
Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: Cultural Inheritance and Emotional Exile

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Abstract: This research paper explores how names work in different cultures and how they help shape a person's identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. Naming is not just a cultural tradition but also a way to show and understand the experiences of immigrants and their children living between two worlds. The paper studies how the main character, Gogol Ganguli, deals with his mixed identity through his name, which connects his Indian background and American life. The paper explains that names can cause confusion, conflict, and understanding, showing themes like feeling lost between cultures, fitting in, and finding oneself. Using ideas from language studies and cultural studies, the paper shows that names in *The Namesake* carry family history, cultural expectations, and personal meaning. Gogol's changing feelings about his name show the struggles of living between two cultures where identity is always changing.

Keywords: Name, identity, culture, diaspora

Introduction: Writers who live in foreign countries but write about their homeland often express their search for identity. Their stories are shaped by living between two cultures, memories of their native land, and the clear differences between life in their new country and their place of origin. This kind of writing is called *diasporic literature*. In today's global and multicultural world, the study of diaspora and diasporic literature is becoming more important in both literature and cultural studies.

Diasporic writers often deal with feelings of being out of place, homesickness, and isolation in unfamiliar surroundings. They may struggle to fit into the new culture, which can lead to identity confusion, emotional pain, and a sense of not belonging anywhere. These writers explore how difficult it can be to adapt to a new way of life while still holding on to their roots. Their literature becomes a space where they can express this struggle and reflect on the idea of "home." Critic Homi K. Bhabha explains that cultural identity is not fixed but is formed through ongoing interaction and exchange between cultures. This process creates new understandings and forms of identity that are flexible and constantly changing. He believes that identity is created in the "in-between" space not fully here, nor fully there but shaped by both cultures.

Diasporic literature highlights the inner conflicts of those caught between cultures. It challenges the idea that identity must be singular or based on only one nation or culture. Instead, it shows that identity can be layered, complex, and changing. These stories help readers understand the emotional and cultural costs of migration, while also celebrating the richness of living across cultures.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* reflects the author's own experience as a second-generation immigrant in the United States. The story moves between two cultures, the deep-rooted traditions of Indian society and the modern, individualistic lifestyle of America. Lahiri shows how living between these two worlds creates both conflict and growth, especially for those trying to balance both identities. Through the character of Gogol, the main protagonist, Lahiri explores how a person can grow up with one culture at home and face a completely different one outside. Gogol is raised in a traditional Indian family, but his daily life in America pushes him toward independence and self-discovery. He struggles with his name, his identity, and the expectations from both cultures. This tension reveals the challenges second-generation immigrants face as they try to create their own identity without fully belonging to either culture. Gogol's mother, Ashima, represents the first-generation immigrant experience. She holds tightly to Indian customs and values, finding it difficult to adapt to American ways. Her emotional struggle with loneliness, cultural loss, and a sense of not belonging in a foreign land is an important contrast to Gogol's journey.

The story powerfully presents the challenges of living between cultures through the character of Ashima. As a first-generation immigrant in the United States, Ashima deeply misses her home in Calcutta. Her homesickness is more than just emotional it reflects a deeper sense of dislocation. She does not feel at home in America, not just because of the physical distance, but because she is culturally and socially disconnected from her surroundings. The life she lives in the U.S. is very different from what she left behind in India, and this contrast makes her feel isolated.

Ashima continues to follow Indian traditions in her daily life from the food she cooks to the clothes she wears as a way to stay connected to her roots. This clinging to her cultural identity shows how difficult it is for immigrants, especially women, to let go of the values they grew up with. Lahiri uses Ashima's character to show the emotional and cultural vulnerability that many immigrants face. Ashima does not make American friends and deliberately distances herself from Western customs. Her strong resistance to adapting to the host country's way of life is portrayed with quiet intensity in the novel. Ashima's struggle with cross-cultural identity becomes clear when she chooses to stay firmly rooted in her Indian identity, unlike her husband, Ashoke. While both are first-generation immigrants, their ways of coping with life in America are very different. Ashima holds tightly to her Indian traditions and finds comfort in maintaining her cultural identity. In contrast, Ashoke is more open to change and makes an effort to adapt to the American way of life.

Ashoke sees immigration as an opportunity for professional and personal growth. He is eager to make use of the career opportunities available in the U.S., and he works hard to blend into the new society. His desire to assimilate is shown in several parts of the novel, especially in the scene where he proudly notices his name listed among the university faculty. This moment reflects not just his academic success, but also his growing acceptance of the host culture.

