

Indian Immigrants in Lahiri's *The Namesake*: Diasporic Identity Process

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Abstract---Jumpha Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) narrates the clash between western and eastern cultures. This qualitative study intends to describe firstly problems faced by Indian immigrants caused by displacement namely identity crisis, cultural clashes, alienation, and unhomeliness in *The Namesake*, and secondly how they cope with diasporic situation by adopting mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence. Bhabha's noticeable theories of displacement, mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence in *The Location of Culture* are applied in the analysis of this study to describe the main characters mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence in *The Namesake*. This study reveals that; first, the main characters of *The Namesake*, in order to fight their displacement and to get acceptable, perform mimicry, hybridity in their manners and actions. Second, ambivalence represented by the characters in the novel as a tug of war between resisting and accepting the western culture. In conclusion, the main characters' mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence in *The Namesake* is the result of cultural clashes between eastern and western cultures.

Keywords---*The Namesake*, Gogol, immigrants, diasporic identity, displacement, mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence

I. Introduction

Diaspora in general and Indian Diaspora in specific, in present time, are mostly a private matter of individuals' choice behind moving out and selection of host country, varying from person to person. Diasporic people are confronted by the newness of culture, society, and atmosphere of the host-country. They face difficulties and are confused between carrying on their indigenous culture and the new culture of host country. At the time, the reaction of natives, towards migrated individuals and community, is not warm and friendly. Mostly, the dominant narratives of identity and belonging and different culture of host country do not assimilate the migrants who live "in-between space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). They are not treated properly and justly. Out of ill-treatment, they face the problems namely identity crisis, cultural clashes, alienation, and unhomeliness, in the host land. As the host-land offers a dissimilar code of life, immigrants, in order to cope with the situation, start constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their identities in order to get acceptance in a host country. In the process, in most of the situations, a sense of isolation and alienation, unhomeliness, identity crisis, and cultural and racial differences problematize their identities which leads towards diasporic situation. Diasporic situation triggers uncertainties about a homeland and a host land (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007, p. 62). It makes the immigrants feel confused in choosing and practicing culture. On one hand, they want to click to their old culture but on second hand, in order to get acceptability in host country, they need to mimic the new and dissimilar culture of host country. The dual nature of host country's and home country's cultures inject ambivalent feelings in them.

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Ambivalence according to Young refers to a “simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action” (1995, p. 161). In order to contextualize, ambivalence refers to immigrants’ mixed feelings of liking and disliking for the dominant culture of a host country. Immigrants’ ambivalent feelings are developed due to unequal relationship with a host country (Ashcroft, 2007, p. 11) and their prime desire to become like the masters of host country (Tyson, 2006, p. 427). It is with this desire that they start imitating their masters in dresses, language, and lifestyle, to become like them in order to get acceptance in a host country. Another reason of immigrants’ imitating a host country is their lack of access to mainstream power structure. They are powerless in front of the dominant culture of a host country, their desire of imitating their masters, is, basically, a desire to make their lives easy going in a host country. However, they are shocked when they realize that even after mimicry, their relation with the host country can never be balance and equal (Ashcroft, 2007, pp. 11-12). As a result, they turn towards their roots and unconsciously, according to Bhabha, start deteriorating colonial authority by mixing their own culture with the host culture and producing totally a new one, it is termed hybridity (1994, p. 86). They are in touch simultaneously to more than one culture (Barry, 2002).

The Namesake by Lahiri is a narrative of Indian couple and their children who migrates from India to America. Most of the family members especially Gogol, after shifting to the host country, have problems with their old identity and the construction of a new identity in order to be accepted in the host society. Their diasporic condition compels them to lose their fixed identity by imitating the life style of the host country. However, the dominant narratives of identity and belonging cannot assimilate the migrants who live “in-between space” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). As a result, they are in continuous struggle in the host country to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their diasporic identities. A way to analyze the effects of displacement on the characters’ way of lives and how they react to them, the study focus to investigate:

- 1) How does the selected novel depict Indian diasporic experiences and how do these experiences problematize diasporic identity?
- 2) How far the diasporic Indian fiction does resist the dominant discourses of identity and belonging?
- 3) How far does the host culture deprive Gogol of a stable sense of his self?

