

Existentialist Crises in the Immigrants of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake*

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Abstract: Existentialist crises expounded by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus permeate in diverse form in the life of Ganguli family in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. The crises can be traced in the fear of death, in angst for alienation, in socio-cultural in-between-ness, and in sense of being nowhere which the characters experience. Most of these crises emerge from being immigrants adapting to a new culture in America and from the identity crises for being the second generation of these immigrants. Just like Nikolai Gogol's solitary soul, Akakii Akakievich, in 'The Overcoat', all the characters of *The Namesake* try vainly to find their own overcoat to create their sense of belongingness in a culture which is not originally their own, but ultimately result in facing existentialist crises. This paper will explore the source and nature of these crises in their lives.

Keywords: Existentialism, Crisis, Camus, Sartre, Expatriation, Migration, Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri

“First of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be.”

— Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism Is a Humanism

In postcolonial experience of Diaspora all outsider conditions as a(n) 'migrant', 'expatriate', 'exile' 'settler' or 'refugee' in a foreign land deal with some kind of crisis either concerning with socio-cultural identity, or meaning and purpose of existence, or both. The Gangulis in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* are suffering existentialist crises which emerge mostly for being immigrants; compromising with or adapting to a new culture, location and ideologies. Ashoke being an immigrant of 60s, Gogol being an American with Indian origin and Ashima having an unwished married life in a foreign land, all have faced the core questions regarding their belongingness and so forth their existence. Each of the Gangulis tries to avoid or face the true feeling of barrenness of their existence. All of them try to escape the reality of life, death and ultimate nothingness; and constantly try to make their life happy. The reason behind Ashoke's willful choice of his own career and settlement in Boston is somehow related to the attempt to escape the memory of witnessing from so close the thin and fragile border-line between life and death in a train accident while returning from a visit to his grandfather. By scheming to go abroad, he wants to escape the morbid, irrational, and paralyzed but yet inevitable life, which he literally faces for almost a year after the accident. On the other hand, Ashima's crisis is multiple: as a housewife she is bound to stay at home rereading hundred times the letters from her family members in India; while her husband is busy in office. Living in an alien culture, "alone, cut off by curtains" (Lahiri, 3), she is always in quest of her real home. At the end, her make-belief home is also destroyed after her husband's death. But finally, when she decides to spend six months in India and six months in States, then only does she understand the dilemma of her being 'everywhere but nowhere' in the world. Except Gogol's sister all the other Gangulis try to avoid the barrenness of their existence. They are afraid to face the reality of life which is a constant compromise with life itself. The migrated family and their inheritance live in a complex conditioning of a vicious circle in a different culture where they are not even capable to exert their 'free will'. As it is found, Gogol had affairs with different ethnic girls and he hated to be identified as American Born Confused Deshi (ABCD), but paradoxically he married to Moushumi which ties him the more to the same ethnic identity which he longs to shed away. "Though (he) is born free, but everywhere he is in chain." (Rousseau)

Ashoke had a peculiar sensation of life after his reading Nikolai Gogol's 'The Overcoat'. Just like Akaky's ghost the book haunted a place deep in Ashoke's soul, "shedding light on all that irrational, all that was inevitable about the world" (14). Ashoke's willingness to settle in abroad is provoked to avoid death; the death which provides "no sense

of victory, no solace” (289). Life in a new land is not full of blessings for Ashoke. He faces alienation in this life. Though he is proud to be an Indian professor teaching American students, he is alienated from the American culture. He does not drink and he keeps himself aloof from American lifestyle. Unlike his son he likes to keep in touch with Indian community through parties and Indian rituals. When he hears the death news of his parents and other relatives over phone he and his wife find themselves totally alienated; or, more generally, feel themselves the only Indians stranded and dislocated in some antagonistic environment. As the most important female character in the novel, Ashima, during her labour in the hospital, “wonders if she is the only Indian person in the hospital”. (3) She gives birth to her son in the hospital alone in an alien environment cut off from any of her relatives or acquaintances. No one knows her to attest her existence. This loneliness leads to an existential crisis in her.

