



## Re - Examining the Existence of The “Self” Through the Name Sake

Dr. Mrs. P. V. Anila  
Principal  
Noble College, Machilipatnam.

---

Jhumpa Lahiri, the author of *The Namesake*, was born in London to Indian parents in 1967. She later moved to the United States to pursue her studies and lived there for a period of time. Although her knowledge of India is extensive, she has made limited trips to her parents' land. She travelled to India in her childhood as a tourist: she has never lived there. As a writer, her first book was *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories, the themes of which are connected with Indian-American identities and Diasporas. As noted in “Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction” by Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero, “[n]early all of these stories deal with the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States, rendering the difficulties of making personal connections across cultural boundaries--and sometimes even within families--palpable to readers” (852). *The Namesake*, Lahiri’s first novel, was published in 2003. It deals with the themes of immigrant experience, identities and displacement, and ties and clashes between the generations. Even her later work, *Unaccustomed Earth*, which was published in 2008, is about immigration and its real and/or imaginary consequences for its characters.

In her “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*”, Nathalie Friedman writes that “scholars and critics have dubbed her [Lahiri] a documentalist of the immigrant experience” (111). In her works one can easily feel a sense of living in exile, loss of communication, the sense of belonging to nowhere, the inability to feel accepted, complicated social status, difficulties in relationships and different experiences which first and second generations of Indian immigrants have in the United States. All these revolve around a more general theme: displacement. This thesis aims to discuss and question the sense of displacement in the lives of the characters in *The Namesake* and especially its main character Gogol Ganguli. Moreover, entities like culture, nationality and belonging--which are the main concerns of the characters in the novel and the reasons for their displacement--tend to be loose and changeable in a contemporary perspective, and a covetous sense of freedom and emancipation from these concepts could be traced in the course of the novel.

The rampant migrations and migratory lives in the contemporary world have led to the consideration of many aspects of these lives in many academic areas and fields, and naturally it has become a contemporary major motif for literature. Making its own way through diverse considerations like politics and economy, sociology, identity and subjectivity, language, gender and sexuality, literary studies pay attention to the multitude of these experiences. Transnational studies cannot possibly focus on one of these considerations and ignore the other factors entirely. For example, having a Marxist view, one cannot ignore the role of culture in the economy, the linguistic possibilities for propaganda, the role of sexuality and gender attitudes and preferences in the market and the role of diffuse subjectivities and identities on the global market for the ruling and the ruled classes of the increasing transnationalism of recent times. Therefore, a reasonable study of the subject and its consequences will not be obtained by only clinging to a certain theoretical background in literature. As we take distance from the colonial world when the transaction of cultures and identities seemed to be obligatory for the people who lived in such an era, we get closer to the world of transnationalism where that obligation seems to be intentional. This means that people in post-colonial times are not necessarily forced by war or colonization to abandon their homes or live under the hegemonic control of a foreign country. They have more freedom to move and choose where to live. Nevertheless, the later consequences of this movement are unknown and cannot possibly be controlled by these people. In this sense, they intentionally begin a new life in a new place that will have its own new necessities and obligations which can be unknown and unpredictable to them. Further, the exchange of cultures and adaptation to the new cultural urges, where experiences of in-between's, displacement and diaspora and so on, exist, are part of the natural outcomes of this intentional obligation. Tourism, the internet, the global market, different international festivals and sport events and overseas university studies, are features that have doubled the pace of transnationalism. This crucial aspect of our times has led to an urgent field of study in literature which aims to explore the new subjectivity and its outcomes in a united globe: transnationality, and subsequently transculturality is born out of it. Therefore, literature also reflects these global trends. Transnational literature or criticism is a concoction of several trends and theories of literature in a new and wider ground which includes several theories of literature that existed before. But in important ways, it leads and/or changes the older directions. Like other theories of literature, it tends to use as many tools of literature as it can to analyze literary works from different angles. It tends to use and produce theories of Inter- and Cross-Cultural Understanding which stem from a contemporary ideology- everyone in the world today shares features of life which are no longer national, from their clothes, to what they eat and what they see around themselves provided by the intensive and extensive communication technology and easy and fast availability of commodities and goods from all over the world. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen writes in his introduction to *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures*: "As most people have experienced in one way or another, globalization is no illusion, but real, and propelled by strong forces – particularly those of economics and the media- and for better and for worse" (1). Naturally, where there is the theme of migration and related

topics, there is also an automatic intention to investigate the theme of displacement and similar consequences in works of literature. Whatever seems to be missing in the majority of articles and critical writings on these works is the realization of the tangible facts and situations where most of the taken-for-granted(s) have disappeared or at least shifted in meaning.

