



# International Journal of Languages and Culture

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

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## Exploring the Dilemma of Hybrid Identity: A Case Study of “Gogol” in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Novel “*The Namesake*”

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### Article Info

Volume 3, Issue 2, December 2023

Received : 16 June 2023

Accepted : 22 October 2023

Published : 05 December 2023

doi: [10.51483/IJLC.3.2.2023.26-32](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJLC.3.2.2023.26-32)

### Abstract

This paper aims to perform a comprehensive analysis of the intricate concept of hybrid identity by focusing on the character “Gogol” in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel “*The Namesake*.” The concept of hybrid identity is increasingly gaining prominence in response to the growing diversity and interconnectedness of our communities especially among immigrants. This underscores the complex interplay between individuals’ diverse cultural heritages and the geographical environments in which they are nurtured. This study examines the many encounters of Gogol Ganguli, the central character in “*The Namesake*,” as he grapples with the challenges of reconciling his Indian heritage with his American culture. The achievement of this task is facilitated via the utilization of a blend of qualitative and textual analytic methodologies.

**Keywords:** Hybridity, Identity, Dilemma, Multiculturalism, Cultural Heritage, Immigrants, South Asian Literature, Postcolonialism

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### 1. Introduction

In an era characterized by unparalleled levels of worldwide mobility and cultural interconnectedness, the concept of identity has transformed into a framework that is characterized by its fluidity and multiplicity. The notion of hybrid identity emerged as a consequence of the intricate interplay between an individual’s cultural heritage and the influences exerted by their diverse ethnic environment. The aforementioned event, which serves as a reflection of the complexities inherent in contemporary society, has been depicted in literary works as a captivating story element. Jhumpa Lahiri’s literary work, “*The Namesake*,” explores the intricacies of the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli’s, life and experiences, offering a poignant analysis of the complexities inherent in navigating several identities. The novel is a compelling work of literature. Gogol adeptly traverses the intricate landscape of his dual inheritance, symbolizing the significant challenges faced by those who straddle the delicate balance between tradition and modernity, as well as the tension between heritage and assimilation.

In the novel “*The Namesake*,” the exploration of identity formation is a central theme. The protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, embarks on a quest to discover his true self among the complexities of his dual cultural heritage. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel “*The Namesake*,” the central character, Gogol Ganguli, grapples with the challenge of selecting a name that would effectively encapsulate his complex and conflicting nature. Gogol acquired his name in homage to the renowned Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, as a consequence of an arbitrary occurrence. From the outset, he found himself immersed

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in a milieu replete with dichotomous elements. The narrative chronicles the protagonist's journey from early life to maturity, as he endeavors to cultivate a coherent identity within the complex interplay of his Indian background and his American upbringing. Lahiri adeptly depicts the nuances of mixed identity via Gogol's encounters, offering readers a lens to examine their own intricate sense of self. The narrative of the work is presented via the perspective of the character Gogol.

The phenomenon of hybrid identity, characterized by the amalgamation of many cultural affiliations, poses a significant difficulty for individuals as they navigate the diverse cultural norms, values, and expectations associated with their various group memberships. Migration, globalization, and multiculturalism collectively contribute to the transformation of individual and communal identities. The intricate interplay between cultural history and the process of adaptation is a defining feature of the contemporary human condition. The narrative of Gogol serves as a depiction of the inherent difficulties and triumphs associated with the process of assimilating the divergent aspects of one's identity. This tension resonates strongly with readers residing in a progressively diverse and interconnected global landscape.

At the heart of Gogol's struggle for identity, the article presents a comprehensive analysis of the protagonist's encounters, choices, and introspections as they embark on a daring expedition into the heart of Gogol's struggle for identity. Subsequently, the subsequent sections of the essay delve into pertinent theoretical frameworks, extant literature on hybrid identity, the methodology employed for analysis, and, notably, a qualitative assessment of Gogol's narrative trajectory. The findings derived from this study extend beyond the realm of fiction and connect with the lived realities of persons grappling with the complex tapestry that constitutes their own identities.

