

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

REPRESENTATIONS OF CULTURAL CONFLICT IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* reflects the struggle of a Bengali family who attempts to build a life in the US, while being laden with the emotional weight of their past. The novel puts forth questions of cultural belonging, displacement, familial expectations and memory, through brilliant, vivid and graceful storytelling. The characters face their experiences of migration as they go on to pursue better opportunities, while retaining or continuing to feel connected to their native country or homeland. The narrative presents how two distinguished cultures, or two different worlds create hidden conflicts that affect/influence family relationships. The study also examines the first and second generation immigrant characters in the novel, in an effort to holistically understand how cultural conflict and identity struggles emerge within the framework of contemporary cultural thought. The study examines how American life attracts people while they experience the ongoing influence of their traditional values, which also shape their relationships with others who share their cultural background.

Keywords: Indian English Literature, Fiction, Novel, Postmodern, Cultural Conflict, Diaspora, Storytelling, Nation, Identity

INTRODUCTION

Authors like Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are revered names in the world of contemporary diasporic literature. Their works reveal meaningful discussions and discourses on diaspora identity, cross cultural interpretations, exploration of cultural concerns across national and emotional boundaries. Their works have been recognized worldwide and have gone on to become a foundational voice for articulating the varied experiences of migration, identity formation and displacement. The narratives present in their novels portray diverse realities/conditions faced by characters, showcasing the plight and complex situation of families who live between cultures, languages and histories. Their novels reflect the inner and passive struggles faced by characters who are seemingly in their own quests to reconcile their inherited past with their present life in foreign lands. In this paper we shall place particular focus on Jhumpa Lahiri, studying her novel *The Namesake*, to understand the varied representations of cultural conflict embedded in the novel. Lahiri is widely regarded as a pioneering voice in representing the sentimental side of the Indian diaspora. Her works portray the inner conflicts faced by immigrant families along with their children, the experiences of trying to belong in different communities and foreign lands. Lahiri focuses on individual loss that happens together with cultural clashes, generational gaps that emerge when people don't let go of traditional customs and beliefs in a time of immense modernization. Her fictional narratives showcase the postmodern identity that exists in a fragmented state, an identity that is divided from self contemplation, dilemma and all sorts of confusion arising from having to blend into different cultures. The main characters are seen to experience doubt about their true

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Received: 10 January 2026; Accepted: 05 February 2026; Published 06 March 2026

DOI: [10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2.2026.6803](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2.2026.6803)

Page Number: 65-68

Journal Title: International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

Journal Abbreviation: Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

Online ISSN: 2350-0530, Print ISSN: 2394-3629

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

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identity, which ultimately leads them to feel disconnected, torn between their native country and their new homeland. The condition affects both geographical and psychological aspects of characters/individuals, because they are required to shape their identities in environments that necessitate cultural adjustment while showing cultural differences. The concept of "Englishness" together with Western cultural standards therefore functions as a dual force, which these characters find appealing yet disturbing because it creates a sense of conflict between their desire to fit in and their need to maintain their cultural roots.

Lahiri's literary imagination takes her audience/readers through journeys that mirror the characters' own movements across borders. As characters navigate new environments, readers are simultaneously drawn into unfamiliarity of newly seen cultural landscapes. The characters' experience runs somewhat parallel with that of the reader as the process of discovery keeps unfurling in her narratives. This narrative technique widens the reader's engagement with the text, creating resonance, encouraging empathy and creating a scope for broader analysis on issues like identity, migration and belonging. So, the very act of reading turns into a shared journey, wherein both the character {in fiction} and the reader {in imagination} travels across different cultural and emotional terrains. Jhumpa Lahiri's personal background also provides a basis for studying diasporic themes. The author spent her early years in the US. She was born in London to Indian parents, hence combining both Indian and British cultural elements. She basically lived her life between two different worlds that didn't share any commonality with each other. Her characters experience this same feeling of cultural suspension which drives them to practice their ancestral customs in foreign lands, while also responding to the requirements of their new society. The attempt to meet expectations from both cultural groups creates emotional pressure that results in people experiencing feelings of unworthiness and social disconnection. Lahiri combines real-life experiences with fictional elements in her narratives, to manifest characters who struggle internally to maintain cultural ties while trying to blend in with the new culture or society. The individuals find themselves in a confused, somewhat purgatorial state, stuck between their traditional practices and modern ways of livelihood, including their mother tongue, nativity and social language. The conflict establishes a dynamic environment which scientists can utilize to study how people develop their identities through the process of diasporic experience which leads to identity transformation and identity breakdown.