The researcher has taken different steps in conduction of the present research. The first step involved close reading of the selected novel in order to get perceptive understanding of the novel in line with the theoretical paradigm of the study. This step involved taking notes of the important points related to the topic of the research. After this, the researcher needed some supporting data for supporting the primary data. For this purpose, the researcher then searched relevant material for the study through print and electronic media. Through mentioned media, the researcher collected supporting theories and related studies to analyze the novel based broadly on postcolonial perspective and narrowly on diasporic perspective.

The third step was to analyze the novel critically through the lens of postcolonial and diasporic perspectives to understand what problematize and construct identity of diasporic people both in host and home countries. The last step concludes the whole discussion by giving some details of findings and suggestions for future research.

II. Discussion

Displacement is an essential part of human experience as human keeps on moving from place to place since time unknown for different reasons. Displacement on one hand enrich human experiences and help to improve human condition but on other hand, it disturbs identity and creates unfavorable environment for immigrants. This migration, in today's world, is made further speedy by globalization and capitalism. People moves from one corner of the globe to other freely and eagerly due to technology. Though human movements play effective role in connecting and bringing people closer, however, they also problematizes cultural identity of displaced people due to unfavorable condition in host country. Once the migrants displace from their native homes, the changes in their identity start operating; they struggle for constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their genuine identities. In addition, to the diasporic identity (Hall, 2010) issues, displacement also causes cultural shocks, alienation (Wright, 2004), unhomeliness (Bhabha, 1992 & Tyson, 2006), in-betweeness (McLeod, 2007), and otherness (Said, 1978) and so on.

Identities of displaced people are little problematic and uncertain (Hall, 2010). They are faced with a challenge of maintaining their genuine identity in host country. As their identity is rooted in homeland, they are faced with conflicting identity of host country. In order to cope with the conflicting situation when they try to construct their identity in host country, both the homeland narrative of identity and the dominant narrative of identity at host land confuse them. As a result, they become victims of identity crisis.

In *The Namesake*, nearly all characters go through identity crisis, however, the main character, Gogol, suffers the most due to his ambivalent name. Throughout his life, he feels humiliated, as the name is neither American nor according to Indian culture. He is given this name temporarily out of compulsion in America. As Ganguli family is not allowed to take their baby out of hospital without naming him. In hast, they name him after Gogol, a Great Russian author. They think it is merely a provisional name, a kind of domesticated name, and will be changed later on. However, the pet name becomes his permanent name. With this name, as a young boy, he starts growing, and does not "mind his name, Gogol" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 66) however, when he gets exposure to the host society, he is asked about his strange name and in this way, he is embarrassed & daunted in front of his class fellows, teachers, and sometimes in public. At school, teachers "each time break in proceedings, looking apologetic the minute they reach at Gogol's pet name in the calling register, pushing him to call out, in advance even being called" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 67). Everyone frowns at him when listen his name. This makes him uncomfortable with his name. Bit by bit, he starts hating his name as it "echoes ridiculous to his ears, lacking self-esteem and solemnity" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 76). This problematizes Gogol's identity in host land.

According to Sharma (2013, p. 123), Gogol like an outsider does not feel at home in American society while at the same time he has the same confusing feelings for his native land, India. In this way, his identity becomes blurred and questioned. What is the role of name in identity formation? Gogol tries his best to erase his past by replacing his name in order to reconstruct his identity in host country but even then, the question of Gogol identity remains unanswered.

