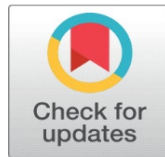
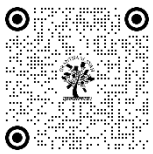


CROSSING BORDERS: DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores dual identity, cultural displacement, and intergenerational conflict in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, a seminal work in diasporic literature. Through the lens of the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, and his immigrant family, the novel captures vividly the struggles of navigating dual cultural landscapes, grappling with the alienation of being caught between tradition and modernity. Lahiri delves into the complexities of naming as a metaphor for identity, examining its role in shaping self-perception and cultural affiliation. By portraying the dynamics of assimilation and resistance in an increasingly multicultural world, the novel highlights the challenges faced by second-generation immigrants in reconciling inherited cultural values with contemporary societal expectations. This paper will explore how Lahiri's narrative sheds light on the construction of hybrid identities, the significance of nostalgia, and the interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation. Ultimately, the analysis underscores *The Namesake* as a poignant reflection of the diasporic experience, illuminating the universal quest for belonging and self-discovery.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Cultural Displacement, Hybridity, Immigrant Experience, Cultural Preservation, Nostalgia, Multiculturalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Diaspora, one of the significant areas of research in contemporary literature, literary works created by authors living outside their homeland, focuses on issues of displacement, alienation, and cultural identity. The term "diaspora" comes from the Greek word "diaspeiro" which refers to the dispersion or scattering of people to a foreign land that is very different from their own homelands. It refers to the movement of people from their homeland, often driven by factors like exiles, refugees, and immigrants. These individuals often experience homesickness, seclusion, racial discrimination and cultural confrontation due to differences in civilizations. These challenges, combined with the struggle to adapt to new environments, contribute to their overall well-being. Bill Ashcroft et al in *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* define diaspora as: "The voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions" (Ashcroft et al 2004: 61). Research reveals that diaspora refers initially to groups of people, including Jews, Greeks, and Armenians who were forcibly expelled from their homelands, categorized as involuntary or voluntary migration, and includes various terms

like exiles, refugees, and immigrants. Indeed, Oxford Dictionary defines diaspora as: "the movement of the Jewish people away from their own country to live and work in other countries."

A thorough study shows that the colonial era provided individuals from Asia and Africa — the colonized lands — with opportunities to travel to Europe, the imperial center. Even after the colonial period ended, migration continued for economic, political, cultural, and personal reasons, with many eventually settling in these foreign lands. This phenomenon, known as the diaspora, refers to people relocating and establishing themselves in a new country. However, the deep-rooted connection to their homeland — its religion, language, and culture — often makes it challenging for the settlers to fully integrate into their new community. These diasporic individuals face significant challenges as they grapple with leaving behind their former identities while adapting to unfamiliar circumstances. This duality creates an internal conflict, dividing their lives between the old and the new, leaving them in a state of liminality. They often come to the painful realization that they belong neither fully to their homeland nor to the adopted country, inhabiting a metaphorical "no man's land". Struggling to reconcile this mental dualism, they undergo profound reorganization of their thoughts and behaviors, which often creates feelings of alienation in their new environment. These people often experience homesickness, discrimination, seclusion, cultural clash and a sense of loss and angst. For those born and raised in the diaspora, the experiences differ significantly. Unlike the earlier settlers, this generation does not bear the same deep emotional connection to the homeland. Their understanding of their ancestral country is shaped by limited visits, as well as stories, books, and films shared by their parents. Consequently, they grow up with a fragmented perception of their heritage, which may evolve as they mature. However, this leads to dilemmas when they are expected to embrace their roots or when their identity is questioned in the adopted land. The parental insistence on preserving ethnic ties often complicates their journey, creating tension as they navigate between two worlds. This, in turn, mirrors the struggles of the first-generation settlers. Given their attachment to the land of their birth and upbringing, their challenges might seem less intense than those faced by the earlier settlers. Despite their physical displacement, the themes and motifs explored in these works by the writers are deeply connected to their countries of origin, reflecting issues such as identity, displacement, belonging, and cultural conflict. This genre serves as a bridge between the author's native land and their adopted home, offering rich insights into the complexities of life in diaspora. In this paper, through a close textual analysis, literary theoretical concepts, and cultural studies, an attempt is made to examine the impact of the diaspora on the characters in *The Namesake*, offering insights into their struggles and adaptations in a foreign land transforming experiences of Gogol Ganguli and his parents, Ashoke and Ashima.

