

DIASPORIC ENCOUNTERS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S
THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract

This paper will investigate the representations of the experience of migration and settlement across generations and on the ways in which the text tries to decentralize the identity of characters in a rhizomatic process. The Namesake is set against the backdrop of the 1970s and 1980s when Indian migration to the West (here particularly the United States) was rampant due to the effect of rising globalization. It explores the conflicts of Indian immigrants for both the first and second generation, spanning a time period of late 1960s to early twenty-first century. American-born children of Indian parents, showing how they dwell between the assumptions and dominant forms of the American society, on the one hand, and the values of their ancestral homeland, on the other. Lahiri's novel has opened a site for readers to understand its transnational context, and the American nation-state has little meaning except when being considered within its collocation with different ethnicities and cultures.

Keywords: Diaspora, Third space, hyphenation, locus standi, schizophreniac

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Nowadays diaspora becomes crucial issue once people actively involved in global world. In diasporic world, people inevitably engage with their new environment, adjust with the new life and adapt to the unaccustomed-yet habits. However, on the same time they will look back at their old homeland which is sometimes totally different from their new world. In that situation people will face the struggling condition to keep going with two different worlds by some process of negotiating, transforming, or even contesting.

A major contribution in this regard has been that of the Indian writers, like Rushdie and Naipaul, who live as world citizens - a global manifestation of the exilic condition. Indian-English writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Hari Kunzru have all made their names while residing abroad. The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement—a perennial theme in all exile literature.

Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration is acknowledged as one of the eminent women writers in Indian English literature. Being an immigrant she is interested in the large section of new generation Indian Americans their traditions values and relationships and the significance of family and how it ties man to his homeland. Lahiri a dispassionate chronicler of the lives in a global society remains as a detached observer of the daily events in the lives of her characters. Her immigrant characters have a double vision and assert their identity in a bicultural universe. Her works portray the many issues that Indians settled abroad face in America. Before analyzing the experiences and maladies of the diasporas presented in Lahiri's novel, an attempt is being made here to define the term 'diaspora', the related crisis of dual identity and various hazards experienced

by them in the process of settlement in the new country-- their cultural dilemmas and displacement; the generational differences; transformation in their identities with the new demands; and the new possibilities and new ways of thinking.

The word 'diaspora' has been taken from the Greek, meaning "to disperse." Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define 'Diaspora as the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions.....'

Robert Cohen describes:

Diasporas as the communities of peoples living together in one country who "acknowledge that the old country-- a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore— always has some claim on the loyalty and emotions.

The Namesake is also contextualized in the field of diaspora studies as it tells the stories of subjects who have migrated from India to the US. The term diaspora refers, generally, to the movements of migrations, that is, the dispersion of peoples across the globe. There is, however, a distinction between old diaspora and new diaspora. The old diaspora is defined by Alex Weingrod and André Levy as referring to:

the Jews, the Greeks, and the Armenians, peoples who lost or were driven from their homelands and then resided different lands as dispersed minorities (diaspora is a Greek word, meaning, appropriately, "scattered seeds"), and yet continued to both dream and plan to someday "return home".

The new diaspora, on the other hand, includes a number of different peoples, has different causes, and the desire to return is no longer an important issue. Therefore, the new diaspora is defined as being:

Scattered about as a result of the global trends that shape the

contemporary world. As we know, these new diasporas have emerged from the worldwide movement of millions of persons, which in turn has been caused by inequalities, modern information and production technologies, powerful multi-national corporations that frequently shift production across the world, as well as the more familiar “old-fashioned” reasons of famine and war.

There are two phases in South Asian immigration to both the United States and Canada. The first phase began as early as the 1890s and saw small numbers and staggered discontinuous flows of immigrants arriving. The early wave of South Asian immigrants is mostly constituted by the labouring and farming class without the advantage of much education. Following the relaxation of immigration laws in 1965, which eliminated race, religion, and nationality as criteria for immigration and phased out the quota system in the United States, there has been a dramatic increase in South Asian immigration in the 1960s. In contrast to the constituency of the first wave, the typical profile of the second wave of South Asian immigrants illustrates that they were mainly English-speaking, college-educated, middle-class elites and brought with them a high level of skill or education that has often allowed them to become affluent in the adopted country.

Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli in *The Namesake* exemplify the second wave group. Ashima has already got a college degree and worked as an English tutor in Calcutta, and her husband, Ashoke, was “a doctoral candidate in electrical engineering at MIT” in 1968 U.S. The second generation migrants grow up in an atmosphere of guilt, only to find themselves like *Trishanku*, not belonging to anywhere. The plight of the immigrants is still better than that of their second generation who does not have a definite *locus standi* in terms of a home culture.

Diasporic experience is a spring of agonized inspiration, multiple identities, new subjectivities, creative memories and fresh perspectives of language and life. The earlier immigrant works of the neo-colonial and post-

colonial works were often a product of forced immigration of people running away from religious and other political or social persecution. But several Indians who migrated to America in the mid 1970s and afterwards were in search of a better life, material success and prosperity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*, published in September 2003 in succession to her debut collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, emerges as a national bestseller and sets its motif on the immigration experience, cultural clash and generation conflict. Lahiri was born in 1967 in London of Bengali parents, and grew up in Rhode Island, USA. *The Namesake* on a major scale reflects Lahiri's own experience of and contemplation on the identity problems of the second-generation South Asian Americans. This novel captures, in its substance, a sense of the troubling of identifications. As is implied by the category—"South Asian-American," the very rhetoric of the inclusivity of "hyphenation" veils the fact that whiteness is by implication invested with normativity.

It tells the story of an Indian family who migrated to the US. When their first son is born, they struggle about his name as he is supposed to have both a private and a public name according to their tradition. This is due to a delayed letter from a relative who was supposed to have the honor to name him, his private name, Gogol, ends up becoming his public name. As a result, naming occupies a central point in the narrative as the name "Gogol" will bring distress both to him and his family. For his parents it feels as if they had failed to follow an important cultural tradition from their homeland. However, for Gogol, it carries a feeling of dislocation and of not belonging, as it is a meaningless name for him since it is neither American nor Indian. Therefore my hypothesis is that naming in *The Namesake* symbolizes the feeling of the hybrid subject who lives between two worlds, an imagined one, and the "concrete" one which forces the characters to deal with their migrant heritage.

It also explores where the immigrant writer goes beyond the conventional wisdom and creates the 'third space' where they create their identity as transnational. As Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'third space' (third

space where we negotiate between different identities) the common ground of negotiation and transformation, which is neither assimilation nor otherness but represents the history of coalition building and the transnational and cultural diasporic connection. Jhumpa Lahiri emphasizes not only the immigrants who leave somewhere called home to make a new home in the United States but also the endless process of coming and goings that create familial, cultural, linguistic and economic ties across national borders. Her characters live in between, straddling two worlds, making their identity transnational.

Our names definitely signify our identities. In a conversation with Mira Nair, director of Hollywood movie on Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* Jhumpa Lahiri says:

"The names we have, there is so much about them: who are we and they are the one world that exists that represents us. And yet we don't choose them. These are from our parents."

Addressing the themes of immigration, collision of cultures and importance of names in *The Namesake*, Lahiri demonstrates how much of a struggle immigration can be.

However, *The Namesake* is a novel that celebrates the cultural hybridity resulting from globalization and the interconnectedness of the modern world and rethinks conventional immigrant experiences. Lahiri is aware of the existing problems of cultural diversity in the multicultural United States, and she argues that the struggle to grasp a transnational identity becomes an urgent issue for immigrants in this environment. While she represents Gogol as someone who is confused about his identity, she also presents Gogol as a prototypical transnational agent who lives between two different worlds with the possibility of creating multiplicity of identities.

The Namesake revolves around the metaphor of name which is the most integral part of an individual's identity, Lahiri extends the theme of "The Third

and Final Continent" in her debut novel.

The Namesake which revolves around divided identities and the conflicts in multicultural society is Jhumpa Lahiri's second book and her only novel till date. As the title indicates name plays a pivotal role in the narrative. The protagonist's cultural identity begins to blur with his naming ceremony, thus, pushing him into a limbo he struggles all his life to liberate himself from:

"A bowl of small, round, roasted red potatoes is passed around and afterward a salad. They eat appreciatively, commenting on the tenderness of the meat, the freshness of the beans. His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest...."

Ashutosh Dubey while analyzing the pain of migration in *The Namesake* makes an interesting comment:

"The immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world."