The contrast between Indian and American cultures is also powerfully shown in the episode where Ashoke and Ashima face a naming crisis for their newborn son. The letter from Ashima's grandmother suggesting a name does not arrive on time, and the hospital insists they name the baby before discharge. This moment captures the difficult adjustments Indian immigrants must make to unfamiliar systems and cultural expectations in the host country. The stress of not having a name ready in a hospital that expects immediate paperwork reflects how immigrant families are often caught off guard by differences in social norms.

For Gogol, the name becomes a source of discomfort and confusion. He struggles with the unusualness of his name in the American context and begins to reject it as he grows older. This rejection of his name also symbolizes his rejection of the Indian culture and traditions that his parents try to maintain at home. While Ashima, his mother, holds tightly to her cultural roots and tries to raise her children with Indian values, Gogol increasingly embraces American ways of thinking, living, and loving. His relationship with Maxine, an American woman, shows how deeply he immerses himself in American culture. He feels more at ease in Maxine's world, which is open, liberal, and independent—very different from his own family's values. Jhumpa Lahiri skillfully contrasts the traditional Indian lifestyle of Gogol's parents with the carefree and expressive lifestyle of Maxine's family. This comparison shows the cultural gap that children of immigrants often experience while growing up in a different country.

Jhumpa Lahiri also reveals the duality in Gogol's identity. While he tries to reject his Indian background and adopt an American identity, he still expects Maxine to behave according to Indian customs when she meets his parents. This contradiction shows that Gogol is not fully settled in either culture. He is caught in a space between two worlds, unsure of where he truly belongs. Gogol begins to understand and connect with his Indian identity after the sudden death of his father, Ashoke. While performing the Hindu last rites—such as shaving his head and taking part in other traditional rituals—he feels the deep cultural significance of these practices for the first time. This moment becomes a turning point in his life. He begins to realize the importance of family, tradition, and heritage. His father's death forces him to look inward and reflect on his roots. In an effort to fulfill his mother Ashima's wishes and reconnect with his cultural background, he agrees to marry a Bengali woman named Moushumi in a traditional Indian wedding ceremony.

The theme of identity crisis is further explored through the character of Moushumi, Gogol's wife. Like Gogol, she is also a second-generation Indian-American who struggles

with the pressure of balancing two cultures. Moushumi initially rejects the idea of an arranged marriage, viewing it as outdated and restrictive. However, after experiencing heartbreak and emotional loneliness when her romantic relationship ends, she ends up entering an arranged marriage with Gogol—the very tradition she once resisted. This shows the complex emotional journey many children of immigrants face. They may reject cultural norms at first, only to later return to them in search of stability and belonging.

Moushumi's story reveals a deeper layer of diasporic experience—the inner conflict between personal freedom and cultural expectation. Even after marriage, she feels confined and eventually becomes dissatisfied, leading to infidelity. This shows that simply returning to one's cultural roots does not automatically resolve identity struggles. Her loneliness and emotional detachment highlight the vulnerability of second-generation immigrants who live in between two worlds, never feeling fully accepted in either.

Sonia, Gogol's sister, also stands at the intersection of two cultures—Indian and American. However, unlike Gogol, Sonia appears more emotionally stable and less conflicted. She grows up in a traditional Indian household and lives closely with her mother, Ashima, showing respect for her Indian roots. While she embraces Indian customs at home, Sonia is also open to American values and lifestyle. Her transition into American society feels more natural and less painful compared to her brother's.

As the story progresses, Sonia falls in love with an American man and eventually decides to marry him. This relationship marks her full acceptance of cross-cultural living. Although Ashima initially shows hesitation and concern—rooted in traditional expectations—she gradually comes to terms with Sonia's choice. This shift in Ashima's attitude reflects a broader theme in the novel: the slow and sometimes reluctant acceptance of cultural blending by first-generation immigrants. Sonia's character represents a smoother integration into the multicultural reality of American life. Her journey shows that second-generation immigrants may carry forward their parents' cultural values while also confidently shaping their own identities. She becomes a symbol of successful cultural negotiation, balancing Indian heritage with American individuality.

In America during the 1970s, it was a common hospital rule that a newborn could not be discharged unless a name was officially registered. This rule created a cultural conflict for immigrant parents like Ashoke and Ashima, who came from India, where it is traditional to take time before naming a child, often using a pet name (or *daknam*) at home until a formal name is given later.