As the exploration of Gogol's life progresses, a comprehensive understanding emerges not just of his individual experiences, but also of the broader thematic concerns including diversity, assimilation, and the perpetual quest for a sense of belonging. The analysis of Gogol's contacts, relationships, and significant moments in his life sheds light on the core internal conflicts and external factors that contribute to the formation of his personality. The exploration of Gogol's complex identity may be facilitated by employing qualitative textual analysis, which allows for a deeper understanding of his experiences and their relevance to those navigating diverse cultural environments. This will enable us to have an understanding of the parallels between Gogol's experiences and those of other individuals.

The novel "*The Namesake*" may be understood as a literary representation that encapsulates the intricate interplay between inheritance and contemporaneity, conventional practices and flexibility, and the persistent quest for self-identification within a culturally diverse global context. Lahiri skillfully weaves Gogol's journey, serving as a reflective tool to explore the complexities of contemporary identity, while also guiding readers towards cultivating empathy, fostering understanding, and embracing diversity. Gogol's voyage functions as a reflective surface that illuminates the intricate nature of modern identity, while also serving as a guiding light. Our exploration starts with an inquiry that beyond the realm of literary imagination, as we delve into the multifaceted nature and lived encounters of the protagonist, Gogol. Throughout the course of our journey, we gain valuable and profound understandings regarding the broader framework of hybrid identity within the context of the globalized world in the twenty-first century.

## 2. Literature Review

The exploration of hybrid identities has garnered significant attention in the fields of literary studies and cultural studies. Scholars and writers are increasingly interested in comprehending the complex interplay between an individual's cultural heritage and the diverse array of influences that arise from residing in multicultural environments. This section delves into fundamental topics and relevant literature that provide a foundation for understanding the intricacy of hybrid identity as shown via the character of Gogol in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel "*The Namesake*." The character of Gogol holds a prominent position within the narrative of "*The Namesake*."

The present study aims to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding hybrid identity. Scholars and cultural theorists have dedicated considerable attention to the formulation of a conceptual framework for hybrid identity, which may be seen as the simultaneous presence of many cultural affiliations. Stuart Hall's seminal research on cultural identity underscores the dynamic nature of this construct, positing that it is not a static entity but rather a result of the interplay between many cultural discourses. Hall's claim that identity is a result of interaction lends weight to this viewpoint (Hall, 1990). The examination of characters like as Gogol, who navigate many cultural contexts and adapt their self-perception accordingly, underscores the significance of a malleable understanding of identity due to the distinct obstacles it entails.

Homi Bhabha's publications provide valuable insights into the phenomenon of cultural syncretism, which refers to the amalgamation of various cultural elements to create novel and hybrid manifestations. The concept of adaptation is

also a subject of discussion in the literary works of Homi Bhabha. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" underscores the notion that individuals occupy an intermediary realm amidst many cultures, whereby the interplay of different cultural elements facilitates the emergence of novel identities via negotiation (Bhabha, 2004). Gogol's attempts to integrate into both Indian and American societies might be interpreted as a manifestation of the inherent challenges and possible advantages associated with cultural hybridity.

An Examination of Hybrid Identity Explored through Narrative Throughout an extensive duration, literary works have functioned as a medium for scrutinizing the intricacies inherent in the concept of identity. The challenges experienced by individuals from divergent cultural backgrounds are extensively examined in literary works such as "*The Joy Luck Club*" authored by Tan (1989) and "*White Teeth*" written by Smith (2001). These tales offer valuable perspectives on the tensions, disputes, and eventual reconciliations that arise from the juxtaposition of different cultural norms inside their individual cultures. In a way akin to this, the narrative trajectory undertaken by Gogol in "*The Namesake*" serves as an enlightening exemplification of the convergence of diverse cultural influences inside one individual.

