

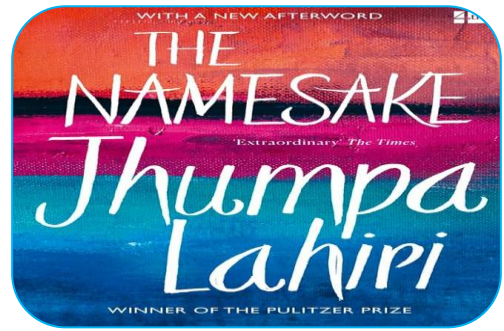


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**EFFECTS OF DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS ON PROBLEMATIC OF FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*****Kashish****NET [2023] and GATE [2024] Qualified,  
Department of English****ABSTRACT**

Displaced subjectivities that are resultant of a migratory consciousness forms the major corpus of Lahiri's fiction, her representation of characters with fragmented selves who are constantly grappling with several facets of their identities stands in tandem with Stuart Hall's definition of identities as not "unified," rather "increasingly fragmented and fractured". Lahiri's fiction transcends narrow nationalism, in favour of an "ethno-global" subjectivity as suggested by Ketu Katrak's concept of "ethno- global", where a celebration of an ethnic heritage mingles with universal humanism through an eloquent and sophisticated portrayal of ordinary people, struggling with 'traditions' all the while exploring a space for themselves in order to perform their subjectivities. A renunciation of old definitions of 'home' as a safe space is reflected in *The Namesake* thus suggesting that when one's native home falls short of one's aspirations, new bonds could always be formulated. Thus her characters are free to engage with the fluid nature of identities, by accepting both the native and the foreign. However such acceptance is gained through experiences that define and redefine the individuals' sense of self enabling them to venture into realms of no-boundaries and hence turning them into wandering nomads whose exilic sense informs their sense of liberation.



Lahiri creates exilic characters and marks their journey to discover their true selves in places not inhabited by them before, therefore, the idea of a 'third space' holds vital significance in her works. Homi Bhabha's, "The Location of Culture" and Stuart Hall's 'Culture, Identity and Diaspora' where the idea of a third space along with Benedict's notions of "nationalism" and "nation-ness" as "cultural artifacts of a particular kind" are applied to Lahiri's fiction in order to discover the flowing nature of identity in her fiction. This essay attempts to examine the effects of a diasporic consciousness on problematic of familial relations which in turn lead to individuals' acceptance of their hybrid identities.

**KEYWORDS:** *identity, subjectivity, exile, experience, space.***INTRODUCTION**

When in the year 2000, Jhumpa Lahiri claimed the Pulitzer Prize several identities claimed her in return, she came to be known as an Asian American/ Indian American/ South Asian American/ Anglo Indian/ Diasporic/Immigrant writer. Criticism on Lahiri splurged on either ends of the spectrum with critics like David Lynn discrediting the post-colonial labeling of her work and others arguing for opposite effect, Lahiri however simply states in her essay, 'Intimate Alienation', "the fact that I am described in two ways or twenty is of no consequence; as it turns out, each of those labels is accurate"

[Lahiri 2]. Therefore being elusive in her response she accepts without dismissing the 'perplexing bicultural universe' that she and most of her characters inhabit [which account for their diasporic subjectivities]. However the self-conscious evocation of the classic realist writers in her debut novel in the form of an epigraph taken from Nikolai Gogol's *Overcoat* presents her willingness to opt for a different option for the canonization of her work, one that is neither expected out of her nor imposed upon her. In the same vein she carves out new spaces for characters in her fiction, so as to formulate a "kind of strange recognition: a connection to something with which you think you have zero in common, but at the same time, something binds you to that thing in a profound way". [J. Leyda, 15]. In agreement with Stuart Hall's definition of identities as not "unified," rather "increasingly fragmented and fractured", Lahiri presents characters with fragmented selves and offers them enough means to perform their own subjectivity in places of their own choosing, this move away from the familiar comes along with consequences inflicted on the conventional model of the family structure and hence, this essay attempts to examine the effects of a diasporic consciousness on problematic of familial relations.

