ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences
Volume 5, Issue 3, 2026 ISSN-L (Online): 3006-6638

Identity Crisis and Cultural Displacement in The Namesake

Rida Mushtaq
ridamushtaq982@gmail.com
M.Phil. Scholar, University of Central Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Rida Mushtaq ridamushtaq982@gmail.com

Received: 25-02-2026 **Revised:** 16-03-2026 **Accepted**: 22-03-2026 **Published:** 30-03-2026

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the theme of identity crisis and cultural displacement in the book, The Namesake (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri by using the critical framework of the theory of diaspora by analyzing the dynamics between migration, belonging and cultural identity interrelations. The research adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach, and explores how Lahiri uses the relocation of the Ganguli family in Calcutta to the US to inform about psychological, emotional and cultural aspects of immigrant life. The analysis presupposes the relevance of the name Gogol Ganguli as a multifaceted signifier of dislocation, estrangement, and hybrid subjectivity, and looks at the first-generational nostalgia of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, the clash between permanence and assimilation, and the importance of food and domestic rituals as signs of cultural continuity. The paper uses the ideas and theories of Stuart Hall conceptualization of cultural identity, theory of the third space by Homi K. Bhabha and other postcolonial and diaspora studies frameworks in the argument that Lahiri reflects on the diasporic identity or state as a fluid, changing and never static or transformative constructions of memory, place, naming practices and intergenerational inheritance. The results indicate that The Namesake expresses the existence of a liminal space between cultures where characters resist, adjust and eventually reconstruct selfhood through continual cultural negotiation. The present research is an addition to the academic discourse on South Asian American diaspora fiction and identity formation due to postcolonialism.

Keywords: *Cultural displacement, identity crisis, diaspora theory, naming, Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake, belonging, cultural identity, immigration.*

INTRODUCTION

Migration experience has been the centerpiece of the state of humanity since ancient times, but the psychological, emotional, and cultural effects of this phenomenon are one of the most complicated questions of modern literary and cultural research. The process of boundary or national and cultural crossings, as experienced by immigrants and their descendants, begins a radical renegotiation of selfhood, belonging and identity, a process both never linear and endlessly becoming to evolve. The Namesake (2003) by the widely acclaimed as one of the most essential novels since, unfortunately enough, there is no single definitive novel within the literary tradition of South Asian-Americans, Jhumpa Lahiri tells a story of thorough depth of this process, of the migration of the Ganguli family, Bengali immigrants who move to the approach to Calcutta and to the Massachusetts suburbs. The novel follows the journey of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, the first-generation immigrants, who wrestle with homesickness, cultural alienation, and the pressure to maintain tradition in a foreign land, and their American born son Gogol, who struggles with his unusual name becoming the main metaphor of dislocation, hybridity, and the search of self in the foreign land (Pradhani, 2025), (Diasporic Elements in Jhumpa Lahiri's, 2019).

The importance of The Namesake is not just in its delicate presentation of the immigrant condition but the subtle expression of the contradictions which occur when people cannot fit in the two cultural realities. Migration, according to the work of diaspora scholars, is a process that, according to them, never involves simple physical movement; it is a process of constant resistance to identity, memory,

and belonging resonating through generations (Saxena, 2026). The reconstruction of the first generation is more likely to be in the form of nostalgia the desire to the homeland, which can be soothing and paralysing, at the same time. The difficulty of the second generation, who have also been born into the host culture but still heirs of the cultural legacy of their parents, is different: they have to find a way of living in what has been referred to as a state of in betweenness as they are equally a part of both cultures but molded in an indelible manner by each (Morve et al., 2024), (Fareeha et al., 2026). Lahiri documents these dynamics with unmatched nuance through the close quarters of home environments, such as kitchens, living rooms, naming ceremonies, where the drama of cultural negotiation proceeds to take shape (Nutul, 2026).

These aspects of the novel are explored systematically by applying the theoretical knowledge of the disaporation theory to The Namesake in this paper with the help of Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, and other postcolonial feminist authors. The following research questions shape the study: How does Lahiri reflect the identity crisis on both sides of the immigrants, first- and second-generation immigrants? How does the novel use the concept of naming as a symbol of cultural displacement? What does food, domestic rituals and everyday practices do to serve as areas of cultural preservation and transformation? So what is Lahiri saying about the in-betweenness of Indian and American identity?

