Chapter - 4

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Lahiri, the author has framed the story as a voyage between America and India. Although the major share of the plot is in America, the air of Indian culture can be effortlessly felt in the lives of the characters. And it is in midst of it that she has planted the issue of identity beyond name. For the main protagonist his name is a black spot on his personality until he learns the vastness of identity beyond name. It is a story that touches back and forth the psychological conflict a young mind goes through.

The story begins with details about Ashima’s pregnancy; she has come to America after getting married to Ashoke Ganguli, a PhD scholar in MIT. She fears about bringing up her family on a foreign land.

During Ashoke’s childhood his grandfather inspired him for reading. He could read while walking around. On Oct 20, 1961 Ashoke boards train to meet his grandfather who has suffered eyesight problem. In train he meets Mr. Ghosh who advised him to travel and see the world. While Ashoke reads his favourite author’s collection of short stories: The Overcoat; the train meets with an accident. Rescue team is able to save Ashoke by noticing book’s page in his hand. He stayed on bed for next one year thinking about Ghosh’s words; and decides to move to America.

Here in America after Ashima delivers a baby boy; wait for Ashima’s grandmother’s letter with a suitable name for the baby starts but it doesn’t arrive. So fatefully Ashoke names the baby boy as ‘Gogol’ after his favourite Russian author, ‘Nikolai Gogol’.

Gogol refuses to use new name i.e. ‘Nikhil’ for school registration and decides to carry on with ‘Gogol’. In the beginning everything seems fine but at slow pace, uneasiness, a kind of
hate for the name rises up in Gogol’s mind. He changes his name to Nikhil, trying to seek happiness but on the contrary it brings a kind of duality in his life, to be somebody he is not. One day when Gogol gets late in returning home on Thanksgiving Day, Ashoke confesses to him about the train accident that changed his life. Gogol has never thought of it, a sense of guilt accompanied with a feeling of betrayal fills him. Soon after his education in Architecture, Gogol starts working in New York. He seems to enjoy his life with girlfriend, Maxine.

Ashoke has moved to Cleveland, on a research fellowship of nine months. Back home Ashima learns to be on her own, to be engrossed in things that are truly hers. One night Ashoke rings up to tell her about mild stomach ache for which he has come to hospital. The other morning, hospital staff informs Ashima about Ashoke’s death due to sudden heart attack. Sonia, Gogol’s sister informs him and he goes to Cleveland, to claim Ashoke’s body and his belongings,

A year after Ashoke’s death on his mother’s insistence Gogol starts seeing a Bengali girl, Moushumi. With the blessings of family and relatives, both set to start a family of their own. Slowly Gogol begins noticing Moushumi’s indifference towards their relation. He thinks it is due to the burden of Moushumi’s exam until one day when by mistake Moushumi confesses of her extra marital affair.

Their house at Boston is sold to a couple, as Ashima has decided to divide twelve months in a year equally between America and India. Gogol is separated from Moushumi and working for a small Architectural firm, designing under his own name, Sonia is an attorney and soon to be married to her American boyfriend Ben. Ashima hosts her last party to say goodbye and asks Gogol to take pictures. He goes to Ashoke’s room to get the camera, coming down he peeks into his room and among all other things he notices the book ‘Collection of short stories’ by Nikolai Gogol gifted by his father on his fourteenth birthday. He has forgot of it to be still
hidden in his room but today he sits cross legged on his bed, holding this book in his hands, and he begins to read ‘The Overcoat’.

Research questions based on the findings are answered below:

Research question 1: As an act of communication, how meaning is created in Fictional Novel, with reference to Identity and Multiculturalism embedded therein?

The protagonist in the novel The Namesake ‘Gogol’ suffers identity crisis as he lingers over his name, its absurdness and idiosyncrasy pushes him to change it. He ends up with the realisation that identity has nothing to do with a name. Identity moves with time; one carries a bit of every moment as identity with oneself. Age number changes, face structure changes, roles in society changes, even the outlook towards the world changes but in between all of these something in bits and pieces is carried forward as you: that is what gives you your identity. Gogol realises this when changing his name brings no difference in the way people looked at him. It was only him who created and then worked to solve this puzzle. A few lines from the novel are worth quoting here:

For his father had a point; the only person who didn’t take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person who constantly questioned it and wished were otherwise, was Gogol (The Namesake, p.100).