Jhumpa Lahiri as a Diasporic Writer

Among many well-known contemporary diasporic writers, Jhumpa Lahiri is the one who presents such characters in her works who are sandwiched between the Indian past, present, and future. In fact, her works often raise questions about identity, history, modernity, cross-cultural dilemmas, westernization, alienation, and ethnic struggle. As a daughter of immigrants, Lahiri provides a highly personal perspective to the issues that immigrants experience in America. Her stories explore problems such as tradition, morals, culture, religion, language, and, most importantly, identity. We must remember that all the diaspora writers give voice to the dislocated and alienated individuals and their experiences in foreign lands. In fact, diasporic writers worldwide explore themes of alienation, marginalization, and cultural displacement, often focusing on the immigrant's journey from their homeland to a foreign country. They often face racism, religious intolerance, and social alienation. This trait we also find quite visible in the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri who has a global presence and delves profoundly into themes of expatriation, homesickness, and cultural identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* focuses on the experiences of Indian diaspora. The story depicts the daily life of an Indian immigrant family that settles in America following India's independence. It delves into such complexities of diasporic identity, cultural displacement, and intergenerational tensions in an Indian-American family. The story explores the contradictions between belonging and alienation, emphasizing the dual cultural issues of assimilation and heritage preservation.

This paper will surely answer following questions: How does Lahiri depict diasporic identity in *The Namesake*? What are the cultural and emotional challenges faced by the characters in navigating displacement? How does *The Namesake* depict the psychological and emotional struggles of the characters in negotiating their diasporic identities? In what ways does cultural displacement influence the personal and familial relationships portrayed in the novel? How does Lahiri explore the intergenerational conflicts arising from differing cultural expectations within diasporic families? What role does the concept of "home" play in shaping the identities of Lahiri's characters? How does the novel address

the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation? How does Gogol's name symbolize his struggle with identity and belonging? What are the key moments in Gogol's life that reflect his journey towards understanding and reconciling his dual cultural heritage? How does the novel portray the impact of cultural hybridity on the identity of first- and second-generation immigrants? How does Lahiri use settings and cultural markers to illustrate the sense of dislocation experienced by the characters? How do Ashoke and Ashima's experiences of cultural displacement differ, and what does this reveal about gendered perspectives on migration? In what ways does the novel address the theme of nostalgia and its role in dealing with displacement?

Critics' Comments

It is pertinent to mention here a few critics and their concepts for developing the right understanding concerning identity, culture, displacement, etc. For instance, Homi K. Bhabha's concept on hybrid identity. His concept of the "Third Space" is often referenced in discussions of *The Namesake*. He argues that diasporic identities occupy a liminal space that allows for the blending of cultural values and practices, creating new forms of expression. Lahiri's protagonist, Gogol, embodies this tension as he negotiates his Bengali heritage and American upbringing. Bhabha states: "Hybridity is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures, but it is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge" (Bhabha 1994: 37). Similarly, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity provides a framework for analyzing the duality faced by diasporic individuals like Gogol. Hall contends that identity is a "production," constantly in flux and shaped by history and culture. Hall opines: "Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'..... It belongs to the future as much as to the past". (Rutherford 1990:225)

Uma Parameswaran, Indian poet, playwright, and short-story writer, says that the immigrants experience different phases;

First is one of nostalgia for homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a stage in which one is busy with adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno-cultural issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues (Shankar 1998:12).

Lois Tyson's Remarks

Double consciousness often produces an unstable sense of self which was heightened by the forced migration colonialism frequently caused. Being unhomed is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak (Tyson, Lois 2006: 16).