Cultural clash is another big problem for immigrants. The discourse of *The Namesake* focuses on the tussle of traditional vs American culture through its followers. Ashoke and Ashima supports and follow culture of India in Unite Stats while their children, Gogol and Sonia, not only stuck to American culture they mock their ancestor's culture. They are not ready and convinced to follow a faraway culture that they have not even observed and have not developed feelings for it. They feel more like Americans than Indians. However, their parents especially Ashima is very worried for her children; she wants them to follow and love Indian culture. That's way at home she arrange different parties

inviting Indian friends and relative in order to give her children Indian sense of belonging. However, the children find themselves divided between two conflicting cultures. On one side, there are expectations of their parents for Indian culture while on other hand there is a practical reason in following American way of life.

Throughout life, Googol tries to hide his cultural background by hiding his name. Later on, he changes his name to be more Americanized. He thought it would settle the problem of differences in culture, but it did not work. At the end, Googol deals with cultural differences by loving and mixing both cultures and gets a different identity which doesn't require a specific nationality and as a result totally different from the old one. He realizes that his identity is embroidered by both cultures and comes to know "identity is as a production, which is never complete, always in process and always continued within, not outside representation" (Hall, 2010).

Cultural differences and displacement eventually causes feelings of alienation in displaced people. Displaced people are alienated from familiar community and places; they are made felt in one way or another that the host country does not belong to them and as a result, they feel separated and alienated physically and emotionally. Alienation refers to living in a "system established by somebody else and is being made isolated from the communities, be it the native and the host country (Wright, 2004). Resultantly, displaced people feel estrangement in both host and home country.

Ashima strictly follows Indian traditional way of life in host country and for this; she is ridiculed by the host society. Resultantly, she feels alienated. She struggles not to adapt the dominant culture against her own culture. She is very concerned for raising her expected baby in host land. Being alone in hospital, she feels the sense of alienation not only for herself but also for her upcoming baby "entering the world so alone, so deprived" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 24). She shouts to her husband that it is not right to raise a child in such a deprived and lonely place and wants to get back to their homeland.

Like his parents Gogol also face loneliness, seclusion and resultantly alienation. The very birth of Gogol is lonesome. Against Indian tradition, there is no one in America to celebrate his birth. His mother, Ashma, ponders that she "has never known a person entering the world so alone" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 24). His lonesomeness is further deepened by naming him after a Russian writer for the reason that the name is neither Indian nor American. When Gogol grows, he feels stranger in both cultures due to his strange name. Whenever someone calls him by Gogol, he becomes uneasy due to people's weird reaction to his name (Lahiri, 2003, p. 91). His sense of alienation is further extended when he goes 'on school trip' to a graveyard, he finds different names written on gravestones, unintentionally he searches his ancestors names there, but he could find any Indian sounding name, it makes him sad. He sadly realizes that beyond life he would neither find place in this graveyard as he does not belong to this country nor in India where dead are burnt. He is further secluded when he moves away from family; he makes different relationships with females but could not maintain them because of his sense of displacement and alienation. Gogol is also made othered through racial comments by Pamla, as she says to Gogol that being an Indian, the climate of India, which normally affect foreigners, would not affect him (Lahiri, 2003, p. 157). Googol's sister, Maushumi, too is made felt othered by giving her a sense that she is misfit in dominant culture as a result, she becomes alienated.

Alienation leads to feelings of unhomeliness. All characters feel sense of unhomeliness; however, it disturbs Gogol the most. The metaphor of his name reflects his isolation and seclusion. By changing his name, he thinks he will settle the issue of his seclusion and unhomeliness; however, it further complicates the problem. It makes him living divided. When he feels as Nikhil, Gogol, all of sudden, starts controlling him. This situation keeps him moving forward and backward; resultantly he is indecisive and he feels divided and worn out. These feelings of 'seized and worn out'

make Gogol unhomed. Explained by Tyson “to be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee” (2006, p. 421). Consequently, Gogol mixes his two cultures in order to feel homed.

