



Operating Beyond Territorial Limits: Globalization and the Metamorphosis of Postcolonial Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Author name: Shwagata Daas

Abstract: Postcolonial literature probes into the experience of being away from one's ancestral homeland. It embodies the literary works of authors voluntarily or involuntarily displaced from their native land owing to aspects such as emigration, exile or globalization. Globalization embraces, multiculturalism allowing for more fluid and dynamic perception of self in postcolonial contexts. This paper discusses how the celebrated author Jhumpa Lahiri in her famous work *The Namesake*, examines in what manner migration corrodes conventional perception of belonging as the characters circumnavigate between their ancestral Bengali culture and the American surroundings, where they dwell. Relying on the theoretical underpinnings of Homi Bhabha's Third Space Theory, Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory and Gayatri Spivak's Theory of the Subaltern, Lahiri's narrative accentuates how globalization transfigures identity into a fluid construct, challenging established national identity.

KEYWORDS: Globalization, Postcolonial Identity, Cultural fusion, Subaltern, Diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri, a celebrated author is known for depicting the adverse experiences faced by the immigrants as they settle into their new country. Born in 1967, Lahiri is an American author of Indian origin. Her family moved to the U.S when she was only two years old. While undergoing an identity crisis, Lahiri was torn between her Indian ancestry and her American upbringing, marked by perpetual strife of not fully belonging anywhere. Her works reflect the crisis of identity and belonging encountered by the people and communities who voyaged through diversified cultural landscapes.

With the growing global interdependence, postcolonial literature examines various facets of the enduring impact of colonial histories, ruminating on the infallible reality of how globalization has delineated a vibrant mosaic of cultures that intertwine, carving out a vivacious society where social meanings and values are subject to constant change and adjustment. It acts as a fulcrum by enriching our understanding of cross-cultural engagement and hybrid identities. This paper endeavors to investigate the central research question on how globalization diversifies postcolonial identity transcending ethnicity in Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

The narrative of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) unfolds in the year 1968 following the arrival of Ashoke and Ashima in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashoke embarks on doctoral studies at MIT, while Ashima wrestles with a sense of *Heimweh* and cultural alienation. Upon the birth of her first child, she undergoes isolation without her family by her side to unwaveringly support her and embrace the newest family member. In stark opposition to the communal and cultural rituals surrounding childbirth in Kolkata, where family

members especially elder relatives play a significant role in naming a child during the Annaprasan ceremony. America lacks such socio-cultural matrix for childbirth ritual. Childbirth in America is often viewed from a scientific perspective instead of cultural ceremonies. Moreover, the letter from Ashima's grandmother which contained the newborn's designated name (bhalanam) never arrive hence Ashoke suggests the name Gogol for the baby's daktam which means 'pet name', after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol whose works rescued him from a train accident in India. Ashoke considered his narratives as an icon of resilience and an affirmation of a new beginning.

However, as Gogol grows up, he changes his name to Nikhil. For Gogol, his name becomes an embarrassment. His growing self-awareness is predominantly caused by his name and his dual cultural heritage and his personal relationships. This name change epitomizes his dominance of self-perception. Later, as he matures, he aligns both cultures, encompassing a transcultural identity.

Also, Gogol had a romantic relationship with Ruth. Although he was passionately in love yet he never introduced her to his parents as he knew they would not approve of their relationship due to cultural differences. Hence, they eventually break up. After Ruth, Gogol falls in love with Maxine and their relationship further illustrates his identity struggle. Maxine embraces a carefree lifestyle that Gogol yearns for. He enjoys the Ratliff's sophisticated lifestyle, yet his integration is superficial. Their break up serves as a crucial point in his path to self-awareness. He then comes across Moushumi, with whom he experiences a more profound connection due to their shared Bengali heritage and he ultimately ties the knot with her. Soon after, Gogol feels detached from his wife as she feels suffocated by their marriage. She feels more comfortable around her friends, captivated by their sagacious thoughts and wants to detach herself from the cultural trepidation of her Bengali heritage.

The narrative also delves into the time when Ashoke passed away. The lamenting period of his father draws him closer to his family and their common heritage. He reads the Nikolai Gogol novel his father gifted him and finds an inscription left by his father. This rumination causes him to develop a profound insight into his father's influence in his life. Through the prism of the Ganguli family's journey, Lahiri dramatically showcases the dilemmas and richness of cultural amalgamations.