Avtar Brah, A Pioneer of Diaspora Studies States

What is home? On the one hand, home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin. On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, somber grey skies in the middle of the day, all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday social relations. In other words, the varying experience of pain and pleasures, the terrors and contentment or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture that marks how, for example, a cold winter night might be difficult to experience sitting by a crackling fireside in a mansion compared to withstanding huddled around a makeshift fire on the streets of nineteenth century England (Brah 1996:4)

Jaiwanti Dimiri, a bilingual writer, critic, and former professor of English at Himachal University, states:

Expatriate experience is problematic for the second generation immigrants of the third world for specific reasons. Born and brought up on foreign soil expatriation for this neo class of immigrants hangs the background as an imaginary reality, free from the stigma of nostalgia and the popular symptoms of angst, loneliness existential rootlessness, or homelessness, their predicament is in many ways worse than that of their predecessors. Despite their assimilation and acculturation, they cannot escape from being victimized and ostracized. (Dimitri 2000:4)

Diasporic Identity in the Namesake

The *Namesake*, Lahiri's debut novel, published in 2003, narrates the life of the Ganguli family of Calcutta, which spans thirty years (1968-2000). Ashoke Ganguli, like many other competent Indians, immigrated to the United States as part of the 1960s brain drain. He leaves his home country to further his education and do research in fiber optics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). After two years, Ashoke came home, married Ashima, a 19-year-old girl, and relocated to Boston, where he now works as a teaching assistant and performs research. Now, being away from her birthplace, Ashima feels lonely and separated from her Bengali surroundings. Her feelings of loneliness are visible in this statement: "I'm saying hurry up and finish your degree. I want to go back" (Lahiri 2003: 39). For Ashima, America is far from a dreamland; it is a place of profound isolation, endured solely because of Ashoke's aspirations. Her heart remains tethered to India, where everything she cherishes resides. In this foreign land, she constantly feels like an outsider, often mourning the absence of familiar comforts and reminders of home.

When Ashima gives birth to her first son, Gogol, her sense of alienation deepens. She laments the lack of familial support and the absence of parents and relatives — a stark contrast to the Indian tradition where a woman is surrounded by loved ones during childbirth. In India, births typically occur in the bride's parental home, not in hospitals, further amplifying Ashima's feelings of disconnection. In fact, even as a university professor Ashoke at heart and home is a typical Indian male, fastidious about his clothing and his food:

He is fastidious about his clothing; their first argument had been over a sweater she'd shrunk in the washing machine. As soon as he comes from the university the first thing he does is hang up his shirt and trousers, donning a pair of draw – string pajamas and pullover if it is cold. On Sundays he spends an hour occupied with his tins of shoe polish and his three pairs of shoes, two black and one brown, (Lahiri 2003:10)

The pregnancy period is particularly taxing for her, as she endures it alone without the solace of her family. The sterile, unfamiliar environment of the hospital, where she is the only Indian expectant mother, heightens her emotional struggle and underscores her sense of estrangement. Jhumpa Lahiri captures the bewilderment, homesickness, and alienation of first-generation Indian immigrants through Ashima's experiences. Unlike her husband Ashoke, who gradually adapts to life in Boston, Ashima struggles to reconcile her traditional Indian values with the unfamiliarity of American culture. Her life feels uncertain and incomplete, reflecting the divide between the old world she cherishes and the new one she inhabits. Ashima's plight in America is presented by the novelist in these lines:

On more than one occasion he (Ashoke) find her morose, in bed, rereading her parents' letters ... when he senses that she is quietly crying, he puts an arm around her but can think of nothing to say, feeling that it is his fault, for marrying her, for bringing her here. (Lahiri 2003:39).

