

## A Study of Double Consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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### **Abstract**

*This article uses theory of 'Double Consciousness' expounded by W.E.B. Du Bois to explore binary perception of Indian and Western cultures adopted by Indian diasporas and problems of identity as an Indian or American in Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, The Namesake. The article focuses on the problem caused due to Double Consciousness that results in cultural hybridity and explores the Indian and American cultural discourses experienced by the characters in the novel.*

**Keywords:** Double Consciousness, Du Bois, Cultural hybridity

Jhumpa Lahiri is the doyen of second generation Indian Diasporic writers. She has carved a niche for herself among the Indian Diasporic writers. Much of the observations of Jhumpa Lahiri's work trace the theme of Double Consciousness among Indian Diasporas. These experiences have created her impact right from her birth in London, upbringing in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and present residence in New York. This brings out a clear picture of her unsettled Indian diasporic life and therefore the aspect of Double Consciousness left a deep influence on her writing to shape the subjects of unsettlement. In the novel *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri's literary creations respond to the contemporary debate and discourse on identity which is generally seen as a construct of ideology and Consciousness.

The central idea of the novel, *The Namesake* revolves around the generational gap between immigrant parents and their American offspring and allows for fuller understanding of the Indian Diasporic Experiences. The story explores the Indian Diasporic Experience in regards to the concern of Ashima and Ashoke, the first generation, towards bringing up their child in the background of bi-cultural milieu with two different attitudes into American and Indian. Since the locale of the novel is America and India, there appears a cross-continental reference and the tie limit is punctuated between 1968 and 2000. During this time, the Ganguli family experiences many changes in their Indian Diasporic life. Their Diasporic Experiences in alien land are encroached with full of frustrations and consolations. The most striking feature of their experience as Indian Diasporas is that their cultural primitivism

stands as a purifier in the midst of America's multicultural background since one cannot keep himself in exile from this hybrid society for a long time. Though the first generation Indian diasporas in quest of economic prosperity and adjustment try to absorb in the multicultural background but this cannot offer the necessary satisfaction to adjust in the alien land. Their cultural interface in the Indian diasporic milieu creates their identity as a hybrid. The hybrid cultural practice leads Ashima to self-judgment, and dual mentality in the multicultural environment.

A complex trajectory of contemporary literary theories particularly the cultural studies explicates the phenomenon of identity formation through the process of interpellation. In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, the theory of Du Bois's 'Double Consciousness' is applied to understand the problems of the Double Consciousness in the characters that happen to fluctuate between the Indian culture and Western culture thereby trying to bridge between both.

The term double consciousness was first noticed in an Atlantic Monthly article titled "Strivings of the Negro People" in 1897. It was later republished in article entitled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in the 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois describes "Double Consciousness" as follows:

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBoisopedia)

Explaining the Du Boisian Theory of "Double Consciousness", John Pittman in his paper states that:

"Double Consciousness is a concept in social philosophy referring, originally, to a source of inward "twoness" putatively experienced by African-Americans because of their racialized oppression and devaluation in a white-

dominated society. The concept is often associated with William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, who introduced the term into social and political thought, famously, in his groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). (Pittman 2016)

The state of Double Consciousness is experienced by Jhumpa Lahiri herself. It is due to her binary perception of Indian and Western culture in which she has grown up might have tempted her to write about lands, the land of her ancestral origin and the land where she dwells. Jhumpa Lahiri herself is of the opinion that "India continues to form part of my fictional landscape." (Morgan-Witts). In the midst of both the lands, Lahiri finds a line of demarcation between the two cultures in which she was brought up. The bicultural upbringing meditates in her Consciousness which appears in the form of cultural hybridity as observed by Robin E. Field. He states:

"Lahiri demonstrates how in occupying the cultural borderlands of India and the United States, these second generation Americans each created a unique cultural bricolage composed of aspects from their south Asian roots and their contemporary American lives" (Field pg. 165).

This integration towards both the countries might have motivated Jhumpa Lahiri to set her novels in both the countries that declare her to be the writer of Indian diaspora. The East-West Encounter to accept both the cultures is a major aspect to deal with Jhumpa Lahiri's idea of Double Consciousness in her novel *The Namesake*. The close analysis on the perspective of Double Consciousness in Ashima displays her as an embodiment of those diaspora individuals who have strong links to their homelands at one side and on the other side, a keen desire to assimilate in adapted land grounded with both the cultures. The spirit of Double Consciousness is evident when Ashima happens to calculate time according to Indian standards. "American seconds tick on top of her pulse point. For half a minute, a band of pain wraps around her stomach [...] She calculates the Indian tie on her hands" (Lahiri pg. 04). A close analysis of the text from the point of Double Consciousness reveals that Ashima's appears to cultivate interstitial perceptions on different connotations like "belonging," as well as "unbelonging", where Double Consciousness may not be synthetically or dialectically "resolved," but rather enables an internal analysis to explore the mundane question of assimilation.

The insider-outsider conditions perceived to develop a sense of Double Consciousness may create counter-pulls in Ashima's consciousness when she moves to America.

"Whether she was willing to fly on a plane and then if she was capable of living in a city characterized by severe, snowy winters, alone." (Lahiri pg. 09) Ashima sensitizes dual consciousness between her homeland that appears to make her feel nostalgic. The alien land create a feeling to her as expectant. The sense of insider-outsider experienced by Ashima in the alien land is the byproduct of Double Consciousness that probes to articulate how the diasporic individual like Ashima face salient problems of Double Consciousness that leads to psychosocial harms to Diasporic populations and problematize to search their identity.