Given the culture in which these situations took place would have been different, for sure the things would have been different too. This is how Lahiri has created meaning embedding identity and multiculture together. One can’t sketch the identity of characters from The Namesake in few words, with few qualities. Each character is simple yet complicated, limited yet far reaching, unique yet mingled.
Lahiri has encoded the struggle for identity acknowledgement in a country that is supposed to be Gogol’s own but for a matter of fact it is not due to his roots that are buried in some other country, some other culture. The string that attaches Gogol to Bengali Indian culture for him is the reason of embarrassment but it is this string that has painted bold strokes of his identity:

But after four years in New Haven he didn’t want to move back to Massachusetts, to the one city in America his parents know. He didn’t want to attend his father’s almamater and live in an apartment in Central Square as his parents one had, and revisit the streets about which his parents speak nostalgically. He didn’t want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world (The Namesake, p.126).

His leaning for drawing since early childhood is trait that has been passed to him from his maternal grandfather. From here, he takes on to opt for Architecture as his career. And eventually with the movement of the story he boards a train back to himself, his family.

Lahiri has shown that Gogol’s struggle moved around his unwillingness to accept the tint and shades of his roots in his identity. And the moment he begins to accept this beauty, it made life much simpler just like tracing the way down back to home:

Gogol knows now that his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he doesn’t possess himself. He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best they could. And yet, for all his aloofness toward his family in the past, his years at college and then in New York, he has always hovered close to this quiet, ordinary town that had remained, for his mother and father, stubbornly exotic (The Namesake, p.281).

The mark of multiculturalism on the identity of the characters can be seen easily. Lahiri in her novel has made effort to encode the essence of two differing cultures, this is the base of her story, a message she has attempted to pass on to the readers. Taking inspiration from her own life, she has drawn the double layered outline, depicting not only the life of those who
come from different cultures, trying to adjust and appropriate the second culture they are a part now, distinctively opposite from their native culture; but also of those who are born and brought up in one culture while their parents and ancestors belong to different cultures. With how much simplicity Lahiri has created the magic of putting all these complexities together is actually an advantage of living a sort of similar life in reality.

Ashima’s identity is the knot connecting India and America. She has an identity, a persona that is strong in her own way. Her grandmother knew this quality of her character much before Ashima executed it:

“Enjoy it,” her grandmother had bellowed in her thundering voice, helping Ashima to straighten. With trembling hands, her grandmother had pressed her thumbs to the tears streaming down Ashima’s face, wiping them away. “Do what I will never do. It will all be for the best. Remember that. Now go” (The Namesake, p.38).

In spite of the fact that she fumbled at few steps she emerged victorious in all the difficult situations. She learned to swim with tides. Moments of difficulties she faced could be traced in the following excerpts:

“I won’t,” she insists thickly, looking neither at the baby nor at him. She pulls back a bit of the curtain, lets it fall. “Not here. Not like this.”

“What are you saying, Ashima?”

“I am saying hurry up and finish your degree” (The Namesake, p.33).

She has tried to accept such lack of human acquaintance as the American way. But the thought of bringing up the baby in this world, without family in a foreign country makes it suddenly unbearable. These halts don’t stop her; she possessed immense courage to prevail over:
She begins to pride herself on doing it alone, in devising a routine. Like Ashoke, busy with his teaching and research and dissertation seven days a week, she, too, now has something to occupy her fully, to demand her utmost devotion, her last ounce of strength (*The Namesake*, pp. 34-35).

At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know and which they claim not to mind (*The Namesake*, p.161).

A typical part of her identity is the dedication she possesses to maintain her touch with India, her roots. Weekend parties, maintaining address books, traditional food, ceremonies and lot more:

She prides herself on each entry in each volume, for together they form a record of all the Bengalis she and Ashoke have known over the years, all the people she has had the fortune to share rice with in a foreign land (*The Namesake*, pp.159-160).

