
**Identity Across Cultures:
Communication, Multilingualism, and Diasporic
Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake
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ABSTRACT:

In a globalized and multicultural world, communication plays a crucial role in shaping identity across cultural boundaries. Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* presents a nuanced exploration of diasporic identity through experiences of migration, multilingualism, and intercultural negotiation. This paper examines how communication functions beyond language, focusing on naming practices, generational interactions, and linguistic choices as key sites of identity formation. Drawing on concepts from diaspora theory, cultural identity theory, and intercultural communication, the study analyzes the ways in which characters negotiate belonging between Indian and American cultural frameworks. The paper emphasizes that *The Namesake* explores new dimensions of communication in multicultural societies, where identity is continuously constructed through cultural dialogue, silence, and linguistic hybridity. By situating the novel within contemporary communication and cultural studies, the paper highlights its relevance to multilingual contexts and cross-cultural understanding.

KEYWORDS:

Identity, Diaspora, Communication, Multilingualism, Culture.

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Introduction

Diasporic literature occupies a significant space in contemporary global culture, especially in the 21st century, where migration and multicultural living have become major aspects of modern societies. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, V. S. Naipaul, and Jhumpa Lahiri have offered distinctive literary perspectives on migration, displacement, and cultural adaptation. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) stands as a seminal text in diasporic fiction, examining how identity is shaped through language, cultural memory, and interpersonal communication.

Set across Kolkata, Boston, and New York, the novel traces the experiences of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, first-generation Bengali immigrants in the United States, and their American-born children Gogol and Sonia. The narrative illustrates how identity is continuously shaped and reshaped through cultural interaction, multilingual practices, and the symbolic power of naming. Migration in the novel becomes both a geographical and cultural journey, revealing the complexities of diasporic belonging.

This paper examines how communication—verbal, linguistic, symbolic, and even silent—becomes a central mechanism through which diasporic subjects negotiate identity. While literature has traditionally emphasized language as a communicative medium, *The Namesake* expands the understanding of communication to include non-verbal modes like naming conventions and cultural rituals. These aspects highlight Lahiri's nuanced representation of diasporic consciousness.

2. Diaspora, Identity, and Literature

Diaspora studies offer a useful theoretical lens for examining *The Namesake*. Scholars like Avtar Brah (1996), Robin Cohen (1997), and Vijay Mishra (1996) argue that diasporic subjects experience identity as fragmented, hybrid, and negotiated across cultural boundaries. Stuart Hall (1990) suggests cultural identity is a process of “becoming”, shaped by history and society, not a fixed

“being”.

In Lahiri’s text, diasporic identity emerges through a combination of nostalgia, memory, cultural performance, and communication. Home becomes a multifaceted space, both geographical and psychological. The first-generation immigrants retain cultural memory through food, language, and ritual, while their children grapple with dual cultural belonging. In literary contexts, naming functions as a semiotic marker of cultural identity. First-generation immigrants often hold onto their cultural practices as a means of grounding identity, whereas second-generation characters negotiate identity through adaptation, social integration, and selective cultural retention. Lahiri captures this generational divide with subtlety, foregrounding communication as the medium through which cultural values are transferred, questioned, or reshaped. Lahiri’s novel presents naming as a site where personal identity intersects with cultural history and linguistic translation.

3. Migration and the Search for Belonging

Migration initiates an extended period of cultural adjustment for Ashima and Ashoke. Lahiri’s portrayal of Ashima’s early days in Boston captures the loneliness and disorientation common to immigrant narratives. Her inability to fully communicate in English limits her social engagement, demonstrating that language proficiency significantly mediates access to cultural participation.

Lahiri shows communication goes beyond just verbal fluency. Ashima communicates her nostalgia for Kolkata through culinary practice, preparing Bengali food as a cultural anchor. The kitchen becomes a communicative space where cultural memory is transmitted to the next generation, showing that domestic rituals can function as cultural language.

Gogol’s experience, however, reflects a different trajectory. As an American-born child, he confronts the complexities of cultural duality. He is linguistically fluent in English but culturally

disconnected from Bengali traditions. His struggle for belonging is not rooted in linguistic deficit but in cultural identity, illustrating that communication in diasporic contexts involves both speech and silence, articulation and erasure. Lahiri poignantly notes that Gogol feels “neither Indian nor American, but something in between” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 118), reinforcing the liminality of second-generation identity. Characters seek belonging not only through place but through language, relationships, and naming. Migration in the novel is thus not a singular movement but a continuous negotiation of cultural positioning.

4. Naming as Cultural Identity

Naming emerges as one of the most important communicative sites in the novel. Gogol’s name—derived from Russian writer Nikolai Gogol—symbolizes the tension between personal history, cultural identity, and familial memory. For Ashoke, the name signifies survival and second birth, recalling his railway accident and recovery. For Gogol, however, the name becomes a source of embarrassment, alienation, and cultural ambiguity.

In diasporic communities, names often undergo translation, alteration, or negotiation. Lahiri portrays this through Gogol’s attempts to rename himself “Nikhil,” a choice that represents cultural assimilation and an assertion of agency. The shift from “Gogol” to “Nikhil” signifies his desire to belong within American social structures, yet Lahiri reveals that renaming does not erase cultural memory. Instead, the dual names coexist, reflecting the dual identities he inhabits.

Naming becomes symbolic communication that operates across generations. For the parents, names preserve heritage; for children, names become barriers to assimilation. Lahiri thus illustrates how naming functions beyond linguistic designation, becoming a cultural discourse on identity, belonging, and diaspora.