CULTURAL CONFLICT AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

In *The Namesake* characters are seen to experience deep personal uncertainty and cultural tensions, as they try to fit into two different worlds. The Indian couple, Ashoke and Ashima, are deeply attached to their home country because they had spent their whole lives in India, before having moved to the US. The novel reflects how deep cultural bonds or attachments tend to shape the course proceedings of an individual's life. The American way of life proved itself to be challenging for the couple, as their Bengali cultural background seemingly determined their entire way of life. Gogol, on the other hand, was born and raised in America. He discovers that socializing comes easily to him because he grew up there. Yet he felt a sense of unrest or confusion because he didn't fully belong to either culture. The main characters in the novel constantly juggle between their identities, Indianness and Americanness, by selectively choosing which cultural elements to latch onto whilst adapting to the new contemporary lifestyle. The immigrant experience shows that people frequently try to mimic others while they make adaptations and undergo transformations. It is a tactic of sorts, enabling foreigners to blend into different cultures. So, a major finding is that the characters try to maintain Indian traditions while also learning to function within American society. Diaspora life reaches its highest sentiments and expressions through such mannerisms. Every time a person builds a new existence or identity on foreign soil, they will inevitably lose or transform something essential from their previous existence. The Ganguli family manages to create a secure American home, however they couldn't sustain their complete attachment and emotional ties with their previous Indian life. Characters like Ashima embody the emotional burden that comes with losing one's cultural roots. The American experience makes her afraid that she will lose her cultural identity while she worries about raising her child in a foreign country, where there's an observable lack in family and community support as well. Bengali magazines helped Ashima maintain her connection to her homeland, through both language and associations with cultural memory. These scenes clearly depict how people/characters use their native language, native literary sources and reading as critical instruments to maintain their cultural identity.

The novel also states that change is an inevitable outcome. In order to survive, societies and individuals need to adapt. Ashima had slowly learned to adjust to her new American way of life, without having to abandon her native traditions. She doesn't reject her past, but she gradually transitions and modifies her habits to befit her new surroundings. This transformation is never sudden, nor is it an easy one. It is a gradual negotiation between new realities and old values. She establishes a newly blended identity, bringing into conjunction her American lifestyle and Bengali traditional practices. Ashima later becomes somewhat isolated from her surroundings, after the tragic event of her husband's death and her children growing up to be adults. She develops independent living skills which her younger self could never have imagined. Her daily activities, along with her process of adjusting to new situations, showcases emotional exhaustion. Migration causes major personal changes in life, which are all gradually revealed through these small/subtle changes. People develop their identity through essential needs, the need to make compromises and their ability to overcome challenges, all of which she demonstrates through her personal experience. The immigrant experience is also further reflected in the life of Ashoke, Gogol's father. He survived a train accident in India and uses his experience to create a vision for his future, ultimately leading him to study in the US. He was required to abandon his homeland and family ties, ultimately causing him emotional distress and suffering. Immigrants usually experience a life that combines two states. This altogether creates a cycle, a

quest for identity, wherein the person keeps on searching for their homeland while feeling broken apart inside. His American relocation functions as more than just a job choice because it brings about a fundamental transformation that determines his future course of life.

Gogol's story forms another central thread in the novel. Rederas can observe his struggle with identity in his relationships with others in Western society. His interactions with family and inner-self reveal different aspects of his cultural confusion. His relationship with Maxine, an American woman who has a secure sense of belonging, reflects his own feelings of difference or uncertainty. Later, he got married to Moushumi, who just like himself, is a child of Indian immigrants. This turn shows that even shared cultural backgrounds do not guarantee similar understandings of identity because of the conflicts readers get to witness in the succeeding pages of the novel. Moushumi is seen to interpret her cultural heritage differently, further complicating Gogol's own search for stability. He did not like his name too, because it never clearly stated who he was exactly, whether Indian or American. His name made him feel disconnected from his real identity. Through his name change attempt to Nikhil he tried to create a new identity for himself but still remained lost between both worlds. He starts to comprehend how important the name is to his father and he sees how his parents sacrificed everything to unite both their Indian and American cultures. As Gogol matures into adulthood, he slowly gains a better understanding of parents' earlier struggles. He sees that his parents always desired to return home while they worked to build an American life. He learned adaptability from them, learning from their ability to change or alter behaviors while maintaining cultural integrity and ties to their native heritage. He realizes that people need multiple elements, including their personal experiences, social connections and life events to build their identity. In sum, the novel showcases how the Ganguli family experiences diaspora through their ongoing process of cultural adaptation. The characters show that identity remains in motion because it undergoes frequent transitions in their personal experiences. The study also shows how individuals who exist between two cultural systems develop their identity through specialized agreements, changing behavioral patterns, even personalities and discovering their true selves in the process.