After Ashoke’s death when she decides to divide her time equally between India and America; it reveals the connection America has made with her. No doubt America didn’t belong to her initially but it is in this country where she begun, created and lived her life with Ashoke and their two children:

It reminds her of their life together, of the unexpected life he, in choosing to marry her, had given her here, which she had refused for so many years to accept. And though she still does not fully feels at home within these walls on Pemberton Road she knows this is home nevertheless – which she has created, which is everywhere around her...... (*The Namesake*, p.280).

Lahiri has patched identity and multiculture in a manner that she overpasses those novelists who lift their hand at handling different cultures neutrally, paving way for the beauty of each culture to come out. She makes it a point for the readers to note that the ease Gogol and Sonia feel in America is the same as for Ashima and Ashoke in India. It’s not the country but commonness with the culture, the affinity, the contextual canvas and the dialogic communication with life that sketches identity.
Moushumi’s desire to be free, independent and live a life of her own, which she couldn’t do in reality till her adolescence, has given her a diverse character. Her calmness, her poised persona and her indulgence in books is a part of her she wears as a cloak, to hide her from the outer world, but doing so over the years she has totally repented and regretted. Drawing an outline through her character in the novel, one can trace the development of identity as a result of childhood experiences very well proposed by Sigmund Freud (1905) in the form of a theory of identity, ‘Theory of Psychosexual development of Personality’:

Even now she regrets herself as a teenager. She regrets her obedience, her long, unstyled hair, her piano lessons and lace collared shirts. She regrets her mortifying lack of confidence.... (The Namesake, p.214).

Moushumi took refuge from her internal stress either in cigarettes or in organization. Even after she’s found her roaster, she continues, completing the task Alice has left undone. The mindlessness soothes her. As a child she always had a knack for organization..... (The Namesake, p.256).

This habit of hers is what makes her accidentally know about Dimitri’s resume and then spoil her marriage with Gogol. Subtleness of her identity is so shining that the readers are forced to overlook the hollowness of her senses.

These characters provide meaning to the identity and multiculturalism by communicating to readers through words.

**Research Question 2: How impactful/influential an author’s personality shades are in shaping the personality of characters in a Fictional Novel?**

The impact of Lahiri’s personality in shaping the characters of the novel is a bit tricky thing to analyze. None of the character is fully her nor are the characters fully independent of her influence. Quite same as in the novel each character has developed in patches with support from other characters’ personality. All the characters of the novel act as the icon of the
author’s personality but definitely with a variation in degrees. Jhumpa Lahiri was born originally as Nilanjana Sudeshna; Jhumpa was her nickname which teachers and friends picked up simply for being easy in pronouncing. The glimpse of Gogol’s struggle between a nickname and a public name could be drawn from here.

Moushumi’s separation from her roots at a young age is similar to that of Lahiri’s. With such similarity decoders get a hint of what could possibly happen with a child if one is removed from the base that sets the beginning of the identity construction. A pinch of her personality is visible in the character of Ashoke as he opts for reading to keep him away from the outside world that causes him disturbance and Lahiri opts for writing.

Ashima’s character is hers in a subtle way; her strength to fight the feeling of exile and her determination to build something she can call her own is what resembles Lahiri. As stated before, on semiotic plane the characters are icons of a representamen that is here enacted by Lahiri. But the different icons are acting at differing degrees; none is fully her.

Research question 3: What kinds of signs are present in the novel significant for improvement of the Theory of Mind?

When a story is supported by visuals (as in films) it nullifies the imaginative power of the audience. Whereas stories like The Namesake, without any visual support put stress on the imaginative power of the decoders and thus improve their ToM.