Almost all characters in the novel suffer from displacement in host land; they live very lonely life. They are made feel othered and inferior. Explicitly, being Indian in American society, Gogol is always made *othered*. The sense of otherness is given to him mostly in social gatherings. As in one party, Mocking Gogol’s colour, Pamela with frowning says, “You are Indian,” “I’d think the climate would not affect you, given your heritage” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 157). In order to fight inferiority and otherness, they desire to occupy the masters' place through action of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence.

2.1 Mimicry

As stated by Bhabha that mimicry is an act when it is tried to imitate somebody else and resultantly he might become more or less ridiculous; he becomes “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Lahiri describes her main character in *The Namesake*, Gogol as a person who mimics the culture of white society in order to be accepted in the host country. He is a son of Bengali migrated family who wants to be American by his actions and language. However, Fanon argues that when colonized people uses colonizer’s language; it is regarded as predatory, and not transformative, which in turn may create insecurity in the colonized consciousness (Fanon, 1986, p. 11).

Instead of creating the feelings of insecurity, language plays very vital role in getting acceptance in the host society. That is why Gogol starts mastering the standard American accent and keeps up speaking in English even with Indians. It occurs at several occasions that Indian boys speak with him in Bengali but he refuses to speak in Bengali, instead compels them to speak in English. His parents wants him to be in touch with his ancestral roots through Bengali language. For this purpose, he is admitted in Bengali class, however, he “in the class study without interest” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 66). His main concern is, mastering and using recognized American accent. He mimics standard American accent in such a way that when his parents “close their eyes it never fails to worry them that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 65).

Besides mastering host language, Gogol also, with a considerable pace, starts learning to mimic the manners of American people. It is evident from his relation with his American girl friend, Maxine. He promptly “falls in love with Maxine, the house, and...manners of her living” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 137). Gogol’s falling in love with Maxine is “the attempt of the colonized to get acceptance by imitating the dress, speech, and lifestyle of the colonizers” (Tyson, 2006, p. 427). In order to be accepted in her family, he must “to know her and love ...her habits” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 137). Although there are many differences between both of them like the standard of table manners and habits in America and India are different, however, he has to level the differences by mimicking Americans to blend in American society. For this purpose, Gogol prefers to eat American foods and dress like Americans.

In order to sound more as Americans he changes his old name because he considers his name is a big hindrance in his way to be accepted in American society. It irritates him to clarify and explain people the meaning and context of his name. He hates telling and explaining to American public that his name is both ridiculous, ambiguous, and meaningless and it has no connection to reflect who he is (Lahiri, 2003, pp. 75, 76). On one occasion being nervous regarding the absurdity of his name and the expected reaction of an American girl, he could not introduce himself as

Gogol to her. He thought that he could have presented himself as “Jason or Colin or Marc” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 96), and their talk may perhaps linger a bit longer. He feels that his strange name problematizes his personality and he is not taken seriously because of it. Moreover, this feeling of inferiority leads to unbelongingness, a feeling that pushes him to change his name. Out of desperation to be included in their society, he changes his name. The change of name reflects mimicry, on one hand, it makes him feel a changed person while on the other hand, it also break up his relation with his family and cultural past.

2.2 Hybridity

Hybridity, according to Bhabha, refers to a “force that disturbs the visibility of the colonial presence and makes the recognition of its authority problematic” (1994, p. 159). For Bhabha, hybridity is an effective tool for struggling against colonial power: hybrids create a space that is in-between the fixed identities of the colonial and precolonial subjects, and reject the notion of a single sense of identity. There is a muscle that lies within this rejection (1994, p. 159). This muscle enables hybrids to take the dominant culture and disfigure it to create something new of their own. The newly created culture and identity that is neither purely of host country nor that of home country empower hybrids to turn dominance into difference.

In the novel overall, Gogol emerges himself in the American culture, just in slightly different ways. In addition to mimicking the host culture and language of America, he also develops hybridity as per the effects of ambivalent experience. His cultural and linguistic hybridity can be found in his mixing of English and Bengali, changing of his name from Gogol to Nikhil, and celebration of his wedding ceremony in both western and an Indian ways.

