

Cartographies of the In - Between: Gendered Diasporic Identity and Cultural Hybridity in The Namesake

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Abstract

This paper looks at Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2003) to understand how it deals with themes of migration, cultural identity, and what it feels like to be an immigrant in America. The study follows the Ganguli family as they move from Calcutta to Massachusetts and explores how they deal with fitting into a new culture while trying to hold on to their Bengali roots. Key topics include the role of names, the feeling of not belonging, cultural mixing, and the tension between old traditions and modern life. The paper focuses on Gogol Ganguli, the main character, and his struggle with having two cultural identities. The study uses close reading of the text along with ideas from postcolonial and diaspora theories to understand how the novel speaks to the wider human experience of searching for a place to call home. The findings show that Lahiri's novel is an important work in American literature that gives a deep look into the emotional side of migration and how identity is shaped by it.

Keywords: Migration, Cultural Identity, Diaspora Literature, Postcolonial Theory, South Asian American Literature, Cultural Assimilation

Introduction

Modern literature has grown richer through stories that explore what happens when people move from one country to another. Among the writers who have taken up this subject, Jhumpa Lahiri holds a special place. Her work honestly portrays the lives of South Asian immigrants in America. Her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), is widely considered an important work in diaspora literature. It digs into the emotional, psychological, and cultural effects that migration has on families across generations.

The novel tells the story of the Ganguli family, following their path from Calcutta to Cambridge, Massachusetts. It shows how each generation deals with the pressure of fitting into American life while trying to keep their Bengali identity alive. At the center of the story is Gogol Ganguli, whose unusual name becomes both a daily problem and a symbol of his deeper struggle with having two cultural backgrounds.

This paper provides a detailed look at how *The Namesake* handles migration and the search for cultural identity. It examines conflicts between generations, the importance of names, the pull between tradition and change, and the emotional weight of living between two cultures. The goal is to show how Lahiri's work helps us better understand the immigrant experience and the universal need to feel like we belong somewhere.

Literature Review

Scholars have studied *The Namesake* from many different angles, including postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, feminist criticism, and cultural studies. Each approach has added something valuable to the conversation about this novel.

From a postcolonial viewpoint, Rajender Kaur points out that Lahiri's writing marks a new chapter in South Asian American literature — one that goes beyond the usual immigrant story to look at the more complicated identity questions faced by the second generation (Kaur 45). Margot Backus looks at the act of naming in the novel as a postcolonial issue, noting that Gogol's difficulty with his name shows how names carry the weight of both cultural history and personal choice (Backus 78).

Rocío Davis looks at the family through a generational lens and observes that parents and children in immigrant families experience culture in very different ways. While parents hold tightly to their home country's traditions, their children work to build new mixed identities (Davis 134). Shailja Sharma adds that the sense of being out of place is not just about physical location — it also affects how people relate to time, community, and their inner world (Sharma 89).

Feminist scholars have also contributed. Nalini Iyer, for example, focuses on Ashima's character and how she represents the specific challenges immigrant women face when they must balance traditional gender roles with life in a new cultural setting (Iyer 156). Vijay Mishra describes the situation of Lahiri's characters as a constant back-and-forth between memories of home and the realities of their new country (Mishra 201).

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Anita Mannur's work on food culture in the novel shows how cooking and eating habits serve as both a link to the past and a site where culture is quietly renegotiated (Mannur 112).

While this existing research is valuable, there is still room for a study that brings these different ideas together. This paper aims to provide that broader, more unified analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This study reads *The Namesake* through three main ideas: postcolonial hybridity, exile, and cultural identity. Homi Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' helps explain how the Gangulis live in a cultural in-between — a place where identity does not follow fixed national patterns (Bhabha). Edward Said's thoughts on exile show that the family's sense of being cut off from home is not temporary but a lasting condition (Said). Stuart Hall's idea that identity is both something we 'are' and something we are always 'becoming' helps explain Gogol's journey — especially the moment when he changes his name, which is both a personal and cultural act (Hall).

When useful, John Berry's framework for how immigrants adapt — through integration, assimilation, separation, or moving to the edges of society — helps show the difference between how first-generation and second-generation characters respond to life in America (Berry). Together, these ideas support Lahiri's central message: diasporic identity is built in the spaces between languages, names, and places — and it is always changing, never finished.

Migration as Cultural Displacement

In *The Namesake*, moving to another country is much more than a change of address. It changes everything — how people think, how they relate to others, and how they see themselves. Through the Ganguli family's journey, Lahiri shows how deeply migration cuts into a person's life.

The novel opens with Ashima giving birth in a foreign country, which immediately sets up the theme of displacement during one of the most personal moments in life. Lahiri uses this scene to show that displacement is not just about geography — it becomes something people carry inside them every day (Lahiri 49). Ashima tries hard to make her American home feel familiar by cooking Bengali food and keeping Indian customs, but these efforts also remind her of everything that cannot be fully recreated.