Gogol’s hesitance to go to kindergarten, his numbness in front of the kindergarten’s principal in the following sentences reveals the difficulty a young mind would face living with the decisions of the adults that are distant from his little understanding of the world:

There is a reason Gogol doesn’t want to go to kindergarten. His parents have told him that at school, instead of being called Gogol, he will be called by a new name, a good name, which his parents have finally decided on, just in time for him to begin his formal education (The Namesake, p.56).
Gogol’s parents have decided another name for him, i.e., Nikhil. He is unable to understand the need to have another name, he doesn’t want to go to school, to leave his world of Gogol and be Nikhil. He questions his parents:

Why do I have to have a new name? He asks his parents, tears springing to his eyes....He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn’t know. Who doesn’t know him? (The Namesake, p.57).

This hesitance, this difficulty in Gogol’s mind initiates a silence in him, such issues if not resolved may even lead to major psychological issues. Awareness about all this is made possible by novel without making one experience it, only by being a part of the communication:

Welcome to elementary school, Nikhil. I am your principal, Mrs.Lapidus. Gogol looks down at his sneakers...... When the question is repeated and there is still no response...... (The Namesake, p.58).

This is mere the commencing point of the identity crisis that follows in the life of the Gogol and of the signs that are scattered all over the novel for the improvement of the Theory of Mind. Lahiri has used every character to fill the novel collectively with all the shades of emotions and feelings. Ashoke’s indulgence in his books, his kinship with the Russian writers since his early childhood has shaped his personality in a way far different from those of his siblings and cousins. His wife Ashima knew his manner of being limited to his world and of being less expressive about his feelings. She kept on justifying it to herself whenever she seems to lose patience, get irritated and distressed. Lahiri has gone far in incorporating such minute yet crucial details in the whole of the novel; she has not restricted it to specific words or sentences. Ashima lies in the labour room separated by curtains when she hears one of the co-patients; it suggests her of something that she as a wife will never experience:

Carol lies to her left. “Goddamnit, goddamn you, this is hell,” she hears one of them say. And then a man’s voice: “I love you, sweetheart.” Words Ashima has neither heard nor expects to hear from her own husband (The Namesake, p.3).
During her adjustments in the new apartment, Ashoke has brought Ashima into, she gets upset with most of the facilities that happens to be sort of problem but she makes no complain. Instead she writes letters to her family and in-laws describing the beauty and comfort American life have given her:

The apartment is drafty during winters, and in summer, intolerably hot. The thick glass windowpanes are covered by dreary dark brown curtains. There are even roaches in the bathroom, emerging at night from the cracks in the tiles. But she has complained of none of this. She has kept her disappointment to herself, not wanting to offend Ashoke, or worry her parents (*The Namesake*, p.30).

*The Namesake* through these details puts readers into driver seat making them realise and conceptualise the reason behind other’s actions. Even Ashoke himself notes such characteristics of his personality. In the waiting room of the hospital, he notices the reactions of other men and compares with that of his own.

The men wait with the cigars, flowers, address books, bottle of champagne.....Ashima is the one who keeps all their addresses, in a small notebook she carries in her purse. It has never occurred to him to buy his wife flowers (*The Namesake*, p.12).

After Ashoke’s death, Gogol visits his apartment in the Cleveland to take away the belongings and leave the unwanted in the trash. Gogol has never been shown speaking about his sentiments for his parents; in fact, throughout the story he has tried to maintain a distance from them. But today while he is alone in the room, the fact that his father inhabited this place during the last few days of his life, suddenly Gogol feels attached to everything in a strange way. The following sentences explore such inner and unshared part of Gogol’s:

A man outside the first of the buildings, marked RENTAL OFFICE, nods to him as he drives past, seeming to recognise the car. Has he mistaken him for his father? Gogol wonders, the thought comforting (*The Namesake*, p.174).

While vacating the apartment, he still possesses his father in him.
He lingers over nothing at first, but in the kitchen he pauses. He feels guilty throwing out the food; were it his father in his place, he would have packed the spare rice and tea bags into his suitcase (*The Namesake*, pp. 175-176).

