ro>