

HUMAN RELATIONS IN THE NAMESAKE OF JHUMPALAHIRI

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Abstract

The Namesake (2003), first novel of JhumpaLahiri, is a search for identity and true-self of Ashoke and Gogol, the father and the son. The problems and complications of both obviously bring the existential dilemma in their life, that is, the dilemma of to be their authentic self, which they are not when the story begins. Ashoke at a narrow escape in a train-accident decides, as advised by Ghosh, a fellow traveller, to leave India facing death and failure in the land of his birth.

Keywords: Existential dilemma, inauthenticity, to be, self, being-in, bad -faith.

Ashoke secretly applies for a job in America and leaves his family behind. Though he later comes to marry a Bengali girl and creates his own family. His son Gogol was named ironically after a Russian writer Nikolai Gogol whose book he was reading when the train met with an accident. When Gogol was born in an American hospital, the parents were not allowed to leave with the new born without assigning the baby a name for birth certificate. So in these circumstances, the first name that came to Ashoke's mind was that of the Russian writer Gogol. JhumpaLahiri is known for bringing out human maladies all of which are born of the dread of life, of living as being in the world, doing things as others do. It is a life essentially of an anonymous self, ridden with anxiety that anything can happen in the contingent world. Living with others in an inauthentic state breeds its own anxiety. It is a state of an average person. In Ashoke's case, it is neither connected with Americans nor with his own people back home. That is why he is not a great success as a researcher. He is an average man who lives in his "average everydayness." He loses himself in the common-day-world. He was a good student but in America he does not exploit his potentials. In short, he is lost without his authentic existence and one day Gogol gets to know that his father has died. He asks himself whether his father came to die in America. What Lahiri points out is the need for existential existence, which means that one should not live a clock-time, but in existential time, that is, one should bring the past and decide with the whole heart what one wants "to be" in the future. This is what Ashoke dreads most, from the temporal human existence. But this is also true that he does nothing to overcome it.

Ashoke lives in anticipation of his own death. He came to America not merely for what Ghosh told him but primarily fearing death, as if America were the land of immortals. Instead of living in the anticipation of what was to come, he lives in the present without reaching towards the past, his potentials, his possibilities, nor does he think of the future, as if both the past and the future were only the present.

After that fearful incident, that is, the unfortunate train accident, in which only Ashoke was left alive, he turned away his face from God. Instantly, he was in a hurry to leave India and go away. His fear became his malady from which he never could overcome whole of his life. He was not

even able to tell his son, Gogol, the truth of his name because Ashoke did not want to go through that horrible incident again and nor, therefore, wanted Gogol to know it. To save Gogol, from this inheritance of fear and anxiety Ashoke tells him only the half-truth, that he was named after his favorite Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, which proves dangerous for Gogol. Gogol finds his name meaningless. It was not Indian or even American. He was tired of telling people that he was named after his father's favorite writer. That was not enough for him. Unknowingly, Ashoke fills up Gogol with the anxiousness from which he himself was escaping. But Gogol is no like his father. He wanted to discover himself for his own sake. He was not a "being-for-itself," he was always in search of his "being-in-itself". Many twist and turns come in his life in-between.

Ashima also was no better than her husband, Ashoke. From the very beginning she gives no importance to her own freedom. She follows Ashoke in America. She was equally careful about things. It can be seen at parties and get-togethers also. When Maxine said that the car was rented, Ashoke said, "It's fine where it is," but added, "but better be careful" (N 148). Ashima was also worried about the American ways of her children. She angrily reacted at Gogol's comment when he referred New Haven as home. She said, "only three months, and listen to you" (108). Even after twenty years in America she cannot think Pemberton Road as home. She and her daughter Sonia argue violently many a times about such things. Sonia closed the door of the room at her face which Gogol never did. This predicament of belonging nowhere and the confusion of identity is confessed by JhumpaLahiri also in one of her interviews, "I've inherited my parents' preoccupations. It's hard to have parents who consider another place "home" even after living abroad for thirty years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There's nobody in this whole country that we're related to" (MS 24).

