

BILDUNGSROMAN IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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Abstract

A Bildungsroman relates the growing up of a sensitive person who goes in search of answers to life's questions with the expectation that these will result from gaining experience of the world. In a Bildungsroman, the goal is maturity, and the protagonist achieves it gradually and with difficulty. The genre often features a main conflict between the main character and society. Typically, the values of society are gradually accepted by the protagonist and he/she is ultimately accepted into society. The novel describes the life of the son of Ashoke and Ashima, named Gogol, as he travels from infancy to maturity. It also traces the psychological development of a young man from birth to maturity and his place in society. Lahiri provides a psychological study of Gogol's anger at being an oddity and a misfit in his homeland of Massachusetts, his rejection of his father's traditions, his embrace of American culture, his subsequent confusion, disappointments and self-reconciliation.

Key Words: Bildungsroman, psychological, homeland, etc

Jhumpa Lahiri's , Pulitzer Prize winner Bengali American writer, *The Namesake* explores the concept of cultural identity of rootlessness, of tradition, and familial expectation. It is a novel about an immigrant family's imperfect assimilation into America. The novel describes the struggle and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they are accustomed to. *The Namesake* also falls under Bildungsroman genre guidelines in that the novel describes the life of the son of Ashoke and Ashima, named Gogol, as he travels from infancy to maturity. Lahiri provides a psychological study of

Gogol's anger at being an oddity and a misfit in his homeland of Massachusetts, his rejection of his father's traditions, his embrace of American culture, his subsequent confusion, disappointments and self-reconciliation.

In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze “The Namesake” as a bildungsroman novel through the character of ‘Gogol’ that traces the psychological development of a young man from birth to maturity and his place in society. As a literary genre, the form originated in Germany towards the end of the eighteenth century. Bildungsroman is a German word. It was first introduced by Karl Morgenstern in the early 19th century and was later popularized by Wilhelm Dilthey in the 20th century. Bildungsroman, often literally translated as a ‘novel of growth’ the term applies more broadly to fiction detailing personal development or educational maturation. As a literary genre, the form originated in Germany towards the end of the eighteenth century and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–6) is commonly regarded as the prototype. A *Bildungsroman* relates the growing up of a sensitive person who goes in search of answers to life's questions with the expectation that these will result from gaining experience of the world. In a *Bildungsroman*, the goal is maturity, and the protagonist achieves it gradually and with difficulty. The genre often features a main conflict between the main character and society. Typically, the values of society are gradually accepted by the protagonist and he/she is ultimately accepted into society. In Britain, the Bildungsroman became synonymous with a certain sense of social dislocation as is discernible in some classic accounts of problematic identity and stifled individuation, such as Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) and, *Great Expectations* (1861) and Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh* (1903). Elsewhere in Europe, the nineteenth century saw the publication of Bildungsromane more overtly transgressive in the arenas of sexuality and sexual politics. Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1874–6) present women as the models of psychological growth whose development intrinsically involves the fulfillment of a sexualized subjectivity, a self-realization that flies in the face of social convention. Twentieth-century interpretations of the genre have seen its subversion,

fragmentation and reinvention but have not diminished its compelling narrative importance. Modernism's addiction to the revelation of the interior life tended to focus attention away from the social interaction of the individual and towards the ineffability of the fractured self. One notable exception is D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), which charts the growth to emotional maturity of Paul Morel against the backdrop of financial hardship, industrial pragmatism and social upheaval. Postmodernism's attention to the suppressed narratives of marginalized groups has further expanded the envisioning potential of the Bildungsroman. Nonwhite Bildungsromane, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and J. M. Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983) explore the experience of self-realization under the oppressive regimes of political intolerance, whilst Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) offers a transgressive undermining by problematizing the very notion of identity.

The subject matter of this novel is the development of the mind of protagonist or character passing from the childhood to maturity or adulthood, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world. The novel opens with the birth of newborn baby son of Bengali couple named Ashima and Ashoke who lives in the Massachusetts, USA. They are prepared to take their son home however they are stunned to know that they cannot leave hospital until they give their son legal name. The traditional naming process in Bengali culture is to have an elder give the new baby name. They have written to Ashima's grandmother to ask her to name the baby, but the letter never arrives and soon after the grandmother dies. Meantime Ashoke suggests the name of 'Gogol' to his son. He chooses this name because due to circumstances of his survival in a train accident years back in India, during which he was reading the work of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. People rescued him from the rubble, as they saw a page from the same book in his hand. Ashoke considers this author his lifeline.

When Gogol is five and starts going to kindergarten his parents have told him that at school, instead of being called Gogol, he will be called by new name: Nikhil. But he does not want to be called by the new name, nor does he understand why he should have a good name that his

parents are not even going to use. In fact, the boy instinctively rejects his dual identity: “He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn’t know. Who doesn’t know him” (57). They try to reassure him that all Bengalis have two names and that it is part of growing up and of their ethnic identity. Ashoke eventually dismisses the child’s concern altogether by saying: “To me and your mother, you will never be anyone but Gogol” (57).

When Gogol is in the sixth grade and goes on a school field trip, first to a textile mill somewhere in Rhode Island, then to a small wooden house with tiny windows, placed on a large plot of land, which used to be the home of a poet. The final stop of their trip is the graveyard where the unnamed poet is buried. Then their teachers give them a name-related project. The peculiarity of his name(s) becomes even more conspicuous to him after this experience. The students receive some sheets of newsprint and colored crayons and are asked to rub the surfaces of the gravestones in order to discover their own family names of towns. This school trip is Gogol’s cultural encounter with “the other city”, where each Western family has a resting place.