The Role of Names and Labels in Signifying Identity and Categorization Names serve as powerful markers, encompassing a multitude of historical, cultural, and familial significance. Lahiri's exploration of Gogol's choice to change his name brings to the forefront the tension between heritage and acculturation. The aforementioned notion bears resemblance to the literary work "*The House on Mango Street*" by Sandra Cisneros, whereby the central character experiences a transformation of their self-identity by assuming a different name (Cisneros, 1991). These narratives provide light on the complexity of naming and its implications for an individual's identity formation and sense of belonging.

The topic of interest is to the phenomenon of cultural memory and its relationship to generational shifts. The concept of cultural memory, as explored by Marianne Hirsch, offers valuable insights into the mechanisms via which humans transmit the memories and experiences of their cultural heritage over successive generations (Hirsch, 2008). In the novel "*The Namesake*," Ashoke and Ashima Gogol serve as symbolic representations of the endeavor to reconcile their Indian heritage with their current American circumstances. The exploration of Gogol's personal journey in self-discovery is enriched by the interaction between different generational perspectives on identity and cultural heritage.

Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book "*The Ethics of Identity*" looks at the ways in which identity impacts the success of our lives. He further argues that identity precedes culture and that individuality is ethically prior to identity (Appiah, 2005, p. 105). In Gogol's case, he had the similar dilemma in understanding the burden of individuality and identity and how to merge them together in order to be a successful individual.

Janina Brutt-Griffler, in her book "*World English*" states that the way colonizers robbed the youth of their nationalized identity and left them with a mixed and confused identity, Gogol, being a multicultural identity generation faced the similar dilemma throughout his life (Brutt, 2002).

The literature that was analyzed provides valuable insights into the complex nature of hybrid identities and their portrayal in different literary works. The intricate nature of navigating diverse cultural affinities and the process of negotiating one's identity within a multicultural setting is underscored by the collective body of scholarly work generated by notable academics such as Hall, Bhabha, Tan, Smith, Cisneros, and Hirsch. Theoretical frameworks and literary inquiries offer a substantial foundation for examining Gogol's development of identity in "*The Namesake*," shedding insight into the broader implications of hybrid identity in both fictional and actual contexts. In particular, the literary work entitled "*The Namesake*" was authored by Nikolai Gogol.

### 3. Methodology

This study is conducted in a qualitative mode of research through the method of textual analysis. According to Alan McKee in his book "*Textual Analysis – A Beginner's Guide*". This research method involves "Interpretation of something's meaning- a book, television program, film, magazine, T-shirt or kilt, piece of furniture or ornament" (McKee, 2003, p. 9). He further elaborates "A text is something that we make meaning from" (McKee, 2003). In an answer to the question, what is Textual Analysis? He says, "When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" (McKee, 2003, p. 6).

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology to explore the multifaceted nature of Gogol Ganguli's process of identity formation, as shown in Jhumpa Lahiri's literary work titled "*The Namesake*". The application of qualitative textual analysis allows for the acquisition of a comprehensive understanding of character development, topic investigation, and the complexities of hybrid identity that extend beyond the superficial aspects of the story. The

chosen methodology aligns with the qualitative nature of the study's objective, which is to explore the psychological, emotional, and social factors that influence Gogol's self-perception.

The underlying justification for doing qualitative textual analysis is an essential method for examining the several dimensions of fictional narratives, hence providing a valid rationale for its application in qualitative research. The literary work titled "*The Namesake*" is widely regarded as a rich repository of meanings, symbolisms, and character interactions that provide valuable insights into Gogol's exploration of his personal identity. This research aims to delve into these aspects of the text. The narrative contains several meanings and symbols that are prevalent. Qualitative analysis is well-suited for delving into the intricacies of identity due to its capacity to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of how characters navigate their cultural backgrounds, interpersonal connections, and individual choices. The utilization of qualitative analysis enables a comprehensive evaluation of the strategies employed by characters in managing their identities.