Following Benedict Anderson's conception of "imagined communities," one might view the unity, which the first-generation of South Asians strives to form in North America. This imagined community is a construction that involves deliberation, which is solidified through the first-generation South Asians' shared extraction from their mother land. The deliberate disconnection from the Indian origin is best illustrated by Gogol:

"He has no ABCD [American-born confused deshi] friends at college. He avoids them, for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share."

Gogol perfectly portrays the identity dilemma of the second-generation

immigrants; he is neither an authentic American nor an authentic Indian. Gogol is not only caught up between two cultures but, at the same time, excluded from both of them. His identity obfuscation is concretized through his reactions to his name—a name from Russia, which only intensifies his confused state of identification. Gogol's distaste for his own name and refusal to read his namesake's book, given as a birthday present by his father, highlight his suffering in constructing and grasping his own identity.

While Gogol seeks Americanization as Nikhil, he is confronted with an inner struggle between the two names:

“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.”

As he swings between his old name and American name in the schizophreniac nebulous, Gogol finds only alienation and disorientation in that deterritorialized space, rather than true agency or citizenship.

Moushumi, who once married Gogol and then decides to become a divorcee. Her background is far more complicated than Gogol's. She is an Indian, who is raised up in England and then moves to America. In America, she envies and emulates the American way of life and then decides to marry Gogol to live up to her Indian family's expectation. Yet, she is discontent to fall into a simple identification with either America or India. She immerses herself in French because the third language and culture offers her a refuge from America and India “that could claim her in favor of one that ha[s] no claim whatsoever”. A few months after marrying Gogol, she grows relentless again because “she can't help but associate [Gogol]... with a sense of resignation, with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind” .

She finally runs away with Dimitri, a French. Living with Dimitri, she is content that:

“There are no Bengali fruit sellers to greet her on the walk from Dimitri’s subway stop, no neighbors to recognize her once she turns onto Dimitri’s block. It reminds her of living in Paris—for a few hours at Dimitri’s she is *inaccessible, anonymous.*”

This anonymity and inaccessibility both illustrates and accomplishes her will to be against subsumption into the immigrants’ hybrid identity. She is not willing to resign to the two cultures that contest to claim her and that simultaneously set mutually inclusive and differentiative boundaries in between. By deserting the Bengali family and traditions and the interstitial identity the marriage with Gogol seems to offer, Moushumi demonstrates her resolution to rebel against the imperial power.

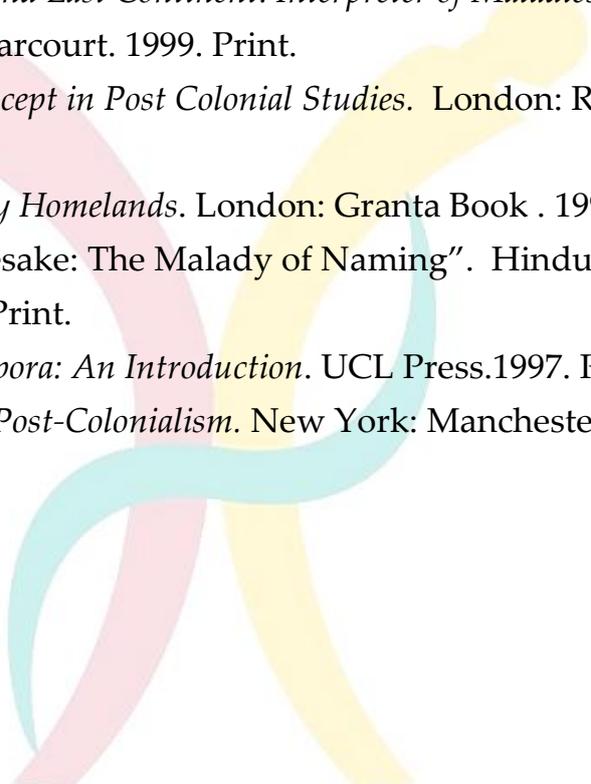
To sum up, Lahiri’s novel has opened a site for readers to understand its transnational context, and the American nation-state has little meaning except when being considered within its collocation with different ethnicities and cultures. William Shakespeare in his play *Romeo and Juliet* demonstrates:

“What’s in a name?
That which we call a rose
By any other name
would smell as sweet.”

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