

Revisiting Home in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: A Diasporic Narrative of Identity, Belonging and Displacement

Dr. Savita Rani

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Shaheed Udham Singh Government College, Matak Majri, Karnal

M.No. 9896171763

drsavitasingh44@gmail.com

Abstract

Diasporic literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from which displacement occurs, and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Basically, diaspora is a minority community living in exile. The dispersal signifies the location of a fluid human autonomous space, involving a complex set of negotiations and exchanges between the nostalgia and desire for the homeland and the making of a new home. In some sense, we are all diasporic because thrown into this world without our own choices; we are all diasporic in this philosophical sense. We know that Jhumpa Lahiri is critical of migrations in *The Namesake*. The present paper will discuss how home is conceptualized in the context of diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. The novelist argues that home in diasporic circumstances is a concept that is constantly being redefined based on processes of movement, remembrance, and cultural negotiation. By focusing on the Ganguli family, specifically on the characters Gogol, Ashima, and Ashoke, the present researcher will examine how Lahiri presents conflicts within the homeland and the foreign land. Based on theoretical models from diaspora and cultural studies, such as those dealing with hybridity and double consciousness, the paper will demonstrate that Lahiri's work actually redefines home as a transnational, psychological, and emotional space rather than a fixed geographical location.

Keywords: Diaspora, identity, belonging, displacement, transnational, hybridity

Diaspora itself, in particular, has proven to be a fruitful concept in its focus on the movement of actual individuals across the globe, whether those migrations were voluntary or forced in the novel. The term diaspora originally refers to the exile of Moses from Egypt. Diaspora, thus, is as old as mankind. When blacks were uprooted from their African soil and made to

serve as slaves, they were diasporic, and so were Indian labourers forcibly transported to the West Indies; they were ancestors of Naipaul and Mr. Biswas. More importantly, a broad survey of the contributions of the second generation of the modern Indian diaspora in the field of Indian writing in English depict certain shift in concerns in comparison to the previous generation, and thereby it widens the field of diasporic literature.

Among the prominent voices in this field, Jhumpa Lahiri stands out for her nuanced portrayal of immigrant experiences, particularly those of the Indian diaspora in the United States. Her novel *The Namesake* (2003) provides a compelling narrative that interrogates questions of identity, belonging, and displacement through the experiences of the Ganguli family. The novel describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they are accustomed to. The story begins as Ashoke and Ashima leave Calcutta, India, and settle in Central Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts. When Ashoke, a Bengali student, moves to America just because someone on the train tells him that India is no country for young people, and he himself feels that his survival is safer in America. Ashoke marries a woman back in his land, but could not avoid death. At the outset of the novel, Ashima Ganguli is a young bride who is about to deliver her first child in a hospital in Massachusetts. Her husband, Ashoke, is an engineering student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). As she prepares to give birth, she realizes how isolated she has become. If she were still in Calcutta, she would have her baby at home, surrounded by all the women in her family who would administer all the proper Bengali ceremonies and would tell her what to expect. Ashima is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is not related to anyone, “where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (Lahiri 5). In the United States, Ashima struggles through language and cultural barriers as well as her own fears as she delivers her first child. It is her son who finally decides to belong to America.

At the outset of the novel lies the concept of “home,” a term that becomes more complex in diasporic contexts. The concept of home in diaspora is undermined by migration and cultural dislocation. The present researcher observed that diaspora involves the scattering of people from their homeland and the subsequent negotiation of identity in a foreign land. This process creates a tension between attachment to one’s roots and adaptation to new cultural environments. Lahiri, in her novel *The Namesake*, captures this tension with remarkable sensitivity, portraying how individuals and families negotiate the complexities of

living between different cultures. When Ashima is left alone in the labour room at Mount Auburn Hospital, the nurse adds to Ashoke that there is a long way to go. At this point, Lahiri writes, “It is the first time in her life that she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents, or with Ashoke at her side.”(3)

The novel questions the traditional notions of home, suggesting that it is not a fixed place but a spirited and vigorous set-up shaped by memory, belonging, and identity. This paper seeks to present how Lahiri revisits home through the intertwined themes of identity, belonging, and displacement. In Lahiri’s concept of home, it is necessary to understand the concepts of diaspora and cultural studies. Diaspora comprises not only physical displacement but also the emotional, psychological, and cultural consequences of migration. She feels alone during her pregnancy, so much unlike the Bengali community, where a pregnant woman is looked after at her parental home. Here, she has no one but her husband by her side. As an immigrant, she feels a sense of loss and agony. The estrangement from her near ones leads to her depression. “—Nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all.” (5)