For Ashoke, displacement looks different. His experience of a near-fatal train accident back in India shaped his reasons for leaving, and America offers him both professional opportunity and a kind of emotional escape. Still, he too feels the quiet loneliness that immigrants often carry.

Memory plays a big role in the novel. The Ganguli family's connection to Calcutta is kept alive through letters, photos, and occasional visits, but these only reveal how much has changed while they were away. As Salman Rushdie describes it, their idea of home becomes a kind of imaginary place — more memory than reality (Rushdie 10).

Language is another area where displacement shows itself. Ashima and Ashoke speak Bengali as their emotional home language, while their children grow up more comfortable in English. This creates a gap — the children can't fully access their cultural roots through language, and their parents can't fully express their feelings in English. The result is a form of displacement that runs through the whole family, not just between the family and American society.

The novel also recognizes that displacement affects social standing. Moving to America meant leaving behind a whole network of friends, family, and community belonging — things that professional success in the new country cannot replace. As Homi Bhabha describes it, the Gangulis occupy a 'third space' — neither fully American nor traditionally Bengali (Bhabha 37).

A key insight in the novel is that displacement is experienced very differently by parents and children. For Ashima and Ashoke, it feels like loss and adjustment. For Gogol and Sonia, displacement is simply the world they were born into. This generational gap creates another layer of distance within the family itself.

The novel also deals with the idea of going back. Physical visits to India show how much both the immigrants and their homeland have changed. Ashima's eventual decision to split her time between the two countries is not a solution to displacement — it is her way of accepting that displacement has become a permanent part of her life (Lahiri 276).

The Role of Names in Identity

One of the most important themes in *The Namesake* is naming. Names in the novel are not just labels — they carry history, culture, and meaning. The Bengali tradition of giving children both a pet name used at home and a formal name used in public reflects the idea that identity has multiple layers (Lahiri 25). This system immediately runs into trouble in America, where hospital paperwork demands a single, official name right away.

Gogol's name comes from his father's love of Russian literature and a personal story connected to the writer Nikolai Gogol. But for the young Gogol Ganguli, the name is confusing and embarrassing. It marks him as different from both his American classmates and other Bengali children. When a teacher tells him that Gogol is a famous Russian author, it adds to rather than resolves his confusion about who he is (Lahiri 67).

As Gogol grows older, his discomfort with his name grows too. He avoids saying it when he can. His dislike of the name reflects a deeper struggle — he wants to fit into American life, and his unusual name makes that harder.

His decision to legally change his name to Nikhil — the formal Bengali name that was originally planned for him — is a turning point. The new name gives him a different kind of freedom, and his relationships with Ruth and Maxine seem easier under it. But the novel shows that a name change does not fix an identity problem. As Nikhil, Gogol still searches for something real that these relationships cannot provide.

His parents continue to call him Gogol even after the legal change, showing that for them, the name holds memories and love that cannot be simply erased. The conflict over the name mirrors the broader tension between holding on to tradition and adapting to a new life.

At the end of the novel, Gogol finds a kind of peace with his original name. This does not mean going back to where he started — it is a more grown-up acceptance of everything his name represents, including his father's love and his own complex history. As Margot Backus notes, the relationship between names and identity in the novel reflects wider questions about how personal choices and cultural inheritance interact (Backus 78).

Intergenerational Conflict and Cultural Transmission

The Namesake gives a thoughtful picture of how conflicts between parents and children in immigrant families are tied to culture. The root of these conflicts is simple: parents and children experience Bengali culture in completely different ways.

For Ashima and Ashoke, Bengali culture is something they lived from childhood. For Gogol and Sonia, it is something passed on to them — through food, stories, visits to India, and their parents' expectations. As Arjun Appadurai points out, this kind of inherited identity is different from one that comes from direct experience (Appadurai 89). The children's relationship with their heritage is partial and sometimes feels forced rather than natural, as Lahiri notes when she writes that they are Americans, though their parents find that impossible to accept (Lahiri 118).

Language creates another layer of generational difference. Gogol's limited Bengali means he misses out on the full richness of his parents' culture. He cannot fully connect with his grandparents during visits to India, and he cannot fully access the cultural understanding that his parents try to share.

Marriage expectations are also a source of conflict. Ashima and Ashoke's arranged marriage worked because it was built on shared values and family compatibility. Gogol, raised in America, approaches relationships looking for individual compatibility and romantic love. His marriage to Moushumi — a fellow Bengali-American — seemed like it might bridge the old and new worlds, but it fails, suggesting that shared cultural background alone does not guarantee a strong relationship.

Lahiri does not present these intergenerational conflicts as simply negative. Instead, she shows how they are part of how culture naturally changes over time. The children's eventual appreciation for their heritage — especially after their father's death — is not a return to old ways but a new, more personal relationship with their cultural background. Rocio Davis observes that this kind of evolution, where culture is reshaped as it passes between generations, is central to the immigrant experience (Davis 134).

The Search for Home and Belonging

Throughout *The Namesake*, 'home' is never a simple idea. For different characters, it means different things — and for all of them, it is something they are always in the process of finding rather than a fixed place they can arrive at.