If we observe the process of nurturing of Gogol by Ashima from the lens of Du Boisian notion of 'Double Consciousness', we find the bi cultural bringing up is seen in two way process. The one we can see from calling her son with pet name 'Gogol' that reflects the Indian culture of naming a person with pet names. The other process, we find from Ashima's second sight given to her son Gogol to see the American world with the eyes of an Indian, a world which yields him no true self-Consciousness. At one side, Ashima perceive to be rooted to her Indian soil, on the other side, She tries to make her son merge into American culture. This results to a kind of dual consciousness not only in Ashima's psyche but Gogol as well. This is the reason why Gogol's receiving of both cultures create a sense of Double Consciousness which is evidently reflected in the text:

He seems to adopt the American culture which may be seen in his rejection of Indianness. Gogol never thinks of India as *desh*. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India. . . . There are also lost of ABCDs. He has no idea there are this many on campus. He has no ABCD friends at college. He avoids them, for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share. (Lahiri pp. 118-119)

Ashima's way of nurturing to Gogol with both East-West cultures showcase an act to escape from state of exile as she feels that her son must be made to learn the peculiarities of Indian culture to sustain the Indianness and also American culture to assimilate in foreign land and create an interstitial space. The text asserts this fact:

She teaches him to memorize a four-line children's poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adorning the ten-handed goddess Durga during puja: Saraswati with her swan and Kartik with peacock to her left, Lakshmi with her own and Ganesh with his mouse to her right. Every afternoon Ashima sleeps, but before nodding off she switches the television channel to channel 2, and tells

Gogol to watch Sesame Street and The Electric Company, in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school. (Lahiri pg. 54)

The text evidently reverberates with Du Bois theory as stated:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,-a world which yields him no true self-Consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this Double-Consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (Pittman 2016)

Ashima's act to teach Gogol to memorize a four-line children's poem by Tagore and equally involving Gogol to watch English channels, Sesame Street and The Electric Company is an act to make him doubly conscious to assimilate in Western culture with Indian sensibilities. Gogol look America through the eyes of Ashima's way of accepting both cultures appears much relevant to Du Bois's "Double-Consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." (Pittman 2016)

From the examination of the text, it is found that the bicultural practices that Ashima nurtured in her child is an act to overcome the exilic condition and to adopt hybrid culture as a substitute to find solace and exist in foreign land. This binarism of West/East, first world country culture/ third world country culture and self/other forms the key words in post colonialism, generate the trauma of Indian diasporic experiences. Families of Indian Diasporas appear to have linked over time through intergenerational transmission of legacies which help the members of Indian diaspora articulate family identities, more about family history, and provide succeeding generations with information about the family culture and ethnicity.

From the examination of the text, it has been observed that an immense burden has been placed on second-generation children in regards to cultural allegiance, family loyalty and racial purity. While living in such luminal space, the assimilation in both the cultures adopted by Ashima finds dramatically altered, for the manner in which she finds herself changed due to the uncertain nature of interstitial environment. Such changes in assimilation of two cultures at same time form the notion

of Du Bois' 'Double Consciousness' where one finds himself in a state of two folded souls, two thoughts and two warring ideals. This dual situation is seen in Ashima who feel her twoness as an American and Indian, two souls and two thoughts. This can be seen in her son's upbringing by making him dwell in two cultures and thereby planting the seed of two cultures as she feels that Double Consciousness is the way of life to sustain in an alien land.

A.K. Mukherjee's in his article, "Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies: A Study" elucidates that "The Indians who have settled abroad feel themselves exiled, as they are in their consciousness unable to cut off completely their umbilical cords that still bind them in their emotional crisis" (Mukherjee pg. 108) The statement of A.K. Mukherjee analyses how the first generation immigrants are fixed to their original roots and look back to the Indian dream. This is the reason for Ashima's sense of exile in alien land.

A close scrutiny from the perspective of Double Consciousness shows how Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the Double Consciousness, between the first and the second-generation immigrants and the gap between Indian parents and their half-American children. She speaks of the struggle of formation of identity and the gradual process of assimilation among second-generation immigrants. Her literary works highlight and exhibit the tendency of these hyphenated children of second generation who move away from the restrictions of their immigrant parents and are often devoted to their community and their responsibility towards other immigrants as well as the native place and its people.

The discussion of texts from the lens of Du Boisian theory of Double Consciousness, it is probed that Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the conflicts between the first and the second-generation immigrants and the gap between Indian parents and their half-American children. She speaks of the struggle of formation of identity and the gradual process of assimilation among second-generation immigrants. Her literary works highlight and exhibit the tendency of these hyphenated children of second generation who move away from the restrictions of their immigrant parents and are often devoted to their community and their responsibility towards other immigrants as well as the native place and its people.

The aspect of consciousness analyzed in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* explores the Double Consciousness, resulting in a self that has been found neither unified nor hybrid, but rather fragmented. Looking from the lens of Du Boisian theory of Double Consciousness, Lahiri

showcases the random movement of Double Consciousness in her characters who are fixed in their original land and at the same time does not cut off from the social and external reality of adopted land. In the gamut of Indian Diasporic Experiences, Lahiri's creative adroitness is seen from her meticulous dealing with Indian and American consciousness which leads to a state of living in dilemmas and rootlessness in her characters. Jhumpa Lahiri explores most of her characters that are suffused with identity consciousness and continuing problems of living in alien societies. The literary and creative corpus of Jhumpa Lahiri traverses through the conduit of the psychological realities of human relationship in a dislocated geographical and cultural terrain. Her characters experience the conflict with dissimilation and assimilation in both the cultures that results to the creation of "Double Consciousness"

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