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In Search of Home: Diasporic Identity and Belonging in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Diasporic narratives have enriched the oeuvre of post-colonial studies since the late 20th century, with Indian diasporic writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, and Amitav Ghosh contributing significantly to its growth and discussion. The 'displacement' of the immigrant crossing the borders of the homeland into the culturally different environment of the host nation places them in a state of perpetual motion and flux, as they are neither here nor there, struggling to define the contours of their identity and find a sense of belonging. Homi K Bhabha defines this state as living in the 'interstices', existing between borders, creating fluid identities and cultural hybridity and placing them in constant transit. Avtar Brah in her Cartographies of Diaspora explores how the diasporic individual is dispersed from a centre, a locus, or a 'home'; a 'home' as V.S. Naipaul claims, can be visited but not returned to. In this state of liminality, the diaspora builds imaginary homelands as observed by Salman Rushdie. Their struggle is not only to find physical and financial security in the host land, but also to manoeuvre the plurality in identity, nationality, and everyday existence. These experiences are explored with emotional depth and critical vision in the works of the Indian-American author Jhumpa Lahiri. This paper attempts to trace how the characters in her debut novel The Namesake (2003) navigate the lucid lines of identity, home and belonging.

Keywords : Indian Diaspora, Identity, Home, Belonging, Cultural Hybridity, Jhumpa Lahiri

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Migration and displacement have characterized human civilizations for millennia. However, migrations across the postcolonial borders of the East and the West that spiked after the Second World War have given rise to new modes of colonization and tales of suppression and alienation in the 'lands of promise' of the West. The 'displacement' of the migrant crossing the borders of the homeland into the culturally different environment of the host nation places them in a state of perpetual motion and flux, as they are neither here nor there, struggling to define the contours of their identity and find a sense of belonging. These experiences are explored with emotional depth and critical vision in the works of the Indian-American author Jhumpa Lahiri, who was born in London to migrant Indian parents and raised in America and had experienced the social, political, and psychological turmoil of the diasporic experience.

The distinction between the term 'diaspora' and the often interchangeably used 'migrant' is significant. In his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, social scientist Robin Cohen describes the term diaspora as follows:

> Diaspora signified a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile. Other people abroad who have also maintained strong collective identities have, in recent years, defined themselves as diasporas, though they were neither active agents of colonization nor passive victims of persecution…However, all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that "the old country" – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. (ix)

Cohen further explains that this emotional association with their natal or imagined natal territory could be weak or strong depending on the historical circumstances the diasporic individual is part of. However, the members of a diasporic community are characterized by "an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background" (Cohen ix). Migrant, on the other hand, refers to the individual who crosses the boundaries to a host land. Migration is a necessary condition for the formation of a diasporic population, but not all members of the diaspora have experienced migration. Individuals born to migrant parents in host countries are also part of the diaspora despite lacking the experience of migration. In Lahiri's works, the entanglements of identity and belonging are not limited to the migrants but also their children, who navigate these conflicts differently in the absence of the experience of migration.

The Namesake is woven around the experiences of Bengali immigrants to the USA, post the 1960s immigration wave to the country, which saw "a substantial emigration of the intelligentsia; from the country…often referred to as the brain-drain phenomena" (Karmakar 82). *The Namesake*'s Ashoke Ganguli is part of this intelligentsia: a young Indian engineer who, after getting convinced of the limited opportunities in India, pursues a PhD in Boston and subsequently settles in America.

He takes his young wife, Ashima, with him and finds a new home and family in the foreign land. Although America was a land of opportunities for Ashoke, the lived experiences of reconfiguring one's culture and lifestyle, the longing for home, and the rootlessness and alienation in the host land prove difficult to overcome, especially for his family.

Homi K. Bhabha, in his *Location of Culture*, discusses living in the 'beyond'. Discussing how exclusive ideas of identity are being drastically redefined, Bhabha considers the concept of living in the 'interstices', existing between borders, creating fluid identities, and cultural hybridity. "We find ourselves in the moment of transit…an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words au-dela - here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth" (Bhabha 1). The essence of the diasporic life and identity captured in Bhabha's words are reflected in *The Namesake*. When the Gangulis travel back and forth between Calcutta and Boston, even after the journey is over, they feel "somehow in transit, still disconnected from their lives" (Lahiri 87).