Likewise, in almost all theories and articles written about migration and displacement--whatever the basis of these approaches, structuralism, feminism, postmodernism or post-colonialism--there is a recognition of the fact that displacement as a defining feature of the contemporary world is not a static phenomenon, but liable to change in meaning according to new conditions and perspectives in the ever-changing transnational world of today. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan in their "English Without Shadows, Literature on a World Scale" after discussing the linguistic aspects of ethnicity and international studies, come to mention that: Feminists have noted that there would be no ethnic identity without the forced containment and channelling of women's reproductive capacities along consanguine family and clan lines and that the privileging of ideals of ethnic or national cultural identity conceals internal fissures of gender and sexual domination. And Post-Structuralists in the field suggest that other concepts of identity, from the nation of the ethnic group to the national culture, are no longer relevant to a transnational, migratory, and diasporic world culture. What the experience of geographic displacement teaches is that all the supposedly stable equations of place, ethnos, and national political institutions are imaginary constructs which displace displacement by substituting permanent migratory dislocation an ontologizing image of home or of a homeland, a proper place where a spuriously pure ethnos can authenticate itself. (853-54) If there is displacement in today's world, it is not exclusive for the immigrants and their following generations: everyone in whatever situation, immigrant or not, is liable to be displaced. The borderline between the ethnic or cultural past and present is dissipated. Therefore, effects of a powerful ethnic or cultural past are not likely to last for a considerable period of time. Having a different past is not an eccentric fact for immigrants who can easily adapt themselves with their new lives in a different country and with people of that country who might have their own peculiar eccentricities and differences. Moreover, as the poem from Yamada at the beginning of this paper suggests, a new cosmopolitan identity has emerged from the transitory lives of today which makes ethnic identity less-and sometimes more-significant for people who live in communities like the United States. This study of *The Namesake* is based on actual observations of contemporary experience. *The Namesake* is a new work about recent times. The third-person omniscient narrator with her present-tense narration lets the reader accompany Gogol for a period of three decades--from the late 1900s into the new millennium. The question of identity as the most tangible theme in *The Namesake* is no doubt a question of the "self". Cultural factors are very important in the quest for the identity and self, especially for immigrants. As Jola Skulj notes in her "Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity," "[t]he problem of cultural identity involves the question of the self and of culture. In other words, this means reflecting on the essence of culture itself and the implication that there is a reasonable motive of self-questioning" (2). The "self" reflects upon an autonomous subject or the subjectivity of every human being. As she elaborates further:

Understanding of identity was a result of the romantic interpretation of the self as the inner reality of a given subject. It revealed in itself the concept of the subject as an absolute and autonomous being and denied any decisive or obligatory references outside itself. It denied transcendence outside oneself and identified itself only with its immanent reality or with its own immanent validity. (2) The existence of the “self” inevitably suggests the existence of an opposing factor known as the “other”, which also strengthens the comprehensibility of the self, or as Michael Bakhtin says: “The self is the gift of the other” (qtd. in Skulj 3). As Skulj writes: “No cultural identity can be identified or analyzed only on its national ground. . . . ‘Otherness’ is, irrevocably, cultural reality. The other does not necessarily endanger its selfness or its principles of identity” (2). Regarding this, the Indian immigrants involved in *The Namesake* have an internal dialogue and/or opposition between their ethnic culture and the culture of the country in which they abide: America. For the children of the immigrants who were born in America, the site of the confusion is their household or parental home in America where the Indian culture and customs still exist even if in a diluted form. As Natalie Friedman writes about the children of the immigrants in her “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*,” “they can only define home as the place where their two cultures merge-the literal and metaphysical location is in their parents’ house. . . . Their behavior is akin to that of tourists in their home countries” (115). Moreover, American culture, which is a blend of different cultures, and being American add to the confusion of the characters in the story. The clash happens inside, having the “other” interchangeably replaced sometimes by the Indian and sometimes by the American side of their identities. Realization of, and coming into terms with their new and unique identities as cosmopolites take time, as reflected in the character of Ashima, and sometimes it never occurs, as in the character of Gogol. It is here that the protagonist and the other characters in *The Namesake* are in the search of their identities; that is, in the in-betweenness of cultures: one as the “self” and the other as the “other”. But it is impossible for the characters, as one can see in the course of the novel, to decide which is which. There also comes a third option, as evident with Ashoke and Moushumi, where they have their European side of their identity formation. As, for example, Judith Caesar writes in her “Gogol’s *Namesake*: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*” about Ashoke: “His world is not just India and America but the Europe of the authors he reads, his time both the twentieth and the nineteenth centuries” (106). Also, as regards Moushumi, her life in England with her parents and being a student in France add to the complexities regarding her identity. The novel reflects on the sensibilities of three characters apart from Gogol.

This paper aims to elaborate the sense of cultural displacement of these three characters and then deal with Gogol, the protagonist of the novel. It aims to show how these characters share certain aspects of displacement while there are crucial differences in their ways of perceiving displacement and dealing with it. Characters Although *The Namesake* is essentially the story of Gogol Ganguli, there are more characters involved in the novel, for example Gogol’s family members and the girls with whom he has been involved. It is through their perspectives that the story is written. The novel provides more information about Gogol’s parents, Ashima

and Ashoke, than his sister Sonia. Among the girlfriends, Maxine and Moushumi have more significance than Gogol's other previous girlfriends. Maxine is an American girl who does not have a dual aspect to her identity or nationality as opposed to Gogol, and this characteristic of hers provides a deep and informative contrast to Gogol with his sense of difference and multiplicity regarding his identity.

*Jhumpa Lahiri, The NameSake. New York: Theia Books, 2004. Print*

*Adam, Ian and Helen Tiffin, ed. Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.*

*Aggarwal, Ramlal. World Literature Today, Oct. 2003. Print*

*Ashcroft, Bill et al. The Empire Writes Back, London: Routledge, 1989. Print.*

*Asnani, Shyam M. and Rajpal, Deepika, "Identity crises in The Nowhere Man and Wife", Language Forum, 1- 2 (Jan-Dec 1992), 38-47. Print*