The very first characteristic of hybridity in Gogol can be noticed in his action of changing his name. For Gogol, from the very beginning, name is always a matter of tension, a catalyst in discovering his own acculturated identity, in shuffling and reshuffling his views concerning his dual identities in America. In acculturating himself with the American society, in befriending American girls, and in doing everyday activities, he is severely tortured for his name. Eventually, he decides to change his name. The procedure, against Gogol expectation, is entirely unceremonious and takes just ten minutes to change his name. After changing the name, he:

wonders if this is how it feels for an obese person to become thin, for a prisoner to walk free. He wants to cry to tell people who are walking their dogs, pushing children in their strollers, throwing bread to the ducks that he is no more Gogol “he is Nikhil now. (Lahiri, 2004, p. 102).

The act of changing name indicates hybrid action. This hybrid action is done what Bhabha called “colonial antagonism and inequity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 34) which is produced by the pressure between the colonizer and the colonized. Replacing Gogol with American name Nick can be inferred as a hybrid action. Gogol use hybridity as a strategy to be accepted in American society. By changing his name, Gogol turns into a self-assured youngster. He starts going to university with this new injected confidence where nobody knows him as a Gogol. A fluid name allows him to act and react according to the demand of context. He becomes, in terms of Rushdie, a “translated man” (1991, p. 17). The name Gogol “is a metaphor for his feeling of a dislocated issue and, the new name a metaphor for the acceptance of his identity as a hybrid subject” (Chakraborty, scribd.com).

Besides showing cultural hybridity by changing his name, Gogol also shows hybridity in customs and traditions by making his wedding ceremony both Indianized and Americanized. There is an hour-long watered-down Hindu ceremony along with Shenai music (Lahiri, 2004, p. 222). Among wedding guests, on one hand there are mashis, meshos, and on other hand Americans and a priest. Moreover, on one side, according to Indian tradition, there is “mounds of hot pink tandoori, also thick orange sauce” and on other side there are “the heated silver chafing dishes” (Lahiri, 2004, p. 223) labelled for Americans. In addition, Gogol and his wife, as a Western Wedding customary, celebrate the ceremony of cutting wedding cake. All this show that Gogol mixes up both cultures by inviting both Americans and Indians, serving Indian and American dishes and following both American and Indian customs in order to create something new of his own.

Gogol also shows linguistic hybridity by mixing Bengali with English. Sometimes, during his discussion with Moushumi, he “slips Bengali phrases into his conversation in order to comment with impunity on other dinner’s unfortunate hair or shoes” (Lahiri, 2004, p. 211). The mixing of languages is done in order to comment with impunity to other people. It makes Gogol to become a hybrid.

2.3 Ambivalence

Gogol mimics Western culture with a hope of getting acceptance, however, with the passage of time he also develops ambivalent attitudes towards it. Ambivalence generally refers to a state of being in-between and within the postcolonial context; it is seen as the characteristic predicament of the colonized subject’s double attitude of both attraction and repulsion towards the colonizers. Growing up in American environment in public and Indian environment at home, Gogol, at a time, experiences two poles apart cultures. At the same time, he has to be Indian and American by learning both Bengali and English. Moreover, he is told to behave similar to other American children at school but at home, he has to behave as an Indian child. In nursery school, he must learn about Americans while at home, he must learn about Indians. Furthermore, being a Hindu, knowing the names of Gods and Goddesses and their characteristics, is obligatory for him (Lahiri, 2004, p. 54). These divided obligations and experiences of facing different cultures make him confused. This confusion develops ambivalent feelings of attraction and repulsion in Gogol both for India and for America (Young, 1995, p. 161) which makes him unstable in both cultures.

