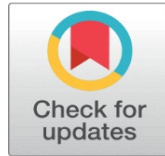
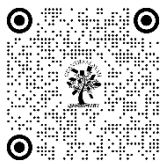


MAPPING THE DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN THE NAMESAKE

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalised world, transnational migrations are not just movements across borders but also transitions across languages, cultures, and identities. The condition of being “in-between”—of being neither fully here nor there—produces a persistent sense of otherness. Lahiri’s protagonists often inhabit these in-between zones, where they are required to reconcile inherited cultural legacies with adopted environments. This study investigates how Lahiri’s characters experience and internalise displacement, negotiate cultural dislocation, and construct fractured yet meaningful identities within diasporic spaces.

Keywords: Displacement, Dislocation, Hybridity, Identity, in-Betweenness, Otherness

1. INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* is the story of Ashima and Ashoke and their US born son Gogol. Through *The Namesake*, Lahiri tells the story of first-generation immigrants Ashima and Ashoke who grapple with everyday attempts at assimilating into American culture, while at the same time trying to stay connected to their roots. While Ashoke, on the advice of a stranger on a train, and for his academic prospects, becomes a voluntary migrant, Ashima has no reason other than being Ashoke’s wife to come to the US. Being first-generation immigrants, they have to grapple with multiple issues that shape their everyday life as foreigners. They must grapple with everyday attempts at assimilating into the American culture, feeling homesick, as well as cultural alienation. Amongst the few moments in the novel where we see them happy and alive and full of energy is when they are in the company of fellow Bengalis who have also migrated to the US.

While Ashoke seems to have settled well within the American culture, Ashima’s struggles are real. From struggling to navigate the American public transport to her constant missing of Bengali festivities and customs, hers is the typical portrayal of an individual’s diasporic experience.

Gogol, who is a second-generation immigrant, is typically confused about his identity. His name itself is something too detached from him and does not make sense to him why his parents would give him a name that has nothing to do with either India or the US. While Gogol’s is the classic case of a second-generation immigrant trying to make sense of his roots, or rather rootlessness, he is perfectly caught in the in-betweenness, in the interstitial space that Bhabha talks about in his seminal work *the Location of Culture*.

His journey from self-alienation to self-acceptance is central to the narrative. Gogol initially resents his name, a symbol of his ethnic and cultural difference. His attempts to shed his Indian identity, including changing his name to Nikhil, dating white American women, and distancing himself from Bengali traditions, illustrate the internalised otherness experienced by diasporic subjects.

However, Gogol's eventual reconciliation with his name and heritage suggests a movement towards a hybrid identity. His reading of Nikolai Gogol, his father's favourite author, and his recognition of his father's past signify a deeper understanding of his diasporic inheritance. Lahiri portrays the diasporic experience not as a binary between assimilation and resistance but as a fluid, evolving process.

Thus, *The Namesake* illustrates how displacement engenders both loss and transformation. Lahiri reveals the affective dimensions of migration—nostalgia, guilt, love, and self-discovery—that shape the diasporic self across generations.

In *The Namesake*, displacement is not just physical, but also cultural and psychological. Ashoke and Ashima's migration to the US is marked by physical uprooting, and at the same time they are also distanced from Bengal's cultural landscape to an unfamiliar, alien American cultural landscape.

Ashoke and Ashima's migration to the US, therefore, marks the first-generation immigrant displacement. While Ashoke's displacement is more voluntary and intellectual, as he is influenced by a stranger's advice, "You are still young, free. Do yourself a favor. Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late." the possibilities in the US and Nikolai Gogol's writings.

Ashima, on the other hand, experiences forced emotional displacement. She never feels "normal" and is constantly under a certain fear. Throughout the narrative, we see Ashima comparing how things are here in the US and how they would have been back at her home. Post her arrival in Cambridge, Ashima is deeply troubled by the idea of being a mother in a foreign land.

For the past eighteen months, ever since she arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It is not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land. For it was one thing to be pregnant, to suffer the queasy mornings in bed, the sleepless nights, the dull throbbing in the back, the countless visits to the bathroom. Throughout the experience, despite her growing discomfort, she had been astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great grandmothers had done. That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to know one, where she knows little so little, where life seems so tentative and spare. (6)

While there is a sense of fear, there is also a sense of nostalgia for home. This nostalgia is a part of what Vijay Mishra, in his seminal text *Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, refers to as the "diasporic imaginary." Ashima knows that had she been undergoing pregnancy at home, she would have a cohort of experienced mothers to help her in birthing and caring for her baby. This sense of fear arising due to lack of the familiar is what constitutes her diasporic experience.

Even though there are few other immigrants like her who sometimes keep her company, they can "only be substitutes for the people who really ought to be surrounding them." Lahiri writes, "without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived." (24)

This haphazardness, this half-truth is a reminder as well as a consequence of displacement and dislocation. And as Ashima rightly thinks, Gogol is born in this world alone and deprived. He is deprived of his roots and his identity. He is born into a world of in-betweenness where he has to grapple with his hybrid identity.

However, Ashima does start learning the American way. She slowly but gradually starts to get hold of the American culture. From finding her ways to the pathways, to learning about privacy, Ashima makes her way into the American culture. "But she has gathered that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their handholding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy."