Ashima's relationship with Calcutta is deep and lasting, but each time she returns, she sees how much has changed. The Calcutta in her mind — the one she talks about and cooks for — is, as Rushdie describes, more a creation of memory than an actual present-day place (Rushdie 10). Her American home becomes a hybrid space — Bengali in its kitchen smells and social gatherings, but American in its structure and setting. Yet even this home-in-between cannot fully satisfy the feeling of belonging.

The dinner parties the Gangulis host for other Bengali families in Boston represent attempts to recreate community and culture in a foreign place. These gatherings feel natural and nourishing to the first generation but can feel performative or artificial to their children, adding another layer of alienation.

Gogol's search for belonging takes him through different relationships and professional paths. His time with Maxine gives him a taste of easy American belonging, but this falls apart when family circumstances require him to be Bengali again. His professional success as an architect is real and meaningful, but the novel makes clear that career achievement cannot fill the deeper need to feel genuinely at home in a cultural and personal sense.

After his father's death, Gogol begins to understand belonging differently. He starts to see that the complexity of his background — the very thing that made him feel homeless for so long — is also what makes him who he is. Ashima's choice to live between two countries is the novel's clearest statement that home can be multiple and shifting, not single and fixed (Lahiri 276).

Lisa Lowe's concept of 'immigrant acts' — the constant performance of identity for different audiences — captures the exhausting work of belonging that second-generation characters like Gogol must do (Lowe 45). The novel ultimately suggests that home is less a place and more a process — something built through relationships, choices, and a growing acceptance of one's own complexity.

Cultural Hybridity and Identity Formation

Cultural hybridity — the blending of two or more cultural backgrounds — is at the heart of the second-generation experience in *The Namesake*. For Gogol and Sonia, this blending is not a problem to be solved but simply the reality of their lives.

Language is one place where hybridity shows itself every day. Gogol and Sonia understand Bengali better than they can speak it. They answer their parents in English during Bengali conversations. They carry both languages inside them but are fully at home in neither when it comes to cultural depth. This kind of linguistic hybridity creates new ways of communicating within the family — accommodating both generations at once.

Food is another rich site of cultural mixing. Ashima adjusts traditional Bengali recipes to work with what is available in American stores, creating a cuisine that is both rooted and adapted. Her children grow up appreciating this food, even if they were sometimes embarrassed by it at school lunches. Their eventual adult love of their mother's cooking is a symbol of how hybrid identity often involves going through rejection before arriving at appreciation.

Professionally, hybridity can become a strength. Gogol's career in architecture — a field about designing spaces — mirrors his own life project of building an identity that works. Stuart Hall's idea of 'new ethnicities' — identities that are hybrid by nature, not just by circumstance — applies well to Gogol and Sonia (Hall 163). Their cultural hybridity is not a deviation from something purer — it is its own kind of authenticity.

The novel's conclusion, where Gogol accepts his name and shows interest in his family's literary and cultural heritage, represents what Homi Bhabha calls 'cultural translation' — the ability to find meaning across cultural differences without needing to erase them (Bhabha 228). Gogol grows into a person who can hold contradictions within himself, and that is presented as a sign of maturity rather than failure.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* shows that migration is not simply a matter of moving from one place to another. It is a process that reshapes identity, family relationships, and the sense of home — often for generations. Through the Ganguli family, Lahiri explores how memory and modernity, tradition and change, are constantly in dialogue. As Edward Said noted, seeing the world from two cultural positions at once generates both insight and inner conflict — and Lahiri captures both with great skill.

The novel's treatment of naming makes this clear. Gogol's journey from rejecting his name to accepting it is a journey from alienation to self-understanding. It shows that identity in a diasporic context is not about choosing one culture over another, but about finding a way to hold multiple influences together.

Cultural hybridity in *The Namesake* is not presented as a loss. Drawing on Bhabha's idea of the 'third space,' Lahiri shows that the Ganguli family creates something new in the space between cultures — using language, food, and tradition as tools for redefining who they are. The novel challenges the idea that people must be purely one thing or another, offering instead a vision of identity as something that grows and changes.

The women in the novel — especially Ashima — also show how migration quietly reshapes gender roles. Ashima moves from a traditional wife and mother to someone who eventually makes independent choices about where and how to live. Her daughter Sonia takes personal and professional freedom as a given. Together, they illustrate how the diaspora can open up new possibilities for how women understand themselves.

At its deepest level, *The Namesake* is about the meaning of home. Lahiri's answer is that home is not a fixed place but an ongoing process of connection — to people, memories, and choices. Ashima's decision to divide her time between India and America shows that belonging can be plural, that one can be rooted in more than one place.

Ultimately, *The Namesake* stands as a powerful and humane work about what it means to live between worlds. Lahiri does not offer easy answers, but she does offer compassion — for the first generation who gave up so much, for the second generation who inherited the results, and for the universal human need to feel at home somewhere in the world.

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