After a visit to Calcutta the Ganguli's feel "in transit, still disconnected from their lives, bound up in an alternate schedule disconcerted by space, by the uncompromising silence that surrounds them" [Lahiri 87]. It's a feeling that captures the split in the consciousness of displaced subjects even while the displacement is caused by voluntary migration as is the case with Ashoke Ganguli. Friedman suggests in "Mappings" that among other reasons for a voluntary migration an individual often disseminates with a fixed motive of looking for identity outside of their familiar natal world and thus Ashoke's move away from India after the fatal incident of the train accident is a conscious attempt on his part to go away "as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died" [Lahiri 20]. The fact of his life being saved by his copy of Gogol's story the *Overcoat* establishes the story's function as that of a self-reflexive allegorical text for *The Namesake*, thus, like Akakiy, Ashoke 'dons a new overcoat' by creating a new identity for himself as Akakiy did by buying a new overcoat. Eventually though the new identity turns to be a source of displeasure in Akakiy's seemingly peaceful life and the story ends in ambiguity, consequently Ashoke is pained by his several identities for he is not able to assimilate the American professional with the Indian native, these identities for the rest of his life remain sequential instead of being simultaneous, he faces lack of continuity as a result and a split self.

Another lack that plagues Ashoke is that of vocabulary, unlike Ashima who refuses to forgo India, voices her pain and has come to an understanding of being a migrant as that of 'constant pregnancy' therefore mourns her losses by constantly examining the void created by the split that migration causes Ashoke on the other hand only ignores them and while doing so unwittingly passes 'racial melancholia' onto his first born. David Eng and Shinhee Han in their essay "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia", explain 'racial melancholia' as a "sense of inherited loss that is also ungrieveable" making it not a matter of "individual disposition rather a social structure" [Eng and Han 63]. Lahiri captures the sociological and psychological profile of two generations of Indian immigrants whose lack of access to "cultural citizenship" adds to the feeling of loss along with the guilt of leaving the homeland that permeates the immigrant's consciousness, "the losses suffered by the first generation are not resolved and mourned in the process of assimilation [...] the melancholia that ensues from this condition can be transferred to the second generation" [Eng and Han 63-64]. Gogol thus becomes a victim of this cultural and emotional off-loading when Ashoke instead of resolving his losses initially ignores and eventually accepts them by learning to live with them. Therefore when the word 'Ganguli' on their mailbox is dismantled and converted to gangrene, Gogol's "ears burn at the sight", and he rushes to his father feeling confident of the sense of insult that would entrap him but Ashoke remains unaffected, he dismisses the matter by telling Gogol, "it's only boys having fun" [Lahiri 68]. The difference between reactions of the two generations when confronted with racial slurs is emblematic of the different sense of ideals they associate with identity and belonging.

The letter containing Gogol's name is lost in transit, somewhere between India and America symbolizing the loss of Gogol's link with his parents' homeland and the lack of connection with the adopted home of his parents. Gogol's status as a second generation immigrant makes him even more displaced than his parents for he is racially different from Americans, a trait he shares with his parents

but unlike them he is culturally, linguistically and geographically different from Indians. The split in his consciousness is therefore different from that of his parents because he unlike them concurrently inhabits multiple spaces of belonging. Gogol however for the better part of his life won't be able to bridge, accept or understand the ambivalence of identities that claim him and as a result he remains an alienated being, 'a foreigner within himself' as suggested by Julia Kristeva. This self alienation is evident in the scene when he has to read the *Overcoat* as a class project in high school, "to read the story, he believes, would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow. Still, listening to his classmates complain, he feels perversely responsible, as if his own work were being attacked" [Lahiri 92]. Gogol, much like Akakiy is a passive being, his rice ceremony where he refuses to choose the object that would foretell his future and instead cries in the face of destiny foreshadows his later attitude towards life where he would not choose to accept rather reject the potential elements of his self including his name, his initial rejection of Nikhil- as a kid- in favour of Gogol is a rejection of the ways he'd have to adapt into outside of his home, he prefers the comfort of his surroundings and therefore keeps on rejecting the elements of alteration which require him to adjust and adapt. As an adult he realises this tendency on seeing Moushumi in Paris however still being characteristically passive and thus Lahiri's omniscient narrator concludes that, "here Moushumi had reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt...He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do" [Lahiri 233]. Hence Gogol fails to thread the link that Ashoke forges with Akakiy by actively seeking a new identity, on the contrary he engages with a passive rejection of his fragmented sense of self instead of accepting the fragments like Sonia, on whom the second generation baggage never weighs quite as heavily as her brother for as her name suggests, she is 'a citizen of the world' and having assorted and assembled various parts of her being into a fluid identity has adapted to her diasporic consciousness with relative ease.