The subsequent sections delineate the several phases involved in qualitative textual analysis. The primary text selected for this research is the complete novel "*The Namesake*." The narrative is thoroughly analyzed to identify significant dialogues, interactions, and descriptions that offer a valuable understanding of the development of Gogol's character.

The selected segments of the text were subjected to a rigorous process of classification and categorization based on the themes of hybrid identity, cultural adaptation, family dynamics, and instances of identity crisis. The utilization of coding enables the organizing and categorization of literary works that help the understanding of Gogol's journey.

The process of extracting themes involves retrieving the encoded passages that are relevant to the formation of Gogol's persona. The issues encompassed in this context consist of the influence of cultural heritage, the difficulties associated with adapting to a different culture, the hardships encountered in romantic relationships, and the pivotal moments of self-discovery.

The analysis of the contextual elements around each topic is undertaken to get a comprehensive comprehension of the significance of the textual components within the broader narrative. The analysis of character interactions, the impact of societal norms, and Gogol's emotional responses are key components of this undertaking.

This analysis focuses on the narrative arc employed by Nikolai Gogol in his literary works. This qualitative research encompasses the full of Gogol's narrative arc, facilitating the identification of patterns, conflicts, and shifts in his self-perception. The comprehensive nature of this method enables a more precise depiction of the dynamic process of his identity development.

The study employs methods of triangulation to ensure the maintenance of analytical validity. The collaborative efforts of several academics facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the discovered issues through the joint process of coding and analyzing specific parts of the text.

The utilization of qualitative textual analysis proves to be a potent method for delving into the multiple levels of Gogol's exploration of identity as depicted in "*The Namesake*." This approach facilitates a thorough understanding of the obstacles, choices, and ultimate resolves encountered by Gogol as he navigates his mixed identity. The achievement of this task is facilitated via the systematic process of coding, categorizing, and analyzing textual resources. This methodology enables the research to provide a valuable addition to the broader discourse around hybrid identities, the intricacies of cultural assimilation, and the difficulties of reconciling one's own identity within a multiethnic context.

#### **4. Analysis**

This section only relies on the text of Jhumpa Lahiri's "*The Namesake*" and employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine the significant events, dialogues, and descriptions that intricately shape Gogol Ganguli's process of reconciling his mixed identity. This study examines the psychological, emotional, and social factors that influence Gogol's evolving self-perception throughout the course of his lifetime, through an analysis of individual quotes.

As the story opens, we see that Ashima and Ashoke have been married and living in America where Ashima has been facing home sickness being at hospital and in labor pains. As Gogol's birth takes place, naming him becomes a matter of confusion since the very first day. Both parents were waiting for a letter from India in which Ashima's grandmother chose name for their child but since the letter never arrived, they had to name him something before discharging from hospital. And therefore, "Gogol was named "Gogol" because of Ashoke's love for Russian author Nicolai Gogol thinking that this must be his pet name "Duknam" as in Bengali tradition and they will name him later as good name "Bhalonam".

Later we see that the letter got lost in between and never arrived so Ashoke named him Nikhil which he did not accept when he was called by this name at Kindergarten. As a child he asked with tears in his eyes "Why do I have to have a

new name?" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 51). Further we see his fear of being someone else "He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him" (Lahiri, 2004, p.51). For him, being Gogol in his childhood was much more important so his father stated "Don't worry, to me and your mother, you will never be anyone but Gogol" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 52). So he was registered as Gogol at his school rather than Nikhil.

Later we noticed his love for his name when "at the top of sheets of scratchy pale yellow paper he writes out his pet name again and again" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 55). He doesn't mind being Gogol as a child rather he used to find chunks of his name here and there on the road signs "As a young boy Gogol doesn't mind his name" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 59).

For Gogol, his name was so peculiar and he realized that the day he visited graveyard where he was given an activity to search for names on grave stones. On one grave he finds a name Abijah Craven and he realized he has never seen this name before but then "he has never met another Gogol". His teacher has said "Now those are some names you don't see very often these days, sort of like yours" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 62). We can see that he is so fond of obsolete and rare names of past that he even carefully kept his parchment at home when his mother refused to paste on the wall. He feels an undefined and unexplainable attachment with them.