More specifically,

“In some senses Ashoke and Ashima live the lives of extremely aged, those for whom everyone they once knew and loved is lost, those who survive and are consoled by memory alone. They feel like they are the only Gangulis in the world; Even those family members who continue to live seem dead somehow; always invisible, impossible to touch.” (63)

This profound sense of alienation always haunted Ashoke with the issues of identity and the crisis of existence. Here we find Ashoke skeptic or having ‘bad faith, about life’. He does not want to admit that death is the end of life, so he wants to create a new life in America. Unfortunately his death in America was no less than an unforgettable and insignificant death in a hospital surrounded by unknown people. Ultimately, his death echoes the idea of Camus: “after all it’s a matter of dying” (Camus 1942).

Nikhil Gogol Ganguli is inflicted with the same ‘identity crisis’ more severely as his attempts to be free and get to the shore of this dilemma was more radical. He strived to get out of this limbo state of being nowhere and relocate his identity by asserting his existence as an American. Gogol may have believed in “I rebel; therefore I exist.” (Camus) So he rebels by rejecting his name he doesn’t find the meaning of. He seems to consider that “life has no meaning a priori... It is up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing but the meaning that you choose.” (Sartre, *Nausea* 1938) His search for a new name also brews from the disassociation between his Indian parents’ lifestyle and the American lifestyle which he prefers. Even his wished for changed name gives him a grotesque feeling of acting. This is proved when he says: “But after eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential. At time he feels as if he’s cast himself in a play, acting the parts of twins... At times he still feels his old name, painfully and without warning....” (105). So, he replicates Sisyphus because “seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable” (Camus, *Myth*) for him.

Nikhil’s hating his name ‘Gogol’ is a result of his failure to balance his Indian and American identity. He could not ever escape his background and the changed name started to give him guilty feelings. He never wants to identify himself with mixed and derived identity. Gogol is always in a quest for something he does not exactly know. He was searching the meaning for living. He is afraid to face the question- what does life mean? He ends up finding the absurdity of relationship. He was always detached from his father and mother’s culture, belief and rituals. It was not even Maxine’s (his second girl friend’s) delicate aristocratic life that he longs as he quit that for giving more time to his family after his father’s death. Accepting to marry an Indian lady, Moushumi, was a result of the fear that something was slowly dying in him while everybody else seems happy. Life is a constant struggle to prove oneself and test oneself in the scale of the others. If you pass in the test you will be honoured and if you fail you will be laughed at. But he will “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” (Samuel Beckett, “Worstbound Ho”) Akaky was unhonoured, unspoken, insignificant and clownish in the eye of the others who are around him. This made his life unbearable so he wanted to change his status by buying the overcoat. Similarly the name ‘Gogol’ makes Nikhil’s existence insignificant, silly and is a reminder of the amount of callousness while choosing his name in the world. The students would tease him saying ‘giggle’ or ‘gargle’. Nikhil is never happy whatever attempts he makes to adjust his own self. By only changing the name he is never able to fully adapt himself to American culture for that reason he comes back to marry Moushumi, another girl with Indian lineage. He faces emotional turmoil after separation with Moushumi still he manages to survive her memory after one year when he is thinking of his future life. The fluidity of life makes him embrace life with more indifference like Sartre’s Antoine Roquentin. Being conscious and alert means plunging into serious dilemma of confused amalgam of identity because identity, for them, does not “merely involve the inclusion of certain American characteristics and the rejection of others or the retention of only some Asian characteristics. What emerges is a synthesis of both American and Asian identities, in fact neither Asian nor American but a unique amalgam of both.” This situation is positively portrayed by some critics

as 'freedom of in-between-ness' a condition you are neither American nor Indian, you are possessing a more universal living which has been tried by Moushumi by adapting to a third namely, French culture. But this in-between-ness makes them feel more vulnerable than free, more rootless, lonely and purposeless.

Gogol was afraid of being alone and his identity was a constant reminder of this alienation. He always felt disconnected from the existing culture. That's why he constantly tried to escape things in his life which actually were derived from the existentialist crisis. Gogol strives hard to escape from this existentialist crisis as he is continuously trying to sense the feelings of belongingness by changing name, fetching American lifestyle, avoiding Indian culture because he believes that "man is not only that which he conceives himself to be but that he wills himself to be". (Sartre 1973) But at some point he understood the meaning of life when at the cemetery he had a strange feelings for the dead, something magnetic forced him to preserve the dead's name. This something is the finality of death which we must face. Gogol easily conceives this insignificance, so he can relate this with his everyday livings. The regularity of living a life, changing names, changing girlfriend, getting divorce or removing things from his dead father's apartment, all becomes flux of incidents which will follow one by one. He learns to accept them indifferently as he reads the biography of Nicolai Gogol, at the ending of the novel, who died one month before his 43rd birthday. The final acceptance of his name is coherent with Sartre's philosophy that human being needs rationality for living but failing to achieve it human life becomes a futile strive to seek belongingness:

"In life man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing. No doubt this thought may seem harsh to someone who has not made a success of his life. But on the other hand, it helps people to understand that reality alone counts, and that dreams, expectations and hopes only serve to define a man as a broken dream, aborted hopes, and futile expectations." (Sartre 1973)

On the other hand, Ashima's crisis is severe than anybody else in the novel in that Ashima directly addresses her pungent feelings in a foreign land: the feelings of alienation, culture shock, and homesickness. Despite all the abnormality in a foreign land she is optimistic of her labour pain, a symbolic pain of being outsider. "It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive." (6) After all, this is "motherhood in a foreign land". Her body's ability to make life connects her with her "mother and grandmother and all her great-grandmothers". (6) This spiritual connection reminds her of the precarious and lonely existence in a foreign land: "That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still." (6) But she cannot remain satisfied because she is worried about imminent dilemma which she can predict in her son. Even if she is lonely she has, at least, as a mother, invisible bondage with her ancestors but her son is going to be totally refined (or adulterated?) having no residue of her own cultural connection. That is why "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." (6) The fear of which Jhumpa Lahiri has reiterated in her other work "The Third and Final Continent": "In a few years he (Narrator's son, a second generation immigrant) will graduate and pave his way, *alone* and unprotected". (Lahiri, "The Third...")

However, the crisis of identity as an immigrant which Gogol is going to face got projected as a leading edge burden on Ashima. Not only that, while the other characters are dislocated only once in their lives Ashima lost her centralized world for thrice. Firstly, as an Indian woman she is dislocated from her parents' house to settle with her husband's as most Indian woman do (like Malin Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent", and many other Indian female migrants, she had left this world at last, ancient and alone, never to return); secondly, by being shifted from her husband's home in Calcutta; thirdly, by losing her make-belief home in Boston where she lived for 33 years. Now she has the feeling of being 'everywhere but nowhere'. In every stage of her life she has to experience the feelings of temporariness like her pregnancy after which her body is supposed to take its previous shape. But her burden of detachment and feelings of alienation are perpetual never to take its previous shape:

"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. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding" (33).

Initially Ashima's diasporic life is suspended in a limbo with no apparent and concrete progression or development. Ashima, at the beginning, being dejected by American life, learns later to adapt herself by creating a world of her

own in Boston, a make-shift replica of Indian home. But finally, she understands the dilemma of her being 'nowhere' in the world. "Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign" (127). The concept of home for her remains only as nostalgia. Ashima lives in nowhere at the ending of the novel which is the extreme existentialist crises for her life.

Thus, Indian born Ashoke tries to escape the fear of death by migrating to a foreign land, his wife Ashima faces outmost alienation in a foreign land beset with unlikable culture, and their son Gogol experiences the ultimate indifferences of life while searching for the meaningfulness of his name and life. Every one of them is victim of either voluntary or imposed dislocation. Both the first generation immigrants Ashoke and Ashima and the second generation immigrant Gogol face existentialist crises which are catalyzed and effectuated, by their Diaspora though the migration was, on the first track, chosen by their 'free will'; and it was the destiny for the second generation immigrants who seem to be prototypes of Jhumpa Lahiri who said in an interview "I felt that I led two very separate lives". This in-between-ness and sense of nowhere are reflected in the second generation of immigrants who even after the endeavor and struggle to blend up with the main stream, ultimately find themselves lonely hung in a limbo such as "Gogol wakes up late on a Sunday morning, alone, from a bad dream he cannot recall." (268) In order to overcome this bad dream of in-between-ness Gogol need to follow Franklin D. Roosevelt's reminder: "Remember, remember always, that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists." So neither Gogol nor Ashoke nor Ashima is outsider alone, rather they are one in the mainstream making a late arrival. The solution of their existential crisis lies in accepting the difference and diversity as suggested by Carlos Fuentes that "Recognize yourself in he and she who are not like you and me." All the immigrants who overcome their existential crisis end up recognizing themselves in him and her, that is, the people who they are surrounded with.

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