

## Similes of Diasporic Transformations in Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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### Abstract

*The Namesake explores diasporic themes such as cultural identity, language barrier, alienation, and nostalgia. Throughout the novel, there is a desire for freedom and emancipation from these ideas.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural identity, language barrier, alienation, and nostalgia*

Language as a barrier, alienation, cultural identity, naming, parent-child relationships, and nostalgia are all part of this story's plot. The thirty-year story of Indian Bengali immigrants from Calcutta is chronicled in this novel. In establishing themselves in a new land, they experienced several displacements.

Ashoke Ganguli is one of the many "professional Indians" who migrated to America as part of the "brain drain" in the early 1960s. It is not the first time Ashoke Ganguli has left his native India to study in the United States, where he hopes he can settle down "with security and respect."

After two years in America, he returns home. So he marries Ashima, a Calcutta-born Bengali girl who has no desire to move to Boston but agrees to marry him. With heavy heart, she departs alone for Boston, accompanied by family members who tell her "not to eat beef, wear skirts, cut her hair, or forget the family once she landed in Boston" (37). While living in their three-room apartment, Ashima is frequently depressed and homesick due to the extreme temperature swings experienced throughout the year. She misses her father's warm and loving home and longs to return there. In the

immigrant's mind, a home is a magical place. (192: 1997)

She is primarily lost in her native land's memories, calculating the Indian time difference between Calcutta and their location. She only reads Bengali short stories, poems, and magazine articles. She keeps her parent's letters in her white bag and reads them between 12 and 2. "without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt by her side, and to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, knows no one, where life seems so tentative and sparse" she says (The Namesake: 35).

She is the only character who adapts to a transcultural lifestyle. "The uncertain young woman we meet in the novel's opening pages, attempting unsuccessfully to recreate a favourite Indian snack in her Massachusetts kitchen, is transformed into a transnational figure," says Alfonso-Forero (852). The clash of two very different cultures caused Ashima's social displacement in America. While American women and men seem to be equally independent, the Indian view of gender roles in society is different. Ashima is the issue. She hosts annual Indian family parties in America to preserve Indian traditions and create a surrogate India.

Alfonso – Forero writes about Indian family culture:

"To resolve the women's issue, nationalism must distinguish between the material and the spiritual in culture.... It creates a division of labour within the Indian home, but it also positions women as the guardians and propagators of Indian culture. In this way, Indian nationalism elevates the status of the middle-class woman..." (853–4)

Ashima is constantly fighting to preserve her family's Indian identity "against the call to assimilate." Gradually, Ashima gains independence. She is proud of raising the child, goes to the market alone with her baby, smiles at passers-by, and meets her husband on campus. When Ashoke is hired as an Assistant professor of electrical engineering at a university, she feels more dislocated. Ashima finds the move from Calcutta to Cambridge' more distressing.'

Living in a foreign land, Ashima realizes that being a foreigner is like a lifelong pregnancy, a constant burden, an uneasy feeling. It is a never-ending responsibility, a pause in an otherwise routine life, only to be replaced by something more complex and demanding. Ashima believes that being a foreigner elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same mix of pity and respect." Ashima gradually gains the kind of confidence and independence that a typical American woman is supposed to have. She gets a job as a librarian and meets American colleagues, a relationship she had never had before. She eventually takes over her husband's responsibilities, such as paying bills, purchasing tickets, driving the car, and changing the house. She finally realizes she is an American as she is an Indian.

Throughout her life, she develops cultural and geographic mobility. Upon the death of her husband, she splits her time between India and the United States, where she has family and roots. In this way, Ashima becomes a transnational figure, "true to the meaning of her name; she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a

resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri276).

Ashoke is a key character in the story. He establishes the family and Gogol as the central character. He is significant to the novel through his death in America, his train accident in India, and his decision to move to America. Ashoka believed he was dead; he was surprised to discover he was still alive when his train mate died. The novelist succinctly summarizes his predicament:

"He recalls feeling ill or even dead. Because he could not feel his legs, he did not notice Ghosh's mangled limbs on them. In the cold, unfriendly blue of early morning, he saw the moon and a few stars still in the sky " (18)

His son's name was inspired by the memory of being saved from a train by a page from Nikolai Gogol's book. Gogol, the protagonist, was given a loving remembrance of his personal life by the author, who had changed his name. Another reason his death is significant is that it, directly and indirectly, impacts the other characters' well-being and well-being. In his absence, Ashima and Gogol enter, gain new perspectives on life and make significant changes. So, after Ashoka's death, Gogol abandons his American girlfriend Maxine and concentrates on his family, marrying Moushumi, a family member who must live alone and confine her lifestyle to the American side of the family (her children) and perform Ashoke's household duties.