Besides, Gogol’s obligation of learning two cultures and languages, customary celebrations like celebration of his birthday party both in Indian and American styles, also causes ambivalence in him. Gogol calls his American schoolfellows and celebrates his birthday party in American style by serving pizza to them. While his parents also arranged a Bengali style party for the celebration of Gogol’s birthday. Contrary to American style party, his mother starts cooking a day before the party, as she has to get long preparation to serve the meal for the Bengali relatives and friends. Gogol also finds difference in faces of guests at both parties. Moreover, he feels the difference between his parents and Maxine’s parents in the choice of their gifts. At another occasion, in contrast with his parents who never calls themselves by names, he finds Maxine’s parents expressing their intimacy through physical affection openly. At matured stage, Gogol too, like Maxine’s parents, desires to show his love publically, however, due to cultural restriction, “they will not be able to touch or kiss each other in front of his parents”. (Lahiri, 2003, p. 145). These conflicting differences of belonging and not belonging, at a time, to two diverse cultures and loving and hating both at the same time, make Gogol feel split and as a result ambivalent.

Another reason that makes Gogol ambivalent is the biased and harsh treatment of the host country. He expects that by imitating the host country would give him acceptance, however, at different occasions; he is intentionally made feel othered by Americans because of his colour. Therefore, he develops mixed feelings for host country. Sometimes, he

adores the host country and imitates it blindly with a hope to get acceptance and to be like them, however, when his efforts are not recognized, his love for the host country turns into hatred. This process of loving and hating, resisting and accepting a host society, keeps on and as a result develops contrasting feelings in immigrants toward racial groups and other social groups in a host society (Larsen, 2007, p. 1) The racial group and other social group mostly represent the colonized group and colonizer group. Since Gogol cannot fully feel like both at the same time, he does not feel whole. He feels split from himself, which causes his ambivalence. The self has to split because it is not considered good enough by white society. It then has to produce another self, a supposed better version, a whiter version. Gogol's action of mimicry and hybridity result in ambivalent feeling inside him. Gogol wants to be accepted in his new community, he imitates the masters (colonizers) but he also feels the urge to resist it and keep his indigenous culture. Gogol tries to be equal with the American in many aspects but Americans still consider him as "the other" (Bhabha, 1994) who is not the same with them. Since Gogol in the white culture identifies with an immigrant identity, he moves in-between the boundaries of heritage and white culture without aligning himself with any of them. Due to the ambivalence that comes with inhabiting the "third space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 53), he has a thorough insight into both of the groups and their relation to the culturally dominant one. His situation reflects the way in which colonized people feel conflicted and divided between accepting or rejecting a culture, it may happen when both cultures have the same effect towards the people (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 10).

III. Conclusion

The Namesake realistically deals with the theme of diasporic identity and its problematics through Gangoli family. As diaspora is not only a "process of geographical dislocation and relocation but also a mental transport" (Samual, 2014, p. 4670), Gangoli family faces many unwanted and unfavourable situations, which put in them a sense of unhomeliness, ambivalent consciousness, inbetweenness, alienation, and loss of genuine identity. In order to negotiate cultural encounters and dislocation, all characters go through, mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence in different manners. All of them struggle with getting authentic identity as their identities are problematized by diasporic condition; however, getting and fixing identities in host land is never likely to be happened as host land's dominant narrative of identity never let the displaced to get authentic identity. It suggests diaspora is 'never-ending process', started and symbolized in a name; the central character of the novel, Gogol, despite of his sufferings, struggles and mimicry, is certainly not relieved of his name and namesake and as a result never becomes accepted American. It is a process that "incorporates the maintenance of the culture of origin with the gaining of the culture and relationship of other ethnic groups" (Samual, 2014, p. 4671), "a resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 278).

Endnotes

This is a revised and altered version of my unpublished PhD work I submitted to the Qurtuba University of Science & Information Technology Peshawar, Pakistan. I completed the work under the supervision of Abdul Hamid Khan (PhD).

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