CULTURE AND DIASPORIC NEGOTIATION

Studies state that culture and identity are intertwined and un-identical at the same time. Culture can be defined as a wider framework of shared beliefs, customs, values, traditions, and practices that shape a community. It represents a collective pattern, a unison that guides social activities, behavior and interactive ways within society. On the other hand, identity operates at a more individualized or personal level. It basically involves the way in which individuals understand themselves in relation to their environment, cultural surroundings and histories. While culture provides the larger structure within which people live, identity reflects the personal meanings and interpretations that individuals create within that collective structure. The academic community has acknowledged for a long time that culture represents an intricate concept, one which develops through the varied influences of historical events, social changes, philosophical and intellectual movements. Culture appears to be unchanging, until social evolution and other transitions may cause transitions. Cultural systems create limits and rules, simultaneously providing people with opportunities to change their behavior and even test out new possibilities. So, another major finding is that the dynamic nature of cultures enables them to adapt toward different social patterns which emerge through population movements and social transformations. While travelling people are seen to develop cultural connections which are both peaceful and internally conflicting. People need to handle the balance between their traditional customs and modern practices, which emerges together, including all new things that come into their lives. Again, our findings come to the conclusion of 'adaptability in new environments'. The study of identity formation creates an additional source of confusion. Identity exists as a process which continues to evolve through different experiences and memories and social interactions. The concept involves dual aspects which require individuals to connect their current existence with their past experiences and their forthcoming developments. People who live in diaspora situations experience a flexible identity which develops through their exposure to multiple cultural influences. People develop their self-identity through ongoing comparisons between their native country and their new country and between traditional values and modern practices.

This theoretical understanding provides a helpful basis for studying the immigrant characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. The story offers detailed sketches of the cultural and emotional struggles faced by first and second generation immigrants. It shows how identity is shaped by language, customs, family expectations and personal experiences in a foreign land. The story shows how diasporic people live through ongoing cultural negotiations which require them to adapt to new environments, while retaining or keeping their ancestral roots. Ashima showcases her attachment and dedication to her cultural roots through her initial experiences in America. She experiences isolation in a hospital that stands hundreds of miles from her home while she waits to deliver her baby. Her discomfort occurs from both physical pain and emotional distress, stemming from the disconnect with her homeland, wherein she had missed her home, traditional practices and customs that would glorify such events with love and affection in Indian culture. Childbirth in India is a firmly family-centered experience, supported by relatives and established rituals. In America, she finds herself alone among strangers who move through a system that seems completely foreign to her. The way people conduct their everyday activities shows how differently cultures behave. The story shows Ashima's dedication through one such interaction, where she chose to avoid saying her husband's name because Bengali customs restrict direct identification through name use. The new environment makes this behavior quite unnatural or even weird, as it differed to reactions from her homeland. Henceforth, cultural traditions determine human actions which create barriers that hinder people from learning to meet new social

requirements. The novel demonstrates how small cultural distinctions build up to produce a complete experience of cultural dislocation.

In the novel, the issue of naming also comes to light. In Bengali tradition, elders play a key role in naming a child. Their names also carry deep cultural and familial meanings. When the expected letter from Ashima's grandmother never arrives, the family is forced to improvise. Ashoke chooses the name "Gogol" as a temporary pet name, intended only for private use, which unexpectedly became the child's official name when school authorities needed documentation. As Gogol grew older, he became increasingly uncomfortable with his name, because firstly it was unusual and secondly it had no significant ties with either culture. When his parents attempt to introduce the name "Nikhil" for school use, he resists the change, not yet aware of the deeper cultural implications. This very moment marked the beginning of his inner conflict with identity. His name in the novel can be treated as a symbolic representation of his divided existence, representing both his parents' heritage and his own origin in America. Gogol's discomfort with his name broadens his struggle, leading him to be at times lost and searching to find his appropriate social space. Through these experiences, the novel demonstrates how identity is shaped by cultural expectations, personal history and social surroundings. The first generation immigrants, Ashoke and Ashima, maintain their strong connection to their birthplace by observing their native customs and traditions while they learn to live in America. The second generation, represented by Gogol, faces a different challenge. The host country upbringing leads him to experience a cultural detachment from his parents' background while he remains an outsider in the new society. The development process of his identity begins with his internal struggles, arising from his shared life between two cultures, and ends with him finding his authentic self. The novel presents diaspora as a state that undergoes constant transitions. People develop their cultural belonging through their experiences, altogether shaping their memories and the decisions they make. The Ganguli family's experience therefore becomes reflective of how identity gets shaped through historical influences, present-day realities, traditional values and modern developments.

CONCLUSION

The cultural assimilation process which immigrants undergo proves to be an intricate and challenging procedure because it requires them to adapt to their new society or cultural environment, while their own cultural ways slowly fade to black. *The Namesake* portrays diaspora as an evolving condition in which people acquire new customs while they change or discard their traditional customs. The Ganguli family maintains their dual cultural heritage throughout the years, although their younger members find it strikingly difficult to do so, or establish a permanent connection with either culture. Their identities develop into forms that extend beyond the boundaries of specific national or cultural identities. In conclusion, it can very well be said that Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* is an intricate depiction of cultural conflicts that stem from cross-cultural transitions, immigration and all the other variables hitherto mentioned in this study. In short, while cultural transitions are also evident based on social evolutionary factors, one's individual identity is also shaped by the cultural environment. Behaviors are shaped and a certain way of life gets established, one that adapts for survival, recognition and comfort within a new space.

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