She feels awkward at the thought of motherhood in a foreign land, which is so unfamiliar to her. She often feels queer and lost altogether. When in the hospital before her delivery, she wished the curtains on her three sides were open. The curtains shut her from the exterior world. This is also symbolic of her being separated from her family and even her husband. She is thrust into a solitary refuge, which is very suffocating. After the baby’s birth, she thinks of going back to Calcutta but decides to stay back for Ashok, her husband. Gradually, she tries to get herself into the lifestyle of the foreign country. But when they move from the apartment to a suburb, things become all the more unmanageable for her. A strong sense of loneliness and displacement engulfs her. She feels overburdened with the thoughts of being a misfit in the surrounding society, “...being a foreigner...is a sort of life-long pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts.” (49) She is always in search of her real home. She is hesitant to raise her child in the new country, even after the birth of his son, and she persuades her husband to return to the native land, as they both confront,

What are you saying, Ashima? I am saying hurry up and finish your degree, and then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time: I am saying I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right, I want to go back. (33)

Even after giving birth to her child, she feels a deep sense of loneliness and frustration, and later, Ashima feels suddenly, horribly, and permanently alone after the death of her husband. Thus, alienation entangles her and unable to adjust to the new social, physical, and cultural environment, Ashima always strives hard to maintain the traditional values that she has inherited. She never breaks the psychological restrictions imposed upon her by her elders as to yielding to the foreign culture and practices. She tries her best to uphold Bengali culture in an American environment. But her children, adopting the foreign culture and practices, do make her different from them. They adopt a different lifestyle. Ashima remains confined to her practices and thoughts, leading to her alienation. This distinction of Ashima from American life makes her an existential character in the true sense of the term. At the end, her make-believe home is also destroyed after her husband's death, and then finally, she comes to the state of mind as "she decides to spend six months in India and six months in the States" (275). Only then does she understand the dilemma of being everywhere but nowhere in the world.

The concept of home in diaspora is inherently ambiguous. Rather than being tied to a specific location, it becomes a subjective and emotional setup. This multiplicity challenges the traditional notion of home as singular and fixed. Additionally, there are aspects of fluidity and hybridity associated with diaspora identity. Identity is not an absolute but rather a process influenced by various factors, including interactions, experiences, and context. This approach supports the argument that individuals in diaspora constantly engage in identity negotiation, taking into consideration the requirements of their past and the present.

The issue of diaspora became even more complicated after World War I due to the expatriates, particularly with the rise of globalization. The movement of immigration from one country to another, especially from east to the West, for better opportunities created a rich source for diasporic literature. Today, most migrants feel nostalgia for their homeland, and they think that they have been disloyal to their country. Think of any writer today, there is a sense of pain of diaspora everywhere. We saw in *The Namesake* that the people belonging to a diaspora face the dual condition of being connected and feeling alienated at the same time because of their connections with various cultures, despite being foreigners in a strange land. Since the first day she came to America, she has felt estranged and isolated from others. In her feeling of childbirth in a new country, we get the idea of her belongingness and alienation. For Ashima, America is not home but a place of estrangement,

where the symbols of culture are not present. To counter her alienation, Ashima recreates her native culture through the means of her domestic life by having meetings with other Bengali families, cooking food, and maintaining rituals.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* revolves around the life of Gogol Ganguli, son of Ashoke and Ashima, an Indian-American struggling to reconcile his dual identity. He hates his name—Gogol, a Russian name given to an Indian-born child raised in America. This raises the issue of existence and cultural dilemma in the novel: “He hates that his name is both too unique and too meaningless” (76). Here, Lahiri brings to light a contradiction between individuality and cultural identity, a common struggle among second-generation immigrants. On one hand, Gogol longs for American conformity, yet on the other hand, he feels resentment toward the act of relinquishing his Bengali roots. Once he changes his name to Nikhil, he feels that he has been relieved from the weight of his past. But his newfound identity fails to deliver him from his predicament; rather, it magnifies his feeling of alienation, “Nikhil feels foreign, a name that fits but does not belong” (105). This idea of displacement—inclusion yet exclusion—is evident throughout the novel, *The Namesake*.

We have already figured out that Ashima's displacement takes place because of things that are completely out of her hands, while Ashoke's displacement is a result of his desire for change and discovery that was going to be triggered by a tragic train accident. We have witnessed that Ashoke's displacement is different from Ashima's in the way it started and how it was shown. A desire for change and transformation through the traumatic train accident that changed his outlook on life are what led him to make the migration decision. In America, he adapts more easily than Ashima, yet he, too, occupies a liminal space, neither fully Indian nor entirely American. With his terrible history and never-ending nightmare passed on to his son by the name of Gogol, Ashoke's immense sorrow binds him. He lives between two distinct identities, as an Indian and a husband to an Indian and a father to his American children. He later gives his son the name Nikhil, doubling his son's identity into a transcultural identity he himself has. That is the end of the journey for Ashoke, as symbolized in his saying to Gogol that “remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go” (187). Together, Ashima and Ashoke embody the complexities of first-generation immigrant identity. Their experiences illustrate that displacement is not merely a physical relocation but a profound psychological and cultural transformation.