It is not anything in particular which suffers a human being but simply his own unsupported, isolated condition in the world. He becomes doubtful of his own place in the world. In this condition of anxiety and curiousness he yearns for his factuality. To seek protection from this unmanliness the person keeps involving himself more and more deeply in the ordinary, in the "average everydayness" and the practical. The same happens with Gogol until the revelation of the true reason of his name "Gogol" by his father and the accidental death of his father sometime later. These two events changes his life altogether. In such a situation a person may throw himself entirely in the normal and inauthentic goals which Ashoke does. He may, on the other hand, determinedly change the character of his concern for the world, and, changing his position in the world launch himself into definiteness, what Gogol resolute to be.

Gogol chooses to be an architect as he was trained in this field by education. To change his old name with Nikhil was also his own choice. But the motive behind it was worthless. He answers to judge that he wants to change his name because, "I hate the name Gogol," he goes on saying, "I've always hated it" (N 102). He changed his name as Nikhil Gogol Ganguly. His relations with all the three girls who came in his life prove a fiasco. Even after getting a new name he has the fear of the revelation of his original name Gogol. The thought became a nightmare to him. The very idea of change involves negation too.

At such ontic stage of an entity its being becomes an issue for it. According to Heidegger, only then an entity turns itself in "Dasein" an entity which hopes for freedom, for his autonomous and ontological being. A Dasein like Gogol becomes his authentic self only when he finds the structure of his being. Time also plays an important role in it. In fact, time is a property of any

being which moves alongside with that being. His past and present together makes him a phenomenon who can raise himself from fallen ness to possibility of future. The possibility of “to be” comes through “knowing” and “discourse”.

Gogol does not feel related to Ruth or Maxine the way he feels to Moushumi. Moushumi was a Bengali with whom he got married after his father’s death as his mother Ashima wanted him to get married to an Indian girl. He tried to achieve a balance in this relationship. He had his childhood memories with Moushumi and it was something special for him. The desire for connection creates a deep tension. Moushumi does not respond to Gogol as much he deserves. She falls in an extramarital relationship. At last the marriage ends in divorce. Gogol becomes conscious of himself. He wonders his name will be diminished after his death. He thinks whether he will get married again or not, or will he ever have his own children to be named. He resolves to leave a name behind. He hoped to achieve an “existential”, i.e., an existential structure.

Despite all his efforts to avoid his past in America he could not ignore the memories of his past, his name, his parents, his Indian heritage. He always connected freedom with the escape from family, from his real- self, from his name and relations. But at last he accepts it and by accepting it the entire lesson he learns from his life pave the way for his future. He feels himself drawn to his heritage. At the end of the novel we find Gogol reading *The Short Stories Of Nikolai Gogol*, the book his father had gifted him on his fourteenth birthday. His father had said while giving this book to him, “We all came out of Gogol’s overcoat”, “ It will make sense to you one day”(78). This was the day Gogol was able to understand the meaning. He keeps on reading the book with anxiousness without any disturbance. He has decided to be a professional architect engineer and to open up a company by his own name in the state like America which was not the resolution of an ordinary man. Such kind of decision can be taken by a man who has found himself in his real self. The novel in true sense deals with the maladies of existence, the maladies which are found in most of American novels after modern era.

According to JhumpaLahiri the fundamental mode of the being of human existence is future which has to be faced in critical moments such as when one is not to be. The past, on this view, is less important than the future. Gogol realizes it after the death of his father. He decides not to copy others’ modes and designs and thus live authentically. However, JhumpaLahiri is not fatalistic in her attitude to the fact that one must die; out of this recognition of our mortality, out of this sense of guilt, of not having achieved what we might have, develops resoluteness. Gogol develops resoluteness with a new confidence, winning from the possibility that lay garmenting him, not repeating what has been done before, not in the sense of doing just that thing again, but as responding to those responsibilities which were inherent in him, but which were not realized. Thus a hero is born out of a coward as he realizes his reserve yet unrealized possibilities.

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