Lahiri uses the metaphor of pregnancy to remind the readers of Ashima's experience. She writes:

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 an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been an ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity of from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (50)

This realization highlights her alienation. She knows that this feeling is there to stay and is now a part of her everyday life. The psychological weight of alienation is something that she will have to carry through out. This also highlights the angst of the first-generation diaspora who now remains suspended between two nations, two cultures. They are neither fully displaced nor dislocated and yet they can never really get to call any of these as their own.

Vijay Mishra, in his book *Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* talks about two types of diasporas, the old, indentured diaspora, which faced forced migration, and the new diaspora, which is marked by voluntary migration. He says that the literature of the old diaspora often talks of collective trauma, memory, and the reconstruction of religious and cultural identity. While the literature of the new diaspora is mostly focused upon individual alienation, racism, gender politics, cultural hybridity, and identity crisis. Lahiri's *The Namesake* can be seen in this light as it is a part of the literature of the new diaspora. Here, she doesn't talk of a community's collective migration and the ensuing trauma and the collective attempt at reconstructing a cultural identity. *The Namesake* is focused on the characters' diasporic experience. She gives importance to an individual sense of alienation, an individual's longing for home. Be it Ashima, Ashoke or Gogol, all three of them have their own share of experience and have to grapple with their own hybridity and the identity thereof.

As stated earlier, the diasporic experience is marked not just by physical displacement but also cultural displacement. So much so that the characters feel culturally dislocated. It makes people like Ashima feel that they do not belong here. While at the same time they try their best to keep up with their traditions from back home.

Despite living in the U.S. for decades, Ashima and Ashoke try their best to retain their Bengali customs. They cook Indian food and speak Bengali at home. They celebrate Durga Puja, wear saris, and give their children two names—a pet name (Gogol) and a good name (Nikhil)—a tradition which is foreign to American culture. This, however, is also symbolic of their split identity.

Because neither she nor Ashoke has siblings in this country, the days and hours of the celebration are condensed, abbreviated. The celebration takes place not over five days but over one, an abridged, adapted version of the real thing. The guests are invited, the same fifty Bengali families they've known for years. Food is prepared by the women, tables set up, shoes removed at the door. A makeshift altar is arranged on the living room floor, covered with framed photographs of gods and garlands and bowls of fruit and dishes of sweets. The children are dressed in new clothes from India; the women in saris, their hair decorated with fresh flowers. The men wear dhotis stiff with starch. Though it's only October, they complain that it's too cold to stand outside barefoot. Ashima chants prayers, lights incense and a wick lamp, circles the flame before the images. There are no priests; they recite the prayers themselves. The room smells of sandalwood and camphor. (70)

This low-key celebration highlights the theme of cultural displacement and adaptation. The Durga Puja celebration is not as elaborate as it would be in Bengal, but the Ganguli's and their Bengali friends recreate a sense of belonging and continuity in their adopted homeland. It reflects the hybrid identity they have to live with now.

Dislocation in *The Namesake* goes beyond geography. Lahiri's characters, especially Gogol, experience identity dislocation- a conflict between inherited culture and lived reality. Gogol is born to Indian parents on American soil. While his parents have Indian passports, Gogol has American citizenship. Gogol can see himself as neither fully American nor Indian. He is stuck in the liminal space. Gogol is the perfect example of liminality and ambivalence that Bhabha talks about in *The Location of Culture*. Gogol embodies that second-generation immigrant which often finds itself grappling with multiple identities.

Gogol has to suffer dual otherness. In America, Gogol is marked by racial and cultural otherness: classmates mispronounce his name, he avoids Indian parties, and dates American women to distance himself from "Indianness." Gogol's name itself is a site of dislocation. "He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is." His name connects him to his father's trauma and survival but disconnects him from both American normalcy and Indian tradition. He is emotionally and symbolically estranged from both cultures.

"Gogol" represents personal trauma, cultural burden, and inherited identity. "Nikhil" is meant to be a new self but can't erase the past. The name change becomes a symbol of dislocated selfhood. He tries to reconstruct his identity by changing his name to Nikhil but finds that names alone can't solve cultural dislocation. "Even after changing his name, he doesn't feel fully transformed." "He resents being seen as foreign, even though he feels foreign among Indians too."

Lahiri writes, "He's aware that his parents' world will never be his, but neither is the world he was born into fully his own." This highlights the "in-between" state of being second-generation immigrant: Neither fully American nor Indian, characters like Gogol and Moushumi embody Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity—occupying a "third space" where cultures mix but also clash. Gogol struggles to define himself, not through race or language, but through belonging: "He's aware that his parents' world will never be his, but neither is the world he was born into fully his own." This hybridity becomes a source of confusion and identity crisis, but also growth. By the novel's end, we see that Gogol begins to accept his roots and complex identity—reading *The Overcoat* his father gave him and reconnecting with his family.

In *The Namesake* therefore, we see multilayered displacement. Displacement here is geographic, cultural as well as at the psychological or emotional level. Displacement is also symbolic. It can be seen in the naming of Gogol and in the suburban house in which the Gangulis live.

We see all the major characters in the novel trying to navigate their path in this foreign land. They are constantly negotiating with as well as conforming to a world where they barely belong. Ashima's constant longing for home and Gogol's adventures with reconstructing his identity, Lahiri presents to us characters who are split between homes, names, and histories. However, the ending of the novel suggests that belonging is not something that is to be found in a place or language; it is something which is found in acceptance of one's complex origin and in the acceptance of the "truth of life".

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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