Even after the migration is over, the diasporic individual is still in a state of transit and translation. It is in this transitional space that the diasporic identity is defined. Suspended between the borders of the native land and the host land, and consequently caught between the cultures, languages, rituals, and values of both, the identity of the diasporic individual is formed in the in-between space where their culture is hybridized and their identity is plural. The plurality of this identity is encapsulated in the plurality of the protagonist's name in *The Namesake*. Gogol Ganguli, first named after his father's favorite Russian author, later changes his name to 'Nikhil' to sound more Indian, which is later metamorphosed into 'Nick' by his American peers to incorporate him into their culture. Gogol is thus an odd combination of Russian, Indian, and American. Even before he feels the conflict of cultures between his ancestral roots in India and his present life in America, he is inserted into this space of plurality by his name.

First-generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima find that their identities are comparatively concrete. They are 'Indians' in America since they can identify India as the place of their origin. But second-generation immigrants like Gogol and Sonia Ganguli in *The Namesake* are 'Indian-American', living with a hyphenated identity. 'Asian Americans', therefore, share the experience of having to negotiate between two distinct sets of values and cultures. "To be Asian American is to belong to a third culture…a combination of both Asian values and American values", giving rise to "an identity based in a hybrid alternative" to Indianness and Americanness (Park 554). According to Bhabha, such a fluid and hybrid identity challenges exclusivity and reduces the gap between hierarchical binaries, preventing "identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (Bhabha 4).

However, what is undermined here is the alienation and displacement often felt by the diasporic individual in finding the middle ground or having to select and combine certain values and cultural aspects and discard others. Gogol, born in India

and raised in America, is an example of what is often referred to as the ABCD: American-Born Confused Desi. When he comes across the term in a seminar, as much as he realizes that it refers to someone like him, he does not think of India as desh and comprehends that he cannot completely integrate into America because of his Indianness. "The combination of two cultures must result in the sacrifice of some cultural habits or attitudes, and this loss is always taken from one's ethnic heritage rather than the American host culture" (Park 555). The integration of Gogol into America would require a material and symbolic sacrifice of the Indian habits and values his parents thrust upon him. This sacrifice materializes in Gogol's incorporation into the lifestyle of his American girlfriend, Maxine Ratliff, and her family. The Ratliffs teach him their ways, which are in complete juxtaposition to his family's, making him feel that he is betraying his roots. However, their acceptance of Gogol is based on their understanding that he is more American than Indian. Maxine's mother, Lydia, says to her friend: "'Nick is American…He was born here'… 'Weren't you?'" (Lahiri 157). The tag question at the end hints that if Nick had not been "American" enough, he would not have received the same welcome.

It is also to be noted that in their interracial relationship, while Gogol actively imbibes Maxine's American ways, it is not reciprocated. For Maxine, the visit to Gogol's Indian home in America to meet his parents is only "a single afternoon's challenge, an anomaly never to be repeated" (Lahiri 146). The colonial attitude that considers the East as inferior to the West is also apparent here. Nick must bury half of his hyphenated identity or face alienation.

In almost all diasporic literature, a tumultuous and ambivalent relationship with 'home' characterizes the diaspora. Avtar Brah notes in her work *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*: "According to Webster's Dictionary in the United States, diaspora refers to a 'dispersion from'. Hence the word embodies a notion of a center, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs" (Brah 178). Thus, home is the core or the locus point from which the diasporic individual is displaced. In general, 'home' is a significant factor that determines one's sense of belonging, both in the physical aspect of a building that ideally provides shelter, comfort, and space for living and psychologically as a space of belonging, safety, and community that orients the self in the world. The diasporic individual is removed from both on migration. Even though another place of residence can be found in the host country, the psychological affiliation of 'home' almost always remains with the one left behind in the native land. The desire for home is unfulfilled, and the longing for the native land remains.

Ashima and Ashoke in *The Namesake* cannot accept America as home: "Gogol makes the mistake of referring to New Haven as home…Ashima is outraged by the remark, dwelling on it all day. 'Only three months and listen to you,' she says, telling him that after twenty years in America, she still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home" (Lahiri 108). Their house at Pemberton Road and their imaginary home in Calcutta are at odds. Their existence in America is always defined by an intense desire to go 'home' to India, coupled with the perpetual

anxiety of living in a 'foreign' land. A key factor that determines the emotional response to the concept of home is the generational difference of the diasporic members. First-generation immigrants Ashoke and Ashima think of India as home. But for second-generation diaspora members Gogol and Sonia Ganguli, India is a matter of their ancestral past that pervades their everyday existence but an entity from which they are detached in space and time. "For the first-generation diasporics, 'home' connotes India, whereas for their succeeding generations, it is usually constructed in accordance with their own perceptions and compulsions" (Karmakar 82). The intense nostalgia about India harbored by Ashoke and Ashima is incomprehensible to their children.