Faced with the pressure of naming his newborn son immediately, Ashoke decides to name him "Gogol" after his favorite Russian author, Nikolai Gogol. For Ashoke, the name holds deep personal meaning. Years earlier, he survived a life-threatening train accident, and the only thing that remained with him during the rescue was a page from a book by Nikolai Gogol. Ashoke believes that the book—and by extension, the author—played a symbolic

role in saving his life. Naming his son Gogol becomes a tribute not only to his favorite writer but also to the life-changing moment that marked his survival and “rebirth.”

Ashoke considers the name Gogol a temporary pet name, following Indian customs. However, in America, this name becomes legally binding and permanent, leading to an identity dilemma for the child as he grows up. Gogol, the character, eventually comes to struggle with his name because it doesn’t reflect his Indian heritage, nor does it completely fit in with American norms. It becomes a constant reminder of the tension between two cultures—his father’s emotional past and his own uncertain future.

When Gogol is a child, he does not understand how important his name is. For his father, Ashoke, the name **Gogol** means a new beginning and survival after a terrible train accident. The name is full of meaning and hope for his father. But for Gogol, the name becomes a problem. It is the first thing that creates confusion about his identity. Names are more than just words; they show who we are. They help people connect and understand each other. When identity becomes an important issue in someone's life, a name becomes even more meaningful.

Gogol gets so used to his name as a child that when his parents try to give him the official name Nikhil when he starts school, he refuses to accept it. He feels uncomfortable with the change. Even the school agrees to keep calling him Gogol. This is the first time Gogol resists having two identities, one at home and another outside. This situation shows how even something as simple as a name can shape a person’s identity and cause inner conflict. Gogol’s refusal to accept Nikhil shows his struggle with cultural duality—being both Indian and American. The name Gogol, which was once a symbol of life for his father, slowly becomes a burden for Gogol, as it reminds him that he doesn’t fully belong to either culture. This conflict grows stronger as he becomes older. Because Gogol refused the name Nikhil, he had to keep using his old name, Gogol. As he grew older, he began to realize that his name was very unusual, and this made him feel confused about who he really was. He didn’t like having a name that was neither fully Indian nor American.

Gogol wanted to be seen as an American because he was born in America. But with a name like Gogol, he didn’t feel like he truly belonged. He also didn’t understand the deep emotional meaning the name had for his father. Later, when Gogol learns about the Russian author after whom he was named, he feels uncomfortable and becomes eager to change his name. He no longer wants to be connected to it. His name Gogol “sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity of gravity.” (76) He does not want to read Nikolai Gogol because he thinks it “would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow” (92).

The title *The Namesake* reflects the struggle Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his unusual name. The problem of Gogol’s name symbolizes the problem of his identity. Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. Here starts his transformation. He can now relate himself with American environment. He starts doing many activities which he could not dare to do

as Gogol. But a new predicament surrounds him. He changes his name but “he does not feel like Nikhil” (105). Gogol is afraid that others will find out about his real name and identity. By rejecting the name Gogol, he is also rejecting the immigrant identity that his parents wanted him to keep. He tries to live like a typical American. He has girlfriends, lives with them without marriage, and stays away from his parents. He works hard and takes care of himself. But even though he lives this American lifestyle, he is not truly happy. He hides this part of his life from his parents. He does not tell them about his relationships or how he is living. He wants to keep his American life a secret from his Indian family. “After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential.” (105) He hates everything that reminds him of his past and heritage. But the loss of the old name was not so easy to forget and when he visits his home on alternate weekends, “Nikhil evaporates and Gogol reenters again.” (106).

The Namesake talks about the problems immigrants face when they move to a new country. Jhumpa Lahiri shows this mainly through her characters' search for their identity. She answers these questions in a calm and thoughtful way. As people move from one place to another, their sense of who they are can also change. People should not hold on to their culture blindly, but they should also not forget it. Culture is not useless—it is a deep part of a person's thinking and identity.

Feeling like an outsider, or alienation, is common for Indians living abroad. Even if they live comfortably in another country, they may still feel lonely or different. Just changing a name does not solve the problem of identity. Lahiri presents identity as something fluid and evolving, not fixed by names, places, or traditions alone. Through *The Namesake*, she shows how immigrants and their children live between two worlds—trying to fit into a new country while still feeling tied to their old culture. The novel questions whether one's name, language, or traditions are enough to define identity. It suggests that identity must be discovered personally, through life experiences, reflection, and sometimes painful choices. Jhumpa Lahiri adds a deeper voice to the discussion about cultural belonging, heritage, and self-understanding in the lives of immigrants.

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