

## **Acculturation, transnationalism, and the politics of belonging - A study on**

### **Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the different aspects of cultural challenges that Indian immigrants face, such as displacement, marginalisation, acculturation, and transnationalism. Within the community of diasporic writers, numerous are expatriates who consider India their homeland, deeply rooted in its cultural traditions and values. Themes of exile, alienation, cultural clashes, and the experiences of migration persistently emerge as central motifs in diasporic literature. It analyses Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, focusing on Ashima's feelings of loss, pain, and nostalgia for her homeland. The paper also explores the difficulties of adapting to a new culture and the lasting profound struggle to find a sense of belonging.

**Keywords:** acculturation, transnationalism, diaspora, politics of belonging, Jhumpa Lahiri

#### **1. Introduction**

From an anthropological perspective, acculturation happens when indigenous people assimilate into modern influences, later the term started being referred to immigrants who migrated from their homelands to other countries. Acculturation brings in a series of changes including food, lifestyle, clothing and customs, when the new immigrants start to adapt to the surrounding societal culture. These immigrants also bring with them a set of values, traditions, food and language from their home country. Acculturation has been understood as a process happening within various domains, with changes in behaviour, such as the use of language, food preference, peer group interaction, and media consumption, as well as changes in attitude, such as

preferences for the involved cultural elements. (Ozer, 2017). From a psychological standpoint, individualistic acculturation (the responses, reactions and integration of individuals to the new society) is highly subjective.

Initially, the theory of acculturation was perceived as rather simplistic and unidimensional where either the individual is perceived to be oriented to the host culture termed separation or the new adoptive culture which is termed assimilation. It is still being widely used in various realms of research and literature. However, this theory has been debunked lately because of its unilateral nature and a fourfold acculturation model has been set in its place. This new system broadens to include the concepts of integration, biculturalism and marginalisation and spreads into individual acculturation strategies such as segregation, melting pot, multiculturalism, and exclusion. While this process affects the new cultural society, its most significant effect lies within how the acculturating individual is perceived within its context.

### **1.1 Transnationalism and the Politics of Belonging**

Transnationalism has been rapidly increasing over the past few decades because of globalization, technological advancements and the migration of people. Over the centuries, the definition and concept of transnationalism have evolved to represent a duality or hybridity of identity. According to scholars, including Homi K Bhaba, the most convincing argument is that migrants engage in establishing and maintaining interconnected social ties across multiple facets of their lives.

I define transnationalism as a cultural space where immigrants and their American-born children import practices from their country of origin, which they adapt to the new environment and, in turn, adopt practices from the current environment, which they adapt in new ways that help them feel more at home (Paudyal, 2015). The concepts of acculturation and transnationalism are interconnected, as individuals participating in transnational endeavours, such as migrants or those active in the global business sphere, often experience acculturation as they embrace and integrate aspects of the cultures they encounter while preserving their original cultural heritage. The existential confusion of the immigrant community leads them to a constant need to recognize and adopt a transnational identity, this is achieved through negotiations between various factors daily. Lahiri's novel is set in the context of a revised immigration law,

globalization and technological advancement, which encouraged a multitude of skilled immigrants from South Asia to migrate to the US for higher studies and work. Her central character, Ashoke, comes to the US as a research scholar in Electrical Engineering at MIT.

Belonging can be defined as a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places (Hagerty et al., 1992). Many individuals frequently associate ideas of belonging with territorial connections, familiar landscapes, lifestyles, and cultural influences. These concepts tend to gain further strength, especially within the context of migration. When we examine different social science definitions of belonging, we find that the concept ranges from a personal feeling, the sense of belonging to a certain group, place, or social location, to the understanding of belonging as a resource that can be used to draw social demarcations and establish border regimes, the so-called politics of belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval, Davis, 2011).