Lahiri explores the complexities of diasporic identity through the lives of its characters. Gogol Ganguli, a second-generation Indian, struggles with his dual identity, rejecting his Bengali name and attempting to fit into American society. His romantic relationships reflect his internal conflict, with his marriage to Moushumi indicating a return to his roots. After Ashoke's death, Gogol embraces his heritage, demonstrating the complexity of diasporic identity as a process of negotiation, acceptance, and integration. Ashoke and Ashima, first-generation immigrants, face their own challenges in adapting to their new cultural environment. Refusing to give up their cultural roots, they still hope for assimilation and acculturation in their new land, they do not sever relationships with their homeland. Safran says rightly:

They continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (Safran1995:85)

Ashoke's journey is shaped by gratitude for survival and academic success, while Ashima struggles with cultural displacement. Both Ashoke and Ashima then learn to live in the land they were not born in. The first sight of this land "leafless trees with ice-covered branches. Dog urine and excrement embedded in snow-banks. Not a soul on the street". (Lahiri 2003:30) is hardly a flattering description of the place they now call their own. They raise children who are culturally "American" but ethnically Bengali, often encountering resistance. Ashima's journey ends with her acceptance of a hybrid identity, dividing her time between the U.S. and India.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* portrays truthfully the Ganguli family — Ashoke, Ashima, and their children Gogol (also known as Nikhil) and Sonia — as they navigate cultural dislocation and generational divides between their Indian heritage and American upbringing. Lahiri highlights the tensions between preserving cultural traditions and adapting to a new environment. The first-generation immigrants strive to maintain their Indian identity and pass it on to their children, while the second generation, raised in America, often gravitates toward the culture of their adoptive country,

leading to conflicts and misunderstandings. As Sonia and Gogol visit India with their parents, the fact of not belonging strikes them again and again. "They stand out in their bright, expensive sneakers, American haircuts, backpacks slung over one shoulder". (Lahiri 2003:82) Each experience appears to be a new one and they feel surprised: "In the days that follow, they adjust ... to sleeping under a mosquito net, bathing by pouring tin cups over their heads" (Lahiri 2003:82). The feeling of being homeless strikes the second generation expatriate in a different way. When Gogol's father tells him that they will be staying in Calcutta for eight months, "He dreads the thought of eight months without friends" (Lahiri 2003:79). He doesn't like the idea. While visiting Delhi, they have a variety of experiences, some not very comfortable and they fall sick: "It is the air, the rice, the wind, their relatives casually remark; they were not made to survive in a poor country ...". (Lahiri 2003:86). Ashoke and Ashima fit more easily between the two continents – the two worlds – because to them home is still the land of their birth. The novelist writes:

Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smile wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road. 'I'm scared, Goggles' Sonia whispers to her brother in English, seeking his hand and refusing to let go. (Lahiri 2003:81 - 82).

Quite opposite to this is their reaction once they return to Pemberton Road which brings a sense of relief and joy to Sonia & Gogol. For the second generation, Indian has been the alien land

On this end, there is no effort involved. They retreat to their three rooms, to their three separate beds, to their thick mattresses and pillows and fitted sheets. After a single trip to the supermarket, the refrigerator and the cupboard fill with familiar labels... Gogol and Sonia sleep for as long as they want, watch television, make themselves peanut butter sandwiches at any time of day. Once again they are free to quarrel, to tease each other, to shout and holler and say shut up..... And so the eight months are put behind them, quickly shed, quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives. (Lahiri 2003: 87-88).

In nutshell, Lahiri's novel discusses threadbare the dual identity of diasporic individuals, with Ashima dividing her life between India and the U.S., and Gogol finding solace in changing his name to Nikhil. Further it mentions the complexities of living between two worlds, balancing cultural preservation with the realities of life in a multicultural, materialistic America. Ashoke and Ashima, serve as cultural survivors, preserving their traditions in a multicultural society while the younger generation exemplifies Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, liminality, and in-betweenness. It also talks of the tension between tradition and assimilation, exploring themes of identity, belonging, and cultural conflict. The first generation clings steadfastly to their cultural traditions in a foreign land, seeking solace in their heritage despite the challenges of assimilation. The second generation adopts the lifestyle and values of the host culture, often disregarding the customs and traditions of their parents. This divergence leads to a communication gap and a cultural rift, as the older generation grapples with maintaining their identity while the younger generation forges its own path in a new world

Names as Symbols of Identity and Cultural Heritage

In *The Namesake*, names serve as powerful symbols of identity, cultural heritage, and the struggles of diasporic life. The protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, a Bengali-American, embodies this symbolism. His name originates from his father Ashoke's traumatic experience during a train accident in India, where Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* becomes a symbol of survival and hope.