Gogol and Sonia do not like their occasional visits to Calcutta, and the alienation that Ashoke and Ashima feel in America is felt by their children in India. This difference is articulated in the episode where the Gangulis return to Boston after a brief stay in Calcutta: "He knows his mother will sit silently staring at the clouds, as they journey back to Boston. But for Gogol, relief quickly replaces any lingering sadness…With relief he puts on his headset to watch The Big Chill and listen to top-forty songs all the way home" (Lahiri 87). Here, 'home' for Gogol is their house at Pemberton Road in America. While Ashima and Ashoke are leaving home, Gogol and Sonia are going home. "Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (Brah 188). Lahiri interprets home in this sense as the place of origin, although it is impossible to return to it. This 'original home' is easily identifiable for Ashoke and Ashima since they were born and raised in Calcutta. But for a second-generation diaspora member like Gogol, the place of origin is not easily locatable. He is an amalgamation of India and America, born and raised in America with ancestral roots in India, causing the strict boundaries between what is native and what is foreign to blur. Gogol feels it is a sense of obligation that draws Ashoke and Ashima back to Calcutta because that is his reason to go back to India. It is only at a later stage in life that Gogol can begin to comprehend the displacement and longing his parents had felt for India their whole lives.

It is also crucial to remark on the difference between the real home and the imaginary home in the diasporic mind. The native land is often exaggerated and glorified in the diasporic imagination, stripping it of all flaws and giving it a picture removed from reality. V.S. Naipaul notes in his essay "In the Middle of the Journey": "Perhaps India is only a word, a mystical idea…which no one ever gets to know: India as an ache, for which one has great tenderness, but from which at length one always wishes to separate oneself" (Naipaul 7). 'Imaginary India' becomes detached from the real India in the minds of the diaspora, manipulated by emotional longing. As Rushdie points out, the diaspora engages with "imaginary homelands", stringing together fragments of memory: "But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge…that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that

was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind" (Rushdie 10). Such an imagined, often glorified picture of the homeland prevents the acceptance of life in the host land.

The difference between real and imaginary India is felt more distinctly by second-generation diaspora members who are twice removed from India. The nostalgia and patriotism felt by their parents give a hyperbolic picture of India, which is shattered when they encounter the 'real', existential India. During the Gangulis' trip to Calcutta, Gogol and Sonia are exposed to the poverty in the streets, the dangers of pickpockets and bandits on an Indian train, and the cracked and congested streets where Gogol cannot keep up with his cross-country training in his American sneakers. The reality of the imaginary homeland yearned for by their parents distances them further from it.

Following the theories of liminal space and interstices put forth by Homi K. Bhabha, it can be said that the actual home of the diasporic population is situated in the "in-between space" between borders, nations, and boundaries, negating the binaries of native and foreign: "…the immigrants occupy an interstitial space between the nation left behind and the nation where they reside…the grey area between host country and India, between two lifestyles and cultures, and accept that as 'home'" (Karmakar 81). There is an acceptance of this interstitial space as home towards the end of the novel. When Ashima decides to leave America and alternate her stay between America and India after Ashoke's death, she finally embraces the house on Pemberton Road, which she had denied the tag of 'home' for many years: "And though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road she knows that this is home nevertheless—the world for which she is responsible, which she has created…" (Lahiri 280). Along with this acceptance, there is a reversal of the home/foreign-land dichotomy initially associated with India and America, respectively. While thinking of going back to India, after years of living in American society, she feels the trepidation of migration as she had first felt while making the journey from India to America: "She feels overwhelmed by the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign" (Lahiri 278). The binary distinction between home and host lands vanishes and places Ashima willingly in the third space born out of the confluence of India and America.

The existence of the immigrant in the interstitial space gives rise to the problem of alienation, in the homeland and the host land, raising the question of belonging. "Alienation and estrangement are built into the immigrant experience: only the immigrants' passport and nationality change, and his identity is torn between old and new worlds" (Joshi 84). The attitude of the Ratliffs to Gogol's Indian culture and the remarks of Gogol's wife Moushumi's previous American boyfriend on her Indian ways are instances of the alienation faced in the host land. "Language barriers, disconnection from family and friends, and exposure to new and different customs and traditions can lead to difficulties in adapting to a new country. Difficulties

acculturating can, in turn, lead to low self-esteem and increased self-doubt, with additional psychological stress" (Joshi 85). While Ashima is in the American hospital for Gogol's birth, alone and removed from her family, she reflects upon her alienation: "For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all." (Lahiri 5).