A need to belong — to connect deeply with other people and secure places, to align with one's cultural and subcultural identities, and to feel like one is a part of the systems around them — appears to be buried deep inside our biology, all the way down to the human genome (Slavich & Cole, 2013). Indeed, a sense of belonging may be just as important as food, shelter, and physical safety for promoting health and survival in the long run (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1954). Lahiri's novel presents a vivid portrayal of transnational identity, illustrating how South Asian immigrants and their American-born children bring customs from their homeland, adjusting them to fit their new surroundings. Simultaneously, they embrace practices from their new environment, creatively adapting them to enhance their sense of comfort. Through the course of the novel, *The Namesake*, we see Ashima, the mother, imbibing practices from American culture to validate the emotions and identity of her children,

## **2. Diaspora**

Jhumpa Lahiri's "*The Namesake*" is a classic example which beautifully portrays the experiences of Indian diasporas living in the unfamiliar landscapes of the USA, highlighting the trauma of exile and disconnection. She skillfully captures themes of nostalgia, assimilation, and acculturation among Indian immigrants in her novel. As a second-generation Indian immigrant

herself, Lahiri offers her perspective on the immigrant experience, delving into the challenges of displacement faced by her characters. These individuals grapple with various forms of displacement, driven either by the need for financial stability or the desire to forge an identity in a foreign environment. Lahiri's storytelling navigates the characters' quests for identity and wrestles with the complexities of embracing a new culture, ultimately illustrating the profound struggle to find a sense of belonging.

The term 'Diaspora' finds its roots in the Greek term 'diaspirein,' signifying dispersion. Initially, it was linked to the dispersion of the Jewish community from their native land. Over time, in the twenty-first century, the scope of this term has broadened to encompass other displaced groups resulting from colonial expansion, slavery, or migration in pursuit of better livelihoods. The Indian diaspora includes individuals of Indian descent or birth, encompassing a diverse range of people. Within the community of diasporic writers, numerous are expatriates who consider India their homeland, deeply rooted in its cultural traditions and values. Themes of exile, alienation, cultural clashes, and the experiences of migration persistently emerge as central motifs in diasporic literature. "The Namesake", Lahiri's first novel, explores life in Calcutta, Boston, and New York. It was published in 2003. It charts the journey of a Calcutta immigrant family, as they adapt to life in the United States, exploring the cultural and social adjustments necessitated by this unfamiliar environment. Lahiri skillfully examines the identity crisis experienced not just by the first immigrants but also by successive generations, capturing the Indo-American contrast and the profound personal struggles within America's diasporic community. This book stands as a pivotal exploration of the "immigrant sensibility" that shapes the diaspora. Initially, it was published as a novella featured in *The New Yorker* and then was later expanded into a comprehensive novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri, born in 1967, is part of the second-generation immigrants in the USA and is a prominent female figure in Indian English Literature. Her work primarily centers on various aspects of Indian and American culture, drawing extensively from her own life experiences. Lahiri's literary portfolio boasts the Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short stories, "Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston, and Beyond" (1999), "Unaccustomed Earth" (2008), and her second novel, "The Lowland" (2013). As an immigrant, she deeply understands the

significance of familial connections and their ties to one's homeland. Interestingly, Lahiri was named Nilanjana Sudeshna by her parents but was changed to a more accessible nickname "Jhumpa" by her early schoolteachers, mirroring the situation of Gogol, the protagonist in "The Namesake." The ambivalence surrounding her name became the central theme of her debut novel. Despite this, Lahiri identifies herself as American, stating, "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been." Her writing extensively explores the subtleties of the Indian American experience.

Even though many researchers have investigated and analyzed Lahiri's *Namesake* and the protagonist, Gogol. Not much light has been shed on the character Ashima, and the unique cultural disparity that she faces as she moves to Boston with Ashoke from the comforts of Calcutta, the only city she had ever known. As opposed to her American-born children, her identity is primarily and unquestionably Indian.

This paper attempts to study the psychological aspect of acculturation, politics of belonging and transnationalism in Ashima and aims to unearth the aspects of maintaining and altering concepts of identity, language and culture as a result of the process.