This paper has put forward a thesis that The Namesake has demonstrated the diasporic identity as a sense of fluidity, contestedness and negotiation instead of a state or a binary relationship. With the help of the symbolism of the name of Gogol, remembrance rituals of Ashoke and Ashima, as well as generational conflicts which fuel the storyline, Lahiri shows that the experience of immigration is defined by a constant alternation between the rooted-ness and displacement, tradition and modernity, heritage and assimilation. The end result of these tensions, which the novel proposes is that identity in the diaspora is the act of creating rather than resolving and thus the process is usually creative as well as painful as it entails inhabiting the otherness between these tensions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overall, the academic discussion of The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri has grown significantly since the release of the book, spawning a highly lucrative pool of criticism that intersects the discourse of diaspora, migration, cultural identity, naming, nostalgia and hybridity. In an attempt to trace the intellectual landscape within which the given study is placed, the section examines the existing literature on a thematic basis, with the sources being reviewed based on the claims and theoretical argument they make, as opposed to an author, in order to identify the intellectual landscape of the present study.

Migration, Belonging, and Cultural Identity in Diaspora Fiction

One of the major concerns of the studies about The Namesake is the correlation between immigration and cultural identity. As it has been argued in many studies, the novel by Lahiri represents the complete manifestation of such a process as immigration that causes a radical change to the identity and forces the immigrants to define their identities relative to both their native land and to the new society they find themselves in. The story of the Ganguli family, Calcutta to Massachusetts, is a case study representative of this process, showing the intricacies of cultural assimilation, generational warfare, and eternal struggles on belonging that characterize the diasporic condition (Pradhani, 2025), (Patel, 2026). Migration, as various researchers have highlighted, does not occur as a single act but is an ongoing process of creating identities, memories, and belonging anew, which creates alienation and fragmentation of identity and offers fresh possibilities of making hybrid identities (Saxena, 2026), (Jadhav, 2026).

Along a similarly fruitful line has been the question of belonging--and its opposite. The characters in The Namesake have been shown through scholarship to be in a state of (not)belongingness and (not)betweenness, where they never fully belong to either the culture of their home nor to the culture of their descent, making this state fully acceptable to them (Morve et al., 2024). Such condition is not

limited to the first generation but spreads across the generational boundaries with the second generation having its own peculiar manifestation of displacement. The narratives of two generations, India to America, create a continuous feeling of otherness in a transnational context, where the diasporic subjects are negotiating the culture, memory, dual identity, and the notion of a home (Morve et al., 2024), (Ghodke and Patil, 2026). The idea that diasporic identity is fluid and transforming as opposed to fixed - influenced by memory, migration, and family - has been widely backed by the academic community, where scholars contend that the experiences of the Ganguli family are representative of themes of homesickness, isolation, displacement, and continued struggles of self-identification (Fareeha et al., 2026), (Qazi, 2022).

As it has been used to describe the fiction created by Lahiri, diaspora theory conceptualizes the immigrant experience in general as a negotiated belonging, but not determined exile. Lahiri reimagines the concept of diaspora as a subjective state of loss as a relational mode of belonging constructed in relation to domestic spaces, intergenerational memory, naming practices, and emotional inheritance (Nutul, 2026). This framing is noteworthy as it situates diasporic change in the small, mundane contexts of life and not in such open political or sociological domains. This connotes that identity within the diaspora is never static, but rather never ceasing to become and be re-created with each and every quotidian cooking, naming, remembering and relating with other people across cultural borders (Nutul, 2026), (Sowmya, 2026).

Naming, Otherness, and the Semiotics of Displacement

The metaphorical meaning of naming in The Namesake has received what may be the most enduring scholarly interest. The strange name of Gogol Ganguli, named after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol, to whom his father, Ashoke feels an indistinct yet strong connection, serves to ask as the metaphor of cultural displacement, identity crisis and the hectic process of being oneself in the diaspora. Scholarship has continually shown how names in The Namesake are not simple labels but complex identifiers of gender, religion, ethnicity, race, and the state of being a hybrid, and how the sociocultural processes of the change of names are the surfaces of a complex interface between belonging and alienation (Singh, 2026). Gogol is neither American, nor Indian, and it is located in an intermediate linguistic realm that reflects his personal cultural ambiguity, making him always out of place (Marques, 2012), (Chifane, 2015).

A number of studies scrutinized naming as a dynamic conflict, compromise, and transformation locality within the diasporic situations. The fact that Gogol is uncomfortable with his pet name is an indication of the cultural baggage since names represent the broken boundaries between the past and present, motherland and foreign land (Ali & Mustafa, 2026). Renaming, when Gogol is renamed legally to Nikhil, has been seen as an effort to self-brand and cultural displacement, an effort to eradicate the stranges of their otherness and fit in the mainstream of the American culture (Marques, 2012). But this renaming itself does not solve the identity crisis behind, instead, it creates new levels of complexity as Gogol/Nikhil must struggle against the distance between the self he makes known to the world and the self he harbors. Naming in the given reading provides a leading metaphor of