As we can see, the immigrants of the first generation deal with the sense of loss of their homeland, whereas members of the second generation cope with completely different issues. Growing up in another country, they often find themselves in a situation where they need to reconcile their cultural background and traditions with their actual life experience. One of such characters who exemplify this struggle is Gogol Ganguli from the novel *The Namesake*. The name that comes from the Russian author Nikolai Gogol becomes a sign of Gogol's ambiguous identity that does not fit both his Indian roots and his American surroundings. Dislike for this name becomes a reflection of Gogol's identity crisis. For him, Gogol is a name that separates him from other people and makes him feel different. Therefore, he renamed himself Nikhil. But this change did not fix his internal dilemma. On the contrary, it only made him feel more estranged. Such a situation exemplifies the contradiction of diasporic identity: the longing to belong and the difficulty of completely fitting in. Gogol's connections provide an example of this contradiction. First, his relationship with Maxine shows how he tries to be part of American culture, and then his relationship with Moushumi indicates a re-connection with his Indian roots. However, neither relationship offers him a firm feeling of belonging. Gogol's course of events points out that identity when living abroad is not a constant one but a series of negotiations over time. His difficulty in self-identification is a metaphor for the experience of second-generation immigrants at large, who have to navigate various cultural affiliations. Apart from that, he is undergoing an identity crisis that reflects his family's cultural duality at the time of migration. On one hand, the novel portrays the characters' yearning for a place to call home not only in the physical sense but also in the emotional one. Loss, mourning, and romantic relationships reveal the connection between identity and cultural challenges. This diasporic story features Gogol, the main character who tries to juggle two cultures at the same time: on one hand, his parents' Bengali culture, and, on the other hand, the American culture that he is familiar with since he was a kid. The book deals with various facets of identity and the complex nature of cultural alienation.

Nonetheless, identity, belongingness, and nostalgia are very important factors in influencing the diasporic idea of home. For first-generation immigrants, the homeland often becomes an idealized place, preserved in memory and imagination. On the one hand, the fictitious home gives emotional consolation; on the other, it intensifies a sense of uprootedness. In *The Namesake*, the country of India is pictured wistfully, mainly in Ashima's

recollections. The investigator has very cleverly connected the threads of identity, belonging, and displacement through the lives of the protagonists. This paper highlights the challenges of the immigrant experience and provides a better understanding of the complex layers of identity amid cultural displacement.

For diasporic writers, this home that is only in their mind is at the same time a source of refuge and a constant reminder of their displacement. The way Gogol relates to India is quite different from that of his parents. To him, India is not a place of memories but a concept that he has only through his visits and stories of his family. This difference very clearly points out the generational gap in the perception of home. Lahiri's work raises awareness about the multifaceted and ever-changing nature of diasporic experiences. However, this nostalgic view of home is not just a physical location; it is an imagined space that exists in one's mind.

Therefore, Lahiri explores a preconceived notion of home that transcends geographical boundaries. A transnational identity is best characterized by Ashima's decision to spend her time partly in India and partly in the United States. This shows how she is mobile and flexible. The transnational theme here is a direct challenge to the traditional notion of home as a fixed and permanent location. On the contrary, home can be seen as a fluid concept, changing and being shaped by movement. Ashima's path to becoming a "world citizen" is an example of how embracing multiple identities and belonging to different places and ways is possible. Such a reinterpretation of home is very much relevant to the present world of globalization, where migration and cultural exchange are commonplace. Ultimately, Lahiri's novel portrays home as a changing and complicated idea that is shaped by memory, culture, and identity.

Moreover, the novels of diasporic Indian writers such as Raja Rao, G.V. Desani, Balachandra Rajan, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, and Ved Mehta predominantly look back at India and rarely record their experiences as expatriates. It is as if these writers have discovered nostalgia for their native land when they are out of India. Obviously, they have the advantage of looking at their homeland from the outside. The ironic aspect of diaspora, as in A.K. Ramanujan, is that when the poet returns home, he finds himself doubly alienated. By now, nobody recognizes him. Thus, the diasporic writers encounter the predicament of dual identities.

In conclusion, the novel *The Namesake* explores the complex themes of cultural identity, belonging, and displacement within a diasporic context. Jhumpa Lahiri presents a deep look at the diasporic experience, especially about revisiting the idea of home. Lahiri's novel is about a family that moves from the traditional way of living in Calcutta to a new life in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The story is full of themes such as identity, belonging, self-discovery, and displacement that rightly correspond to the characters' struggles experiencing the alienation of Ashoke and Ashima and Gogol's third-generation problems of being named after a Russian writer. The book argues that the concept of home is something fluid and cannot be thought of as a fixed or stable one. Instead, Lahiri portrays home as a changing idea, shaped by memory, culture, and personal experience. The experiences of the Ganguli family show the complexities of living between cultures, emphasizing the fluidity of identity and the constant negotiation of belonging and displacement. The diasporic narrative *The Namesake* explores that home is not defined by geography but by the relationships, memories, and identities that individuals carry with them. In the diasporic context, home becomes a space of possibility—a site where multiple identities can coexist and evolve.

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