*The Namesake* puts forth the difference between the struggle and ease in other’s lives by making readers understand other’s mental states. The comfort that has been shown to be relaxing Sonia throughout the story is a product of the complexities faced by the rest three members of her family. Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol, each of them shared more or less a bit of these complexities while initiating the journey as an Indian family in America. This ease is evident at the time of selecting a name for her, the same responsibility which took years in the case of Gogol:

This time, Ashoke and Ashima are ready. They have the names lined up, for a boy or a girl. They’ve learned their lesson after Gogol (*The Namesake*, p.61).

*The Namesake* is not just a story to read, it is much more than that. It is a dialogue that takes place between identity and culture irrespective of the place or the generation.

**Research question 4: What kind of psychological gratification authors seek through Defense Mechanism using Fictional Novels as a tool?**

The impact of Lahiri’s personality on characters is through an application of a combo of projection and sublimation as the forms of defense mechanism. Defense mechanism not in the sense that she had dangerous or unacceptable impulses but in the way that she took other means to gratify herself when she realised that in reality it is hard for her to do so. Projection is projecting the thoughts and desires on to somebody else whereas sublimation is using the energy in some constructive way to make it fruitful in order to avoid what is unwanted or not possible. Her solitude turned into solace through writing. Her stories, characters kept her engrossed and allowed her to step away from being a forced alien in the things she didn’t belong to. In an interview with Vibhuti Patel for Newsweek International (1999) Lahiri says:
"When I learned to read, I felt the need to copy. I started writing ten page 'novels' during recess with my friends' writing allowed me to observe and make sense of things without having to participate. I didn't belong. I looked different and felt like an outsider". (Available at: http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/literature/lahiri/bio.html, accessed on 23-04-2016)

This part of her personality bears close affinity with that of Ashoke which he inherited from his grandfather. He opted for reading whereas she opted for writing but the ideas dwelling in both are alike:

For that hour Ashoke was deaf and blind to the world around him. He did not hear his brothers and sisters laughing at the roof top, or see the tiny, dusty, cluttered room in which his grandfather read.

“Read all the Russians, and then reread them,” his grandfather had said (The Namesake, p.12).

The irritation, the nostalgia and the craving for a world of her own is projected through the personality of Moushumi. This is what Lahiri would have wanted to say eagerly throughout her life. The compulsion to move from London to America, frequent trips to India, the pressure to feel at home in India made her feel an outsider. She never felt at home. She says:

"It's hard to have parents who consider another place "home"-even after living abroad for 30 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. India was different-our extended family offered real connections." Yet her familial ties to India were not enough to make India "home" for Lahiri, "I didn't grow up there, I wasn't a part of things. We visited often but we didn't have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us".

(Available at: http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/literature/lahiri/bio.html, accessed on 22-04-2016)

Defense Mechanism as a technique is used by all of us, the only difference is that very few are consciously aware of it while using.

Research question 5: How far the “Psyche” of the novel is the product of author’s unconscious mind?
As a novelist, *The Namesake* is Lahiri’s first attempt. *The Namesake* has been even converted into a motion picture by Mira Nair. Before *The Namesake*, Lahiri has written a volume of short stories “Interpreter of Maladies” and won Pulitzer award for the same. Lahiri’s background is quite multicultural, born to an Indian Bengali couple in London she grew up in Rhode Island, USA. It is not difficult to figure out the feeling of being away from ‘home’ that hovers on *The Namesake* emanating from the stream of her conscious and unconscious both. A website dedicated to “The literature and culture of the Indian Subcontinent” has noted Lahiri’s remarks during a conference in Calcutta in 2001. She describes this absence of belonging as:

"No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile" (Available at http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/literature/lahiri/bio.html, accessed on 23-4-2016)

Although these lines come two years before *The Namesake* got published, the similarity between these lines and the following lines from *The Namesake* reflects mirror image:

True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere (*The Namesake*, p.276).

A conscious effort to write about such a feeling of homelessness or exile remains the visible part of the novel’s psyche. However, an unconscious effort on her part, a similarity with the issue concerning name and identity takes over the charge of the novel. Novel appears as a battle ground where the conscious self well aware of its situation is unconsciously standing against itself for carrying forward this feeling into individual identity.