When Gogol, the Ganguli's son, grows up and is exposed to the cultural dilemmas that his parents have faced ever since they arrived in America, the novel reaches its critical point. Unlike his parents, Gogol must deal with his own culture and tradition and his memories of the motherland. The novel's exquisite style renders the second generation's plight in a way that propels identification.

To summarize the novel's dilemmas and predicaments, Ashima and Gogol are central characters. Gogol perfectly

embodies the woes of first- and second-generation immigrants. Immigrants have a unique ability to live in two worlds simultaneously. To be a first-generation migrant means valuing one's roots and culture. As a result, parents introduce their children to myths, stories, literature, etc., from their native country. However, the importance of the adopted land's cultural shades cannot be ignored.

The second generation's future is there, and he must learn its quirks. The Ganguli befriend many Indian-Americans in the vicinity to alleviate their history and traditions. The acceptance of an unbreakable link with one's past migration history and a shared ethnicity with others of a similar background, according to Robert Cohen, demonstrate adherence to a diasporic community. (26). This "little India" that they all cherish is obtained by attending religious festivals and ceremonies.

More than a month has passed since Ashima's grandmother sent her a letter with two names: a girl and a boy. The letter arrives after Ashoke and Ashima decide to put "Gogol" on the birth certificate to get him out of the hospital. The letter containing Gogol's real name is lost, and his grandmother dies. So the name is absent but present, as everyone knows it exists somewhere (194). Because Gogol's life storey is similar to his name's fate, his identity is also in flux. He does not get it till the end.

Henize says Gogol's name is singular. It means nothing to Gogol. It is neither a first nor a last name in America nor India, which Gogol knows well. He has no idea how his surname relates to a Russian writer. In school, he learned about the Russian writer's absurdity as a mentally ill genius, and he feared his first name's "singularity" He hated his name at first. To the girl he just kissed, he is afraid to say he is Gogol as such. He tells her he is Nikhil, a name his parents suggested but never used: As a result, "not only does he changes his 'overcoat' and his behaviour towards others, but he also changes who he

is if that means his past, the complex concoction of his personal and cultural identity up to this point" (Heinze 195).

In court, he eventually changes his name to Nikhil, effectively disassociating himself from his cultural heritage and family. There is no history associated with the new name. He is still referred to as Gogol by his family and those who have known him in the past. He has the air of an actor. "At times, he feels as he has cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different." (105) (Lahiri). Heinze calls his new character trait "doppelganger." Heinze's new character quality is created by changing his name, but his old network of friends is referred to as "doppelganger" (195). He physically distances himself from his family by attending a university in another city. Then he can claim his new world and identity in a place where everyone knows him as Nikhil. 'His overcoat, Nikhil, obscures his Americanness' (Caesar 110). During this period of his life, he has several relationships with girls who only know his second name.

After changing his name, he is disturbed when his father reveals his Namesake in the car. It is difficult to say how this knowledge affects Gogol, but he is not immune to the news. After all these years, he cannot conceal his ostensible offence at being informed about this. Considering his name and his love for his family, especially his father, it is surprising. This is shown at the end of the novel when Gogol reads "the overcoat" for the first time since he was fourteen and was given the book. Inscribed on the front of the paper were "For Gogol Ganguli" and "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (Lahiri 288). That reminds him of the day his father gave him the book, quoting Dostoyevsky's statement that "we all came out of Gogol's coat," and in response to Gogol's inquiry about the meaning of the phrase, he replied, "It will make sense to you one day" (Lahiri 78).