Theoretical framework through the lenses of Bhabha, Hall and Spivak

The inability to acquire identity and the sense of displacement has been the cardinal point of concern in Postcolonial Literature. The idea of belonging comes from the concept of 'home', which is abandoned. The loss of their indigenous home is so intense that it hinders their ability to accept the dominant colonial culture while suppressing their true identity. Scholars such as Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity further illustrates the ambivalence experienced by individuals. As defined by Bhabha, hybridity originates at the culminating moment when the colonizer and the colonized communicate with each other within a 'Third Space' of enunciation. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Gogol inhabits the Third Space where he is reluctant to fully adopt his Bengali heritage nor fully integrate into American culture. His name Gogol symbolizes hybridity. His parents name him Gogol after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol. However, this name has become an impediment. He wanted to integrate into the American culture by embracing a new name 'Nikhil'. This act reflects mimicry-a strategy described by Bhabha where individuals try to imitate elements of dominant culture while opposing full assimilation.

- "He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him".

This line from the text reflects his unwillingness to accept a new name, Nikhil. Even when he actively decides to change his name there is deeper level of uncertainty about the implications of this decision. The Third Space forces him to navigate between his Bengali heritage and his desire to assimilate into American culture.

Bhabha's Third Space shows how cultural identities are evolved by the negotiation of cultures in ambivalent and contradictory spaces. Therefore, identity is produced by fluidity where individuals draw from multiple cultural backgrounds to form their identities.

Stuart Hall, in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, writes: 'Cultural Identities are the points of identification which are made within the discourses of history and culture'. Ashoke and Ashima embody Stuart Hall's essentialist model of identity by striving to preserve their Bengali heritage in America.

Both Ashoke and Ashima cherish their traditional roots. They celebrate various customs and festivals with gusto.

"Every weekend they visit other Bengali families.... They eat with their hands from banana leaves."

-The above lines from *The Namesake*, highlights how Ashoke and Ashima try to preserve their culture. These gatherings represent an attempt by them to recreate a sense of community in an alien land.

According to Hall, as people undertake new experiences and thoughts their identities are modified, stemming from their association within their broader sphere of existence. According to Hall, culture is not just a reflection of society but a potent influence that changes and recreates individual identity. Contributing to their role definition, Ashoke and Ashima mention Bengal as 'desh'. When the Bengali community gathered on various occasions they garbed in their traditional finery in a foreign land. Being first-generation immigrants, they face unique challenges in reconciling their dual identities. This ambivalence predominantly fosters intercultural friction as their children too experience identity flux. Unlike Gogol, Sonia's path is distinguished by a harmonious blending of cultural duality. Her engagement with Ben, who is of mixed Jewish and Chinese descent illustrates her successful blending of identities. Whenever Ben visits the Ganguli house, they confabulate with him in English to ensure his comfort.

Both Ashoke and Ashima emblemize Stuart Hall's framework of identity as they constantly try to venerate their cultural legacy while acclimatizing to the American life. Their experiences highlight their transient nature of self which is sculpted by intercultural dialogues, inclusion and the difficulties in maintaining equilibrium between diverse cultures.

Furthermore, to shed light on the subtle intricacies of this discussion, Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern (1998) is utilized to emphasize the muted refrains in diaspora, notably through Ashima Ganguli. While Bhabha and Hall concentrate on transcendent identity, Spivak discloses the systematic inequalities that marginalize the subaltern from dominant narratives. These theorists present a multifaceted paradigm of transformation, where identity transcends national boundaries in Lahiri's novel.

In her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Spivak challenges Western epistemic hegemony that distorts the voices of the subaltern particularly the postcolonial female experience. The term 'subaltern' taken from Antonio Gramsci, signifies those group of people who are socio-politically outside the imperial dominance and who are muted and neglected by hegemonic narratives.

Spivak postulates that the subaltern is silenced since their perspectives are often mediated by hegemony.

In *The Namesake*, the unheard narrative is most vividly portrayed in the character of Ashima Ganguli, Gogol's mother, a diasporic woman living in the United States experiencing the multifaceted and intersecting nature of oppression and subtle identity formation. This provides a compelling instance for Spivak's analysis.

Ashima's formative years in America are characterized by displacement, seclusion and obscurity. She experiences a linguistic and cultural disconnect and her sphere of influence is primarily confined to her home. Her experiences are peripheral to the story but her influence provokes defiance against integration.

- “She refuses to learn to drive, prefers saris to pants, Bengali novels to English ones. She keeps in touch with her relatives by sending aerograms that take weeks to arrive.”- *The Namesake*

Ashima is marginalized. Her traditional sanctity operating in a more self-sufficient capacity, might be misconstrued as acquiescence - typical of how subaltern women are constituted in Spivak’s analysis. However, Ashima subtly withstands integration, adhering to cultural preservation.