5. Multilingualism, Communication, and Cultural Translation

Multilingualism in *The Namesake* functions not merely as the coexistence of languages but as a dynamic process of cultural translation. While English dominates the public sphere, Bengali persists as the private language of the household. Lahiri uses linguistic shifts to signal changes in identity and intimacy. Bengali becomes a language of comfort, ritual, and memory, while English represents modernity, independence, and assimilation.

For first-generation immigrants such as Ashoke and Ashima, Bengali ensures cultural continuity. Their conversations in Bengali, even when living in America, create a symbolic bridge to their homeland. For the second generation, however, Bengali becomes increasingly peripheral. Gogol and Sonia are fluent in English but only partially conversant in Bengali, reflecting the generational attrition of linguistic heritage that characterizes many diasporic families.

Communication breakdowns in the novel do not always arise from linguistic incompetence. Sometimes silence communicates more than speech. Gogol's inability to articulate his discomfort with his name indicates that cultural identity often resides in the unspoken. Lahiri thus broadens the scope of communication to include emotional reticence, intergenerational miscommunication, and cultural codes unfamiliar to American contexts.

6. Generational Conflict and Cultural Negotiation

Generational conflict is a recurring motif in diasporic literature, and Lahiri's novel presents it with sensitivity. Ashoke and Ashima attempt to sustain Bengali customs within their American environment through pujas, visits from relatives, marriage arrangements, and culinary practices. Their children, socialized into American cultural norms, interpret these traditions as restrictive or outdated.

Gogol's romantic relationships further illustrate this conflict. His involvement with Maxine Ratliff introduces him to an American

lifestyle centered around individualism, openness, and independence. The Ratliffs' household embodies a liberal communicative style that contrasts sharply with the restrained expressions of affection within the Ganguli family. Through this juxtaposition, Lahiri demonstrates how communication styles themselves can differ across cultures, shaping interpersonal relationships and emotional bonds.

Yet, Lahiri does not present assimilation as wholly liberating. Gogol's marriage to Moushumi, though rooted in shared heritage, reveals that cultural compatibility does not guarantee emotional or communicative alignment. Moushumi's multilingualism and cosmopolitan identity complicate the narrative further; her French linguistic and cultural orientation destabilizes assumptions about Bengali-American identity. Through Moushumi, Lahiri suggests that diasporic identities are not monolithic but intersectional and layered. Communication within the diasporic family becomes a negotiation between expectations, desires, and cultural affiliations.

7. Narrative Techniques and the Representation of Diaspora

Lahiri employs a linear yet episodic narrative structure, allowing readers to observe the characters across different life stages. This temporal span is significant because diasporic identity evolves over time rather than forming instantaneously. Lahiri's restrained prose mirrors the emotional restraint of her characters, reflecting what critics have identified as her "ethnographic realism" in depicting immigrant life.

The use of third-person narration grants access to internal conflicts without overtly dramatizing them. Lahiri avoids didactic commentary, allowing cultural tensions to emerge through everyday acts such as grocery shopping, travel, or social gatherings. These seemingly mundane incidents become narrative devices for illustrating cultural hybridity.

Symbolism amplifies the diasporic themes as well. The train accident that nearly kills Ashoke symbolizes rupture and rebirth; the

home becomes a liminal space between cultures; and food operates as a communicative medium capable of conveying nostalgia, love, and identity. Naming, as already discussed, functions symbolically and structurally within the narrative, bookending Gogol's journey from birth to adulthood. Lahiri's narrative technique ultimately highlights how identity is both personal and collective, private and performative.

8. Communication, Ritual, and Cultural Expression

In *The Namesake*, communication is not limited to spoken language. Lahiri shows that culture itself becomes a form of communication through rituals, food, festivals, and family practices. These everyday activities help Bengali immigrants express who they are and where they come from, especially when they are far from home. Rituals such as pujas, weddings, funerals, and community gatherings allow Ashoke and Ashima to stay connected to their cultural roots and pass cultural meaning to their children.

Food plays an especially important role. Ashima prepares Bengali dishes not only out of habit but also as a way to remember Kolkata and keep those memories alive in America. The kitchen becomes a place where cultural belonging is silently communicated through taste, smell, and shared meals. Lahiri suggests that culture is not only carried in language but also in domestic spaces and routines.

Festivals and social gatherings also highlight how culture is performed. For first-generation immigrants, these events bring comfort and familiarity. For second-generation children like Gogol and Sonia, these rituals sometimes feel unfamiliar or unnecessary. This difference shows how cultural identity can change over time and across generations.

Silence is another form of communication in the novel. The Ganguli family rarely expresses emotions openly, but care and affection are shown through actions rather than words. This contrast

becomes more visible when compared to American communication styles, which favor direct speech and self-expression. Through these examples, Lahiri shows that identity in diasporic families is shaped not only by what is said, but also by what is done, shared, and performed.

9. Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* offers a rich literary exploration of diasporic identity, illustrating how communication shapes belonging across cultural boundaries. By examining naming practices, multilingualism, generational conflict, and narrative technique, the novel foregrounds the complexities of cultural negotiation within immigrant families. Identity in the text is neither inherited nor imposed but continually reconstituted through encounters with language, culture, and memory. As societies become more globalized, multilingual and intercultural interactions are increasingly common, and Lahiri's narrative reflects these evolving realities. Communication emerges not simply as a tool for expression but as a bridge between cultures, generations, and memories.

The novel's relevance extends beyond literary discourse into broader discussions of globalization, multiculturalism, and cultural communication. In multilingual societies, identity is not static but dialogic, produced through cultural interaction and translation. Lahiri's work thus resonates within contemporary global contexts, where migration and mobility increasingly define personal and collective identities.

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