However, alienation is not exclusive to the host land. In the homeland as well, the diasporic population faces alienation. When the Gangulis visit India, they are viewed with a distanced awe by their Indian relatives, who are fascinated by their stories about carpets in the bathroom and the pictures of their life in America. They are treated as 'guests' and feel like 'tourists' in India, especially on their trip to Agra to see the Taj: "Though there is a great deal of admiration for the Taj Mahal…Gangulis are also alienated by it. We are told that they are essentially foreigners in Agra…a signal for the ways in which this family does not belong to India" (Chakraborty 618).

Thus alienated, a sense of belonging must be forged by the diaspora in other ways. To be integrated into the host land, the process of acculturation becomes necessary. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry is useful here. "Bhabha argues that mimicry is 'the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which appropriates the Other as it visualizes power…when members of a colonized society try to imitate the language, dress, politics, and cultural attitudes of their colonizers'" (Omidvar 3). By extension, this can be applied to the attempts of the diasporic population to be like the inhabitants of their host land by sacrificing some of the ways of their native land. Ashima and Ashoke are forced to name Gogol in the American hospital immediately after his birth, and the Bengali tradition of keeping a "pet name" and a "good name", a concept Americans cannot comprehend, is also sacrificed as Gogol's pet name becomes his good name. The Gangulis celebrating Christmas and Easter following American rituals is also an attempt at this cultural assimilation. Gogol muses about his mother's Christmas parties: "It has always felt adopted to him, an accident of circumstance, a celebration not really meant to be" (Lahiri 286).

However, there is a simultaneous attempt to retain the connection to one's roots by the reconstruction of the homeland in the host land in whatever ways possible. Ashima Ganguli repeats the phrase 'that's not our way' throughout the novel, insisting that certain things should be carried out following the Indian tradition. Despite imitating the ways of America for acceptance, there is also an attempt to preserve India in fragments, especially through clothes, food, home décor, rituals, and letters and relics from home. For instance, Ashima re-reads her parents' letters even after their deaths.

Food is a major factor through which the sense of belonging to the homeland is preserved and reconstructed. Often this reconstruction is not complete or perfect. Ashima attempts to make Calcutta street food with Rice Krispies, yogurt from half-and-half, and sandesh from ricotta cheese. All of them are ill-made imitations of

Indian food using American food items. “Yet, in this recreation the practices are inherently different from Calcutta traditions, reproducing an emotional and cultural effect rather than replicating particular acts with any exactness” (Chakraborty 619). The homeland is retained through rituals as well. Along with Christmas and Easter, the Gangulis also celebrate the Durgo Pujo in a hall in America reverently. The rice ceremony is conducted for Gogol and Sonia, although using the soil in America and a dollar bill. Most importantly, the sense of belonging to the homeland is achieved through the association with communities composed of diaspora members who share the same linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. “Members of the immigrant community group together (like the British clubs of the colonial era) to assert traditional values, cuisine, language, and religion” (Joshi 84). This is to find a new family based on ethnicity against the alienating structure of the host land. Describing Ashoke and Ashima’s Bengali immigrant friends, Lahiri writes: “They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends” (Lahiri 38).

Gogol and Sonia get substitute meshos and mashis, or honorary uncles and aunts. Gogol and Moushumi’s marriage is also based on this sense of belonging to the same community. “They talk about how they are both routinely assumed to be Greek, Egyptian, Mexican— even in this misgendering they are joined” (Lahiri 212). Their relationship is founded on the shared experience of being second-generation Indians in America. Their marriage is also an act of creating a sense of belonging and strengthening the ties of the Bengali diasporic community in America: “He is aware that together he and Moushumi are fulfilling a collective, deep-seated desire —because they’re both Bengali, everyone can let his hair down a bit” (Lahiri 224). In the absence of blood relations, shared ethnicity in a foreign land becomes another ground to find belonging.

Identity, home, alienation, and belonging are contested areas in the diasporic experience. The conflict in these areas challenges the concepts of concrete, polar binaries of existence and identity, but the lack of definition regarding identity, home, and culture creates a sense of displacement and disorientation for the diasporic individual who must struggle to live in the middle space. The experience of diasporic life is beautifully expressed by Jhumpa Lahiri in the afterword to *The Namesake*, paying tribute to the journey of her immigrant parents: Their journey is “a process of leaving behind, of reconstructing, of moving back and forth, of living such that every voyage is a departure and no destination is ever fully home” (Lahiri 298).

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