**Research question 6: How diverse and independent is the world of Novel in itself?**

Unlike general stories with a typical beginning and an end, it appears quite like a journey that is independent of its destination and source. The one involved in this act of
communication is bound to feel its dialogic quality. The novel, its story, its characters seem to exist even after the visible mark of the ending, even after the pages are done with flipping. *The Namesake* creates and suggests the infinity of the semiosis universe. Each sign has referred to an object through an interpretant side by side constructing the scope for object to be sign for the next step in this chain. Analyzing *The Namesake* in terms of this triadic relationship reveals the diversity of the novel to be in absolute continuity. The author has developed the visible end of the novel in such a fashion so as to create space for a new beginning in the minds of those who read. Even though the end of the novel does not remark a formal ending, there is no feeling like something is missing or left in between; that is the craft of the words Lahiri has played here with:

He leans back against the headboard, adjusting a pillow behind his back. In a few moments he will go downstairs, join the party, his family. But for now his mother is distracted, laughing at a story a friend is telling her, unaware of her son’s absence. For now, he starts to read (*The Namesake*, p.291).

The beginning is not treated as a starting point; the story has already begun, the characters are moving into it, enacting their part and it is supposed of the readers to go with the flow. Readers are expected to become a part of the semiosis and to generate their own meaning:

On a STICKY AUGUST EVENING two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl (*The Namesake*, p.1).

Its diversity lies in its simplicity that has made a story so powerful. It deals with issues of culture and tradition, family and identity without yielding to the common route that novelists follow.

*Research question 7: To what extent the intended meaning differs from the words used in the novel?*
Intended meaning doesn’t lie separate to the visible words. It is equally a part of the same text; the only difference is that to understand it one needs to read between the lines. The words used in the novel *The Namesake* act as a way for the readers to discover the intended, the latent meaning. The process of semiosis, the universe thus created by the signs involved in the act of communication leads to the discovery of the meaning that is invisibly attached to the words.

The latent meaning is not to tell readers mere about the story of a family but to point towards the millions of families who come from different cultures and always stay in a kind of exile which lingers on. Words used in reference to Ashima are deliberately picked to intend the difficulties, the amount of patience that is required to survive in a foreign culture.

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 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 (*The Namesake*, pp. 49-50).

The characters are not penned down to construct the story but to engross the real life identities that are a product of Multiculturalism. The intention here is to make the readers share the stage with the characters and to feel the difficulties individuals go through during the development of identities on multicultural ground. Lahiri has been so profound in her narrative and its minute details that the novel has come out to be purely human and not American or Indian.

Communication as an act runs on a basic requisite to understand beforehand the mental state of all those involved in the act or related to it in one or the other way.

Meaning is not fixed, it’s never perfect. It’s so contextual that it changes with everything and anything that change around it. There is nothing like the term ‘correct’ meaning of words;
meaning is subjective, contextual and dynamic. An author tries to put meaning in his/her story but during the course of encoding, words take their own meaning. Conscious efforts of author become minimal with words generating their own meaning and the unconscious of the author bringing thoughts that the author him/herself might not be aware of. No matter how wide the branches of communication and culture go, meaning serve as root in keeping both of them connected. An attempt through this study has been made to throw light on the construction of Identity and Multiculturalism in the novel The Namesake so as to add a new feather to recent cloud of cultural studies in communication. The construction of Identity and Multiculturalism in the novel The Namesake has been done on the same ground. It has been noted here that the act of communication The Namesake enacts with the reader go deep to touch their very own identity and cultural issues. It doesn’t provide itself as an exemplary novel but as an experiential novel that very well explores how human is linked to culture and identity simultaneously at one time. This thesis makes no such claims so as to suggest perfection of the analysis; it very well accepts that every time The Namesake will be analyzed it will bring in light new meaning. Every time this novel will be engaged in the act of communication, its meaning will differ. As the meaning is not static, it’s truly dynamic in nature. This is the beauty of communication, it is never the same and that is what makes it the most wonderful of human acts.