In the beginning of the novel, we see a lonely and pregnant Ashima making chaat, a Bengali street snack using planters peanut and rice crispies, in her Boston apartment. This scene depicts her vainly trying to weave in the memories and flavours of her homeland to America. Even America's landscape proves to be a disconnecting experience for Ashima. Through phrases such as "Heaps of broken snow," "the frigid New England chill," "leafless trees with ice-covered branches," and "not a soul on the street," Lahiri vividly contrasts Ashima's feelings with the vibrant and bustling streets of Calcutta. Ashima's immigrant journey, coupled with her lack of acceptance in American society, generates feelings of distress, longing for belonging homesickness, and a profound sense of spatial and emotional disconnection from her ancestral home. Ashima reflects on her life before marriage and her departure with a sense of nostalgia. She spends her time engrossed in reading Bengali poems, stories, and articles.

After grappling with eighteen challenging months of adapting to American life, she faces her first childbirth at Auburn Hospital. In this pivotal moment, she yearns for the presence of her loved ones, feeling isolated and uneasy. As the only Indian among three American women in the

adjoining room, she grapples with the fear of nurturing a child in a country where she lacks strong familial ties and comprehensive knowledge, where life seems uncertain and meagre. She is terrified of raising a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare... (Lahiri 2003:6); 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. (Lahiri 2003: 25). To somehow fill up the abyss, in her unique manner, she tries to recreate echoes of her home within this unfamiliar world.

She feels that being a foreigner is akin to of lifelong pregnancy, a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect (Lahiri 2003: 50). For her, America is never synonymous with home where she clearly does not belong. To ease her life in the USA, we see her and Ashoke uphold Bengali traditions, through food, attire, festivals and other celebrations such as Gogol's annaprasan (a ceremony that marks an infant's first intake of solid food). Lahiri explains: "There is no baptism for Bengali babies, no ritualistic naming in the eyes of God. Instead, the first ceremony of their lives centers around the consumption of solid food" (Lahiri 2003: 38). when Gogol reaches six months, his parents host a gathering, inviting all their Bengali friends, aiming to preserve their Indian tradition by recreating a semblance of India in America. "Gogol is dressed as an infant Bengali groom, in a pale yellow pyjama-punjabi` from his grandmother in Calcutta ... His tiny forehead has been decorated ... with sandalwood paste to form six miniature beige moons floating above his brows" (Lahiri 2003:39). Ashima wears typical Bengali clothing, namely, a silvery sari "with the sleeves of her blouse reaching the crook of her elbow" (Lahiri 2003: 39). Ashoke "wears a transparent white Punjabi top over bell-bottom trousers" (Lahiri 2003:39). During the ceremony the hostess serves "the biryani, the carp in yoghurt sauce, the dal, the six different vegetable dishes" and "the guests will eat standing or sitting cross-legged on the floor" (Lahiri 2003: 39). All of these are symbols of the coping mechanisms she embraces to transform America into a place that feels like home.

As the novel progresses, we see Ashima acculturating into the American way of life. As her children grow older, Ashima and Ashoke begin to adopt more American traditions, slowly



weaving them into their American Bengali home, and gradually being immersed in American culture. Despite it being challenging and hard they acknowledge and are conscious about their children's dual identity. "For the sake of Gogol and Sonia, they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati" (Lahiri 2003:64). At Thanksgiving, She learns to roast turkeys rubbed with cumin, garlic and cayenne; in December they hang a wreath on their door; at Easter, they colour boiled eggs violet and pink and hide them around the house. She prepares sandwiches with bologna or roast beef for the children, and once a week makes an American dinner: "Shake 'n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb" (Lahiri 2003: 65).

### **3. Conclusion**

Creating a new identity and life in a foreign land comes with significant challenges. First-generation immigrants encounter difficulties as they strive to uphold their cultural values through traditional means. When their children embrace the customs of the host country, it often results in complex intergenerational relationships. Similarly, when second-generation immigrants attempt to assimilate the host country's culture, they grapple with a frantic quest for their personal and psychological identity. Jhumpa Lahiri adeptly illustrates the dilemma faced by such immigrants.

Even after an extended period in America, Ashima continues to wear saris, relish Indian cuisine, and uphold every Bengali tradition. The Ganguli family's social circle primarily comprises Bengali immigrants, illustrating their commitment to preserving their heritage. Lahiri intricately portrays Ashima's gradual acculturation process, delving deeply into her psyche. As the central character, Ashima embodies cultural displacement and the anguish of exile, exploring existential themes through her constant quest for identity and a sense of belonging.

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