Caesar believes that "for Ashoke, Gogol is a new life, a rebirth, creating another life in another country, both his own life and his children's" (110). He tries to give his son a transnational identity, which Gogol rejects. A more displacing factor converges Gogol's preoccupations with identity and affection for his father: his father's saviour and means of happiness were precisely what he despised his entire life. A new identity was being built for him, and these relationships and his name change from Gogol to Nikil were the first steps. His lack of continuity undermines his self-esteem and identity. In every emotional connection, he seeks a sense of self. Each relationship transforms him into a new person. He confuses his social self with his material self and thus with his essential self because each relationship he has becomes a new overcoat for him.

Gogol is American, not Indian. Gogol grew up in two worlds, like Bhabha's in-between space where people can move and negotiate (Homi: 1-2:1994). He is both Indian and the American. He is an American who has Indian parents but lives in a different geographical area than India. India is a 'foreign country' to him physically and mentally (The Namesake 118). He juggles his two cultures.

In New York, Gogol, a first-generation American with Indian-American parents, is passive with Maxine, an American girl with American parents who is comfortable with her own identity. Gogol's unconscious thirst for originality and passivity in relationships let him quickly succumb to Maxine and her family's way of life.

He moves in with Maxine's parents. At the same time, he tries to avoid his own Massachusetts family. He even ignores his mother. His immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own"

(Lahiri 141). "He needs this distance partly to focus on his new relationship, which is different from all his previous ones and makes him feel exotic, and partly so he can be free of expectations, responsibility, and exile from his own life" (142). These

symbols of the Ratliff's earthly life construct Gogol's new identity (Lahiri 155). Meanwhile, Gogol's father passes away from a heart attack in Ohio. For his father's funeral, he heads back to his home state of Massachusetts. Fathers die, but they live on in their children's hearts and minds through the things they leave behind. For unclear reasons, Gogol ends his relationship with Maxine. "He thinks she cannot understand and sympathize with his problems." Maxine had just arrived from his parent's house, and he had already told her his other name. 33

'That is the cutest thing I have ever heard,' she exclaimed. Even if it is only his father's material world, Ashoke has already entered it. "He does not want to be with someone who barely knew his father, who has met him only once" (Lahiri 170). (113).

To some extent, he fulfils his mother's wishes, which are bolstered by his interest in his family history, particularly after his father's death. Gogol returns to the role of a bystander at the beginning of his relationship with Moushumi. In the wake of Moushumi's experiences in France: "Moushumi's transformation was free of remorse or guilt. He admires her... He knows he will never be able to do what his parents did in America " (Lahiri 233).

Moushumi, Gogol's wife, is the novel's most mysterious character. She has Indian parents, was born in England, lived in England, America, and France, and has many relationships with people from diverse backgrounds and nationalities... Her lifestyle suggests she is unwilling to accept a defined identity.

She identifies so strongly with her Indian heritage that she breaks up with her former fiancé Graham because she cannot bear him. "Rejecting her background, critical of her family's heritage" (Lahiri 217).

"She hated the way they would talk of the details of her wedding, the menu and the different colours of saris she would wear for the different ceremonies as if it were a fixed certainly in her life", she says of Indian traditions (Lahiri 213). Even after she had moved to the United States, she continued to refer to herself as an Englishwoman: " "During her reminiscences, she speaks of her family's time in England... Despite her reluctance to relocate to the United States, she explains to him that she had clung to her British accent as long as she could " (Lahiri 212). Being an American teenager, she is envious of the freedom to date and be with boys that Americans enjoy. Still, she is compelled to do so elsewhere because of her parents' expectations. She fled to Paris to seek safety. "With no guilt or misgivings, she approached French like any other foreign language or cultural experience – there were no expectations or preconceptions of any kind. Turning away from the two potential claimants favouring a country with no such claims was the easier option " (Lahiri 214).

Her ethnicity or cultural background does not constrain multifaceted Moushumidue to her lack of commitment. That has defined, structured, and limited her for so long is no longer a part of her (Lahiri 253). Whatever her feelings for Gogol or her new husband, she will not change her surname. Changing her name would imply she is fine with being someone else, even if that someone else is Gogol. "she tells him that he was exactly the sort of person she had sought to avoid" (Lahiri 212). In her marriage to Gogol, Moushumi can hide from the rest of the world. She wanted

to go back to Paris to get away from the pain of her previous relationship, but Gogol proposed to her, and they married anyway. She writes in the novel: "The affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day" (Lahiri 266).