As a child, Gogol accepts his unique name, but as he matures, it becomes a source of discomfort, representing his parents' cultural expectations and his sense of otherness in American society. In college, he legally changes his name to "Nikhil" as a way to reject his Bengali heritage and assimilate into American culture. However, after Ashoke's death, Gogol discovers the deeper significance of his name, leading to a journey of self-discovery and reconciliation with his roots. His acceptance of his name symbolizes his acknowledgment of his heritage and his path toward self-acceptance.

Lahiri uses names as a central motif to explore themes of cultural displacement, intergenerational conflict, and identity negotiation. For the Ganguli family, naming represents both the preservation of Bengali identity and the transformation inherent in their immigrant experience. The act of renaming in the novel highlights the characters' journeys of transformation, self-discovery, and their search for belonging.

Displacement and the Expatriate Experience in Multicultural Societies

The novel discusses the nuanced experience of an Indian living abroad, grappling with cultural duality. It outlines the “sandwiched world” where the expatriates balance their Indian roots with a desire for assimilation in a host country. This duality creates a unique space of belonging and not belonging. Despite settling in new lands, these individuals often maintain ties with their homeland, reflecting a blend of acculturation and rootedness.

Due to the multicultural nature of societies today, things for diasporic writers get complicated. These individuals, influenced by both their native and adopted cultures, find themselves in a state of flux, deeply affected by questions of identity and the interplay of relationships. Their work mirrors this dual influence, serving as a critique and analysis of the world they inhabit. They often struggle with the absence of a shared cultural memory. Hence, they experience crises of identity, alienation, or frustration, particularly as minority voices. These challenges can be even more pronounced for second-generation expatriates who navigate the complexities of inherited and adopted cultural identities.

The Namesake explores the psychological and emotional impact of cultural displacement through themes of alienation and belonging. The story follows first-generation immigrants, Ashoke and Ashima, who experience isolation and longing for Calcutta, and their second-generation children, Gogol and Sonia. Ashima's alienation stems from the cultural contrasts and lack of support, while Gogol's identity crisis stems from his dual identity, caught between his Bengali heritage and his desire to fit into American society.

Belonging is achieved through the Bengali community in America, where festivals, gatherings, and cultural practices provide a sense of home. Gogol's sense of belonging evolves after his father's death, leading to a deeper connection with his heritage. The family's efforts to preserve Bengali traditions, such as celebrating festivals and speaking Bengali, are seen as alien and outdated to Gogol. Gogol rejects his Bengali identity, changes his name to “Nikhil” in order to distance himself from his parents' cultural expectations. However, the death of Ashoke serves as a catalyst for reconciliation with his heritage, allowing Gogol to appreciate the sacrifices his parents made and the significance of his name. Over time, Gogol develops a nuanced understanding of his identity, integrating elements of both cultures. His marriage to Moushumi represents an attempt to reconnect with his heritage. The novel highlights the universal struggle of diasporic individuals to reconcile their heritage with their present, making *The Namesake* a poignant exploration of family, identity, and the struggle for identity.

2. CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* stands as a seminal work in diasporic literature, offering an exploration of the immigrant experience and the intricacies of identity formation. Through the struggles of Gogol Ganguli and his family, Lahiri shows the profound impact of cultural displacement, the interplay of tradition and modernity, and the delicate negotiation of belonging in a multicultural world. The novel transcends its narrative to capture the universal quest for self-definition amidst the pull of familial ties and societal expectations. The symbolism of naming becomes a powerful metaphor for identity, highlighting the tensions between personal choice and inherited legacy. By weaving together themes of intergenerational conflict and cultural hybridity, Lahiri paints a rich, empathetic portrait of life at the crossroads of cultures. In short, *The Namesake* resonates as a timeless narrative, illuminating the beauty and complexity of lives shaped by migration and multiculturalism, and affirming the universal human desire of identity and belonging.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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