By the age of fourteen Gogol has come to hate his first name, which he considers both absurd and obscure. He hates signing his name on the drawings he makes in class, or constantly having to explain that it does not “mean anything ‘in Indian’, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian” (76). After he receives Nikolai Gogol’s collection of stories for his birthday, the main character becomes even more miserable when he ponders that not only does he have a pet name turned into a good name, but he also bears a Russian author’s surname turned into a first name. To his mind, this double difference marks his ‘othering’ and subsequent exclusion from American society in which he longs to assimilate.

The following year Gogol went to Calcutta for eight months along with his parents and sister. They made visits to their relatives and some popular places. After back in America, in September Gogol returns to school one morning in January, the English teacher teaches a short story by the name of ‘The Overcoat’, by a Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. After

listening to this Gogol felt embarrassed. Gogol Ganguli blames his parents for never having told him any of these abnormal biographical details.

The Idea to change his name had first occurred to him when he was sitting in the waiting room of his dentist. He found there issue of 'Reader's Digest' and he came to an article called 'Second Baptism'. He read that ten thousand Americans had changed their names each year. That night at dinner table he brought up change-of name form. Ashoke signs the change-of name form. In India such a thing would be inconceivable, yet Gogol insists that he is going to bear a Bengali name from this moment on. Finally Before joining college, he legally changes his name to Nikhil which symbolizes his self conscious attempt to completely disown his self. Under the name of Nikhil he has his first sexual experience with a girl whose name is Ruth whom he meets on the train back home, before Thanksgiving. After a relationship of two years, they break up, and Ruth moves to England. Now a student at Yale and physically dislocated from his parents, he acts as if he were totally independent from them. Although the big move to New Haven coincides with the time of the name change, he is aware that his parents, their friends, and all his own friends from high school, will never call him anything but Gogol.

Gogol's second significant relationship is with Maxine, another American woman, but one who is almost the opposite of Ruth. Gogol meets her at a posh party, and this affair marks a brutal distancing from his parents. While dating Ruth he would keep in touch with them, but after getting together with Maxine, he is absorbed by her sophisticated world and almost forgets about Ashima and Ashoke. Gogol gradually grows closer to the Maxine family .He was more or less a part of their family enjoying his days together in New Hampshire.

All of sudden, Ashoke-Gogol's father dies of a stroke at Cleveland. His father's sudden death makes him withdraw himself to a cocoon. Gogol is all of sudden saddled with responsibilities, and is busy by now managing his sister and mother and thus minimizes the emotional vacuum. Maxine could not digest the fact that he was gradually growing closer to his mother and sister .And finally they break-up and thus second relationship too fails.

It is not surprising, then, that Gogol's third significant relationship is with Moushumi Mazoomdar, a woman he has known from childhood and who stands for the ethnic identity he has now decided to adopt. She is a PhD candidate at NYU, writing a dissertation on francophone poets from Algeria. She is the first Bengali he has ever been involved with. Often, Gogol meets Moushumi. Since he has already met her in childhood, they get well and after a brief date get married. But in a twist in the tale, by the first half of their second year in the marriage, Moushumi had grown restless and seemed to regret in her decision to get married. Gogol often felt like poor substitute for Moushumi's ex-fiance, Graham who left her. Gradually she indulges in extra marital affairs with a person named Dimitri Desjardins. She told Gogol about him everything. For the first time in his life, another man's name upset Gogol more than his own. And ultimately they get divorced.

In the last chapter of the book, Gogol comes home for Christmas. On the way to his home he was missing all the memories of his mother, father, his home, room. He is now 32 years old, married and divorced. Now that his mother is leaving for India, Soniya his sister is getting married. Their house already sold off. It will be occupied by strangers and there will be none to call him 'Gogol' except the occasional calls and emails he get from his mother. It's hard to believe that his mother is really going, that for months she will be so far. He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind. Gogol knows now that his parents had lives their lives in America in spite of what was missing. Finally Gogol learns the fact that, it is impossible to escape from one's origin. Gogol says, these people who gathered for Christmas party, this celebration, his family life, which feels like a string of accidents, incidents inspiring him to move, to make a new life on the other side of the world. Now he felt that, though there was the disappearance of the name that had chosen by his grandmother and accidentally his being named Gogol, defining and distressing him for so many years, he had tried to correct that randomness and that error. His marriage had been misstep as well, yet these events have formed Gogol, shaped him, and determined who he is (P-287). Gogol goes to his room to clean up. Most of his things are packed already, such as essays written in high school under the name Gogol, different records and clothes that he had left behind. Among

his old books he discovers The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol, his father's present for his fourteenth birthday. He opens it and finally connects this gift with his name and identity. He notices an inscription written in his father's tranquil, optimistic hand: "For Gogol Ganguli , the man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (288).

Finally, Gogol became successful to find out who he is and where he belongs to. Even after several visits in India, he could never be part of the India. He could never be an Indian as he was born and brought up in the US at the same time the name and the family values never allow him to be completely American. He always remains in dilemma about his identity and that is the reason can never be the one he likes the kid Gogol, Neither grown up Nikhil .It is impossible to borrow a new culture completely. The best is to absorb the best of both the worlds. Gogol is able to come out of his dilemma and is able to walk tall knowing very well that his identity has both the cultures in it.

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