After a year of marriage, Gogol and Moushumi begin to lose interest in one another, and their relationship continues to deteriorate. In Paris, for a paper presentation, she reunites with her old friend and has sex with him again. As for Dimitri, a short, balding man in his mid-thirties, lay next to me, I thought, "If she is the only woman in her family to have been unfaithful, she wonders if she is the only one who has ever done so. What gets to her is the fact that the relationship makes her feel at peace, and that the added complexity of it helps to organize her day "(266). As soon as Gogol learns of her secrecy, he feels the chill of it numbing him "quickly spreading through his veins like a poison

He cannot blame her much because they both acted out of the same irrational impulse " (284). After a brief discussion, they both agree that they should divorce. After the divorce is finalized, she heads to Paris to live.

Toward the end of the novel, Gogol reflects on his life and relationships. He has felt guilty about his lifestyle for a long time. He needs his family more than ever at this point in his life. "He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them too seldom, dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing," he writes to his parents. "He wonders how his parents had done it" (Lahiri 281). Contemplating that "with stamina, he

fears he does not possess himself he had spent years maintaining distance from his origins... a distance that had not troubled him in the least, until it was too late" (281). Since he is losing family members one by one, he no longer despises his given name but rather misses it: "Gogol Ganguli will cease to exist no matter how long he lives, without people in the world to call him Gogol," he says.

There is no joy or relief in contemplating the inevitable demise of this organization. It is a total waste of time" (Lahiri 289). Gogol's preoccupation with the future is evident in the story's final lines. Plans: "A month from now, he will begin a new job at a smaller architectural practice, producing his designs" (289). As an architect who has previously worked for other companies and designers, he aspires to be more creative in his work from now on. Like his decision to change jobs, he appears ready to design his own life, identity, and sense of self. Throughout the novel, immigrants battle to retain their uniqueness while attempting to shed them. At the same time, it is about the difficult decisions they must make daily to avoid being perceived as outcasts in a strange land. The immigrant's journey is a departure and privation for all its benefits, but the next generation will feel welcomed and favoured. Unwavering loyalty to both old and new worlds is an immigrant's strongest desire.

To keep the reader aware of the growing schism between these two worlds, Lahiri uses these cultural and culinary differences to emphasize how far Gogol has strayed from his roots and how strongly Bengali ties bind him in ways he only gradually realizes. After much struggle, Gogol discovers

that the solution lies in fusing the two cultures rather than rejecting or minimizing either of them. Because of the influence of both cultures/worlds, Gogol is not fully aware of his own identity. He does not have to choose between the two; he can be both. His pride is bolstered by the fact that he is a combination of the two. Despite the novel's conclusion, Gogol can stand on his own two feet. As a result, he no longer feels self-conscious or guilty about who he is or his life choices—a self-confident individual who takes pride in his origins. The most important thing is that he is proud of his name and what it stands for. It is only fitting that Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel, 'The Namesake,' should be described as a "symphonic work" because it not only depicts an intimate and well-observed family but also orchestrates the haunting chamber music of her first collection of short stories to create a novel as assured and elegant as that of a seasoned master of the craft. When Ashima and Ashoke are given a bed at the hospital for Gogoi's birth, the language barrier that has caused them so much difficulty becomes apparent. After a few minutes in Bengali, her husband returns, a language that neither the nurses nor the doctor understands. The curtain serves as a physical deterrent, but it also serves as a metaphor for the barrier that being a Bengali speaker in the United States has erected. The conversation between American husbands and their Indian wives in the hospital exemplifies the cultural divide between the two countries' countries of origin. As Gogoi and Sonia grow older, their language barrier becomes an issue. Ashima and Ashoke are concerned that they sound like American children when they take

their children to Bengali language and culture classes every other Saturday. Nevertheless, 'The Namesake' is a novel that rethinks the immigrant experience and celebrates the cultural hybridity created by globalization and modernity. According to Lahiri, immigrants struggle to grasp a transnational identity in the multicultural United States. She depicts Gogol as a transnational agent straddling two worlds and capable of adopting multiple identities. As a participant in transnational relations, Lahiri recasts the modern U.S. In a globalized world marked by hybridity, transcultural, and migration, Lahiri territorializes India's distinct national and cultural identities.

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