

ENGLISH – RECKONING & THE NAMESAKE ESSAY

Identity is something that individuals create for themselves, not something that they are born with or given.

Following the lives of their respective immigrant families in foreign lands, Jhumpa Lahiri's coming of age novel The Namesake and Magda Szubanski's memoir Reckoning, question the qualities that define an individual's identity. Despite the two distinct cultures, both texts suggest that identity is formed largely by nature, rather than nurture. Throughout the texts, both authors imply that forged identities are achievable, although they are unsustainable, and pervasiveness of heritage and past is an essential part of an individual's identity. Ultimately, Szubanski and Lahiri detail the conflicting notion of born and created qualities and question the integrity of a persona that is forced rather than accepted.

Forging an identity for oneself is an unsustainable practice. While The Namesake and Reckoning see characters creating their own identity to assimilate into their respective environment, both texts caution against the impermanence of false names. In The Namesake, Lahiri demonstrates this through Gogol's attempts to create an identity where he immerses himself in the world of the stereotypical New York family, the Ratliff's. From a young age, Gogol is a character who had always been "chronically aware" of his outsider status and burdened by his identity as a child of Bengali immigrants. Envious of their "intimacy and ease" with the American city and Maxine's "gift of accepting her life", Gogol's desire to become a version himself, Nikhil, that adopts their identity blinds him from the reality of his actions. Blinded by his desire to belong, Gogol is unable to recognise the fabricated and empty reality "of all these months" spent with the Ratliff's. Thus, Lahiri highlights to her audience of the irony of Gogol's so-called "effortlessly incorporated" life with the Ratliff's. Positioning her readers to conclude that creating a mask to hide behind is only a temporary solution. In contrast to Gogol's search for a new identity, Magda's quest had been a result of her desire to assimilate into the expectations of those around her. While Gogol turned to New York and the Ratliff's to camouflage himself, Magda did so through the "A-Grade player" that her father hoped for. Szubanski foreshadows the looming conflicts that will arise as a result of Magda's forced identity, through the "wooden-framed Slazenger" gifted to her by her father. In the text, Szubanski employs Peter's gift as a physical representation of the unattainable expectations that accompany Magda's new persona; a task that she "could barely get [her] hand around". Thus, the author warns her audience of the dangers of the walls of forged identities "collaps[ing] inwards". Likewise, Lahiri employs Gogol's namesake, "we all come out from Gogol's overcoat", to convey a similar message. The short story mentioned throughout the text, written by Nikolai Gogol, highlights that hiding from society, with an overcoat, and forming a secondary identity is as impermanent as a mask. As beneath the surface still remains the true identity and persona of the individual. Evidently, Gogol and Magda's search for a sense of belonging to soothe their alienation from society affirms the consequences of reshaping identity.

The inheritance of identity, while overlooked by characters in both texts, proves crucial to the formation of their identities and is suggested to be a vital part of resolving internal conflicts. In both texts, Szubanski and Lahiri explore the impact of cultural heritage and the past on their character's identity. Evidently, in Gogol's attempt to suppress his Indian culture, Lahiri illustrates to her audience of the ominous presence of heritage in an individual's identity. Throughout the text, Gogol attempts to reinvent himself into an identity that had no resemblance to "that error" given to him from birth. Although after his father's death, during a period of vulnerability and confusion, the Bengali mourners' "plainly prepared" diet was the only thing that felt normal and "seem[ed] to make sense". Through the author's juxtaposition between Gogol's previous "string of embarrassment" for practising a culture that "no one else he knew followed", Lahiri highlights to her audience of the pervasive nature and Gogol's

change in heart towards his Bengali culture. Thus, positioning her audience to recognise the weight and irreversible property of inheritances. Similarly, Szubanski employs her characters to portray the inevitable impact of the past on identity. Mirrored in Reckoning, Magda's father, Peter did not want to identify as a "British-pole, or Polish-Brit", and instead buried his ties to Poland, including his memories and culture. Despite this, in contrast to Peter and Gogol, Magda's sense of nationalism towards Poland flourished; she did not identify as "Scottish-Pole or a Polish-Scot", but as Polish. Her desire to learn Polish and commitment to the "glorious Polish cause" stemmed from a "...[longing] to know about my roots..." and saw her search for her identity introspectively, unlike Lahiri's Gogol. Through this, Szubanski similarly suggests to her audience of the inability to suppress inheritances, such as culture and past. Rather than forgetting such qualities, they can only be accepted or, in agreement with Lahiri, will inevitably find its way. Szubanski further emphasises the pervasive influence of Magda and Peter's shared heritage, even though it had been part of him that remains "submerged for decades". Thus, Szubanski demonstrates to her audience that inheritances are an inescapable part of one's identity that will ultimately "float to the surface" – like objects that are designed to float, heritage will remain afloat. Evidently, both authors convey the idea that inherited qualities cannot be suppressed as they are a pervasive part of their character's identity and can only be accepted.

While emphasising the importance of acceptance, both Lahiri and Szubanski suggest that identity is fluid and changing, regardless of nature or nurture. Lahiri suggests that there is a flexible definition of identity; as it is ultimately determined by an individual's own acceptance and sense of belonging. This is brought to her audience's attention through the locus of Gogol's cultural upbringing and childhood. Like the letter with Gogol's name "forever hovering somewhere between India and America", Lahiri alludes to Gogol's true nature being a combination of his ties to Indian and American culture. Lahiri further emphasises this to her audience through the meaning of Gogol's good name, "he who is entire, encompassing all". Through the Bengali tradition of bhalonam, a name used to identify Gogol "in the outside world", similarly foretells the importance for him to embody and embrace all, nature and nurtured qualities. Whilst conveyed through different means, Szubanski similarly describes to her audience that sense of belonging is pathed by acceptance of qualities inherited from birth and experiences. Conversely to Lahiri's focus on culture, Szubanski details the acceptance of personal experiences and qualities. In the text, Szubanski employs Magda's weight loss as a metaphor for not only the physical weight that had been lost but as well as the experiences that had weighed her down. The new Magda that lost the burdens that previously defined her now "felt insubstantial". In turn, catalysing Magda's observation that "there is no right answer..." to define identity and the importance of "learn[ing] to forgive yourself". Through Magda's realisation, Szubanski demonstrates to her audience the importance of acceptance of experience and memories on her character's sense of belonging and alienation. Thus, both Lahiri and Szubanski highlight to their audience of the fluid nature of identity, to be both created and given, while emphasising that it is ultimately determined by an individual's own acceptance and sense of belonging.

Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake and Magda Szubanski's Reckoning discuss the prevalence of inherited identities, nature, over forged ones. Lahiri and Szubanski explore this through the sustainability of created identities, the inevitable impact of an individual's cultural heritage and the importance of acceptance. Ultimately, Both authors convey the idea that in modern society, where conformity is often favoured, the qualities and experiences that seem uncontrollable and impossible to prepare are an integral part of what defines one as a unique individual.