Gogol, despite being attached to his identity never bothered to know and ask why he was given this name of a Russian author nor the inspiration for his father. When his father gave him a book of Short Stories of Nicolai Gogol, he saw the picture of author on the cover page and "is relieved to see no resemblance. He concludes confidently, there is no resemblance at all" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 66). There is perfectly a good reason for doing so. At the back of his mind, as he grew up, he started hating the idea of constantly explaining questions about his name. "He hates having to tell people that it doesn't mean anything in Indian" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 66). It was this, that he started questioning his own identity that does not belong to any of the places he lives or been to. "He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 67). He couldn't date any girl as other boys started doing. He was resistant and the reason was being "Gogol". "It dismays him that his parents chose the weirdest namesake. What dismays him most is the irrelevance of it all" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 67). At the similar instance, something occurred to him of his namesake that "no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 69). This came to him as a realization that his identity is lingering in between all these cultures.

There came a turning point in his personality at high school which made him change his identity. His English teacher Mr. Lawson discussed his namesake Nicolai Gogol and his life events during one class. He calls him an "eccentric genius" as well as "his life was a steady decline into madness" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 78). His state can easily be judged "Gogol shuts his eyes. Please, stop, he wishes he could say to Mr. Lawson. Please stop, he says, mouthing the words" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 79) which brought an ultimate turmoil in his life.

'Gogol' changes into 'Nikhil' when he met Kim and introduced himself as "I'm Nikhil, he says for the first time in his life" to which she replied "I've never heard that before. That's a lovely name" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 83). He wanted to tell his friends that it wasn't 'Gogol' who kissed Kim but it was the new 'self' 'Nikhil'. He decided to change his name permanently and officially and his irritation towards his parents increased when he asked why they gave him this name in the very first place to which his mother replied that's the Bengali way. He replied that his name isn't even Bengali. We can feel the growing irritation and hatred towards his name and that he himself is the person who torments himself, get embarrassed of his name, and constantly questions his own identity.

When he goes for official name change no one from his parents accompanied him which shows that they might be unhappy over his decision. But for Gogol, being Nikhil is his new self, new identity and new life. He was glad that he doesn't have to write the old name anywhere. He would have his "good name" onto his American Express Card (Lahiri, 2004, p. 88). But he knew that this part of his personality and childhood will remain with him in the form of family and childhood friends and the family from Calcutta.

Getting his new name was above all the garb over his entire old self. Now that he was Nikhil, it was easy for him not to listen to anything his parents instructed him. This new identity changed him from inside out or rather he deliberately wanted to come out of the world of Gogol to accept and welcome the world of Nikhil. The poles apart shift in his personality was intended to forget the shame and pain related to his old name. Despite doing all this, he was unhappy somewhere inside. His conflict is apparent in these lines:

*There is only one complication: he doesn't feel like Nikhil. Not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past. But after eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential. At times he feels as if he's cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally*



*different. At times he still feels his old name, painfully and without warning. He fears being discovered.* (Lahiri, 2004, p. 90)

Part of him wanted to go back to the old self and part wanted to stay in present. He was terribly divided into two halves and felt as if he has split personality. Not just the names change but his entire identity and personality shifted with name. This tells us that how names affects us in every way. His father tells him of the real story behind choosing that name for him. He tells him about the accident he had and it was Gogol that saved him from that horror. “Gogol listens, stunned, his eyes fixed on his father’s profile” (Lahiri, 2004, p. 104).

He remained Nikhil until his father died. We can see that he wears his father’s shoes intentionally out of love at his apartment and that is another turning point in his life. He becomes just like his father taking responsibilities now that he know Gogol was out of love.