Gogol's inherent passivity necessitates his knack for rejection. Rejecting his name in an attempt to assimilate and align with American culture is the first step in the series of events he'll take to shift from the Indian part of his identity without ever succeeding for "it troubles him, making him feel that he's not their child when his parents refer to him as Nikhil" [Lahiri 106], even though this is what he has precisely asked them to do. Thus Gogol will continue uncomfortably to grapple with various elements of his personality until he meets Maxine for that's when he manages to negate the Indian in him for the longest along with the negation of his family and cultural background. As Judith Ceaser argues that relationships provide him with possible identities which he passively accepts, however this passive acceptance of identities is not only a function of Gogol's passive personality- and hence not limited to him but extends to Moushumi as well whose sense of self like Gogol is created through the people she dates- rather a reflexive of the ways consumerist culture permeates the American ways of living and identity formulation, where an individual's sense of self is based on what they consume. Therefore being with Maxine provides him with a sense of being American which he had always sought for himself, donning of a new identity, an American one at that, on the expense of his familial ties and cultural background invites Gogol in the world of rich and affluent much like Akakiy's entry in the prosperous Petersburg society after donning of a new overcoat, however this relative attainment of an American identity is feeble and transitory, immediate questioning of his American identity by a guest of Maxine's parents is evident of this fact which is accentuated when Ashoke dies, for then Gogol switches his rejection to Maxine and her ways of being in order to reconcile with his family and Moushumi is an unconscious attempt on his part to connect with identity, this time that of his childhood, the one that he rejected earlier.

Therefore, Moushumi for Gogol represents acceptance of his cultural background which he seeks after the death of his father so even the consummation of their marriage feels like he performed a duty and thus the omniscient narrator says, "though he desires her as much as ever, he is relieved when they are through, lying naked side by side, knowing that nothing else is expected of them, that finally they can relax" [Lahiri 226]. For Moushumi, Gogol serves as a rebound being devastated after her 'pre nuptial disaster', a relationship that defined her sense of self so much so that she returned from Paris, she seeks solace in the familiarity that Gogol could provide being a second generation Bengali himself,

although unironically in the end this same sense of familiarity pushes her towards Dimitri, an older ex-lover because Moushumi has always aspired to maintain an identity of her own, and therefore she immersed herself in a new language and culture, one which is neither Indian nor American and hence she approaches it “without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind”. Thus Moushumi chooses for herself what Homi Bhabha calls a ‘third space’ that gives priority neither to the motherland nor to the residing country. It holds significance in Lahiri’s worldview to have a space away from the known spaces, therefore she writes, “I translate [...] to create and illuminate a nonexistent world. Fiction is the foreign land of my choosing, the place where I strive to convey and preserve the meaningful”, [‘Jhumpa on Jhumpa’ – “I translate therefore I am”]. Thus exile as a form of liberation is explored through wandering ‘nomadism’ in Lahiri’s fiction in case of Moushumi, although it lead to adultery and the subsequent breaking of the familial ecosystem yet it liberated both Moushumi and Gogol respectively, as suggested by Bhabha “Lahiri in her fiction, depicts flexibility as an apposite ground for productive changes which are mostly observed in the life of those characters that do not stick to old beliefs and traditions; are active in initiating changes, and venture going through inexperienced experiences to improve their life conditions” [Bhabha 231], whereas for Gogol only after his marriage ends and his mother decides to sell their childhood home, a way for liberation seeps in as he for the first time in his life actively claims his self via reading Nikolai Gogol’s *Overcoat*, thus Lynn says, “Gogol-educated, scarred, tested-is now ready to read. He has become a fully realized character, much like Rastignac shaking his fist at mighty Paris at the end of Pere Goriot” [Lynn 45], hence, against the implied labeling Lahiri has managed to forge her intended connection with the realist writers along with allowing new spaces in her narrative for her characters.

Gogol thus finally has enough arrows in the terms of experiences he has gained through the forty years of his life that an acceptance of a merger of an identity that is fractured and fluid is possible. So the novel ends with Ashoke having died in the land of his choosing, Ashima living without borders being a part of both India and America, Sonia solidifying her citizenship of the world by marrying a Japanese boy, Moushumi looking for liberation in Paris and Gogol finally making a move to accept the fragments of his identity by overcoming his passivity and thus the novel ends in an open ended tone with reference to Gogol because, “for now, he starts to read” [Lahiri 291].

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