While Spivak questions the subaltern’s capacity for self-articulation, Lahiri gives Ashima a delicate yet potent arc. In due course she learns to negotiate through a process of acculturation. At the end of the novel, Ashima plans a sojourn in India,

“She will live alone, she who has never lived alone a day in her life.... She will divide her time between Calcutta and the U.S”- *The Namesake*

This decision embodies an implicit assertion. She might disavow collective metamorphosis as Gogol but she forges a territory of individual expression. This reiterates Spivak’s assertion that, despite the subaltern being silenced or rendered unheard in the dominant speaking frame, she can embody her agency through the lens of lived experience.

Ashima simultaneously witnesses and challenges the implications of globalization which frequently presents globally-minded youth with a penchant for modern consumer culture - attributes Gogol personifies more than she does. Her discomfiture with American ways reveals the disparities in global engagement. While Gogol is globally mobile, Ashima is deeply embedded within her ethnic network, highlighting intergenerational gender stratification from the global sphere.

Spivak’s theory elucidates how Ashima’s disempowered position as a woman, a migrant and a traditional figure reinforces power hierarchies in transnational identity narratives. Yet her ultimate choice reveals a counter-story – an alternative model of diasporic subjectivity embedded in subtle stewardship and enduring legacy, not cosmopolitan detachment.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the concept of Third Space as articulated by Homi Bhabha, this study unveils that the characters in *The Namesake* – especially Gogol- explore hybrid identities between Indian and American cultures. Bhabha’s theory reveals how identity formation arises from the dynamic interplay of cultural negotiation and hybridity, deconstructing the Orientalist gaze. Gogol’s cultural fluidity, discomfort with his name and journey of self-discovery explore the intricate tapestry of psychological landscapes shaped by diasporic experience, which emphasize transcultural identity.

Building on this, Stuart Hall’s dynamic model of cultural identity formation serves as a prism through which we can examine Gogol’s identity development. Hall’s poststructuralist approach disavows the categorical rigidity of identity and highlights the socio-historical nuances of identity formation. Gogol’s shifting identification from abandoning his Bengali heritage to embracing them after his father’s death- demonstrates Hall’s statement that identity is constructed through the interwoven tapestry of personal history, lived experience and the stories we tell ourselves and others. As depicted by Lahiri, the fabric of diasporic identity is woven with threads beyond assimilation and return.

To further elevate the discourse, Gayatri Spivak’s theory of the subaltern explores the intricacies of individual identity in *The Namesake* by bringing to the fore the plight of these voices and subjectivities that are marginalized within the veins of diasporic literature. The novel’s critical spotlight is firmly fixed on Gogol and how he negotiates his identity, Spivak’s theory of the subaltern unveils the intricate web of marginalization encountered by characters like Ashima Ganguli. Her experience is marked by a confluence of cultural and

gendered inequalities. She occupies a marginally peripheral position – first, as a Bengali woman in a foreign land, and second, as someone unuttered, whose story remains shrouded in obscurity.

Spivak's analysis suggest that the subaltern, particularly those marginalized women are often barred from the public square where identity is constructed and validated. In this regard, Ashima lacks the same cultural agency as Gogol, whose journey serves as a striking demonstration of identity's articulation in a world shaped by globalization. Her identity transformation emerges from tenacity and the assertion of self-determination.

- "For being a foreigner....is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts."- *The Namesake*

This quote reflects how Ashima preserves her self-respect by navigating the complexities of cultural blending. In this Spivakian light, Ashima's narrative rediscovers the cultural heart of diasporic groups, though they frequently exist at the periphery of narrative focus.

Thus, Spivak's framework not only unveils the hidden contours of gendered subjugation and unacknowledged marginalization but also provides an imperative moral exhortation, that the postcolonial identity formation in literature must heed the voices of the marginalized- to those whose narratives are often understated but whose impact are equally transformative. In *The Namesake*, it is Ashima, not Gogol who subtly models a post-national self that refrains from complete integration and nostalgic return, personifying a transnational experience.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri sketches the complications of postcolonial immigrant identities sculpted by global impact and cross-cultural intersections. As observed in the novel, Gogol's identity is not monolith, it is molded by both Indian and American influences. Regardless, of his parents' endeavors to perpetuate Bengali traditions, their children are captivated by Western culture. Postcolonial identity in the 21st century is dynamic and transnational. While globalization facilitates self-redefinition it also generates conflicts with belonging.

Also, contemporary research compares *The Namesake*, with other diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie or Bharati Mukherjee foregrounding postcolonial identity and dilemma rather than socio-economic critique. Future research can examine how intersectional factors like race, class and religion form diasporic identities in a global world. It can also explore how Lahiri's portrayal of class contrasts with other South Asian immigrant narrative. This will further elucidate on how globalization transforms identity beyond cultural amalgamations alone.

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