A rigorous examination of the text was given above to reveal the profound nature of Gogol’s exploration of identity as shown in the novel. The aforementioned quotations provide valuable perspectives on the individual’s challenges, decision-making processes, and ultimate journey of self-realization. Gogol’s tale may be interpreted as a representation of the wider difficulties encountered by persons who possess hybrid identities. The ending shown in the narrative symbolizes the possibility of accepting and reconciling one’s cultural heritage within a globally integrated society. Through a focused examination of the text, this study effectively conveys the fundamental nature of Gogol’s pursuit of a sense of belonging, so enhancing our comprehension of the intricate dynamics of hybrid identity.

## 5. Recommendations

The comprehensive examination of Gogol Ganguli’s odyssey in “*The Namesake*” sheds light on the obstacles and accomplishments experienced by persons who possess mixed identities. This section presents suggestions that are informed by the findings of the qualitative textual analysis. These recommendations aim to promote understanding, empathy, and inclusiveness in heterogeneous cultures, using insights obtained from Gogol’s tale. It highlights the need to accept cultural variety as a way to enhance society. Promoting inclusive and open discussions on diverse cultural origins and experiences has the potential to foster heightened levels of mutual respect and understanding. In order to cultivate an inclusive atmosphere where people’s distinct contributions are appreciated, it is imperative for multicultural societies to place emphasis on efforts that commemorate diverse identities.

The portrayal of Gogol’s interactions with his parents highlights the complexities arising from intergenerational disparities. Facilitating meaningful dialogues across different age groups has the potential to mitigate disparities in comprehension and provide an environment conducive to the exchange of cultural perspectives. By cultivating an atmosphere conducive to reciprocal knowledge acquisition, families have the ability to establish a feeling of coherence and affiliation that transcends cultural barriers. It also entails a transformative voyage of introspection necessitating temporal and spatial dimensions. Educational institutions and communities have a crucial role to play in facilitating access to resources that enable individuals to explore their mixed identities. The utilization of workshops, discussion forums, and cultural exchange programs has the potential to enhance an individual’s ability to navigate their identities with a sense of self-assurance and genuineness.

Literary works, such as “*The Namesake*,” provide a significant avenue for the examination of hybrid identities. Promoting inclusivity in literature and media can provide individuals the opportunity to encounter tales that reflect their personal experiences, therefore cultivating a sense of affirmation and representation. Moreover, these narratives have the potential to provide valuable perspectives and cultivate empathy among those who are not part of the cultural group, therefore facilitating the development of cross-cultural comprehension.

Multicultural festivals, which commemorate diverse cultural traditions, can function as avenues for facilitating cross-cultural interaction. Through active engagement in various cultural events and the acquisition of knowledge around them, individuals have the opportunity to cultivate a more profound sense of admiration for the multifaceted nature of multiple identities. These festivities have the potential to foster a sense of inclusivity across society since they serve as platforms for recognizing and honoring many cultural manifestations.

The experiences of the protagonist, Gogol, serve as a means to confront and contest the preconceptions and prejudices that have the potential to impede an individual’s progress in achieving self-acceptance. Through the active recognition and examination of prejudices, as well as the active participation in critical dialogues, societies have the potential to progress towards the deconstruction of detrimental views and the cultivation of an inclusive cultural environment.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the portrayal of Gogol Ganguli in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel "*The Namesake*" serves as a noteworthy subject of analysis, offering significant implications for civilizations characterized by cultural diversity. By adhering to the suggestions derived from Gogol's personal encounters, societies have the potential to cultivate an atmosphere that promotes comprehension, reverence, and commemoration of multifaceted identities. Similar to the manner in which Gogol's expedition surpasses the limitations of the literary work, these suggestions expand to encompass a wider scope of actual human exchanges, enhancing the intricate fabric of our interlinked global society.

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**Cite this article as:** Asma Neelam (2023). Exploring the Dilemma of Hybrid Identity: A Case Study of "Gogol" in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel "*The Namesake*". *International Journal of Languages and Culture*. 3(2), 26-32. doi:10.51483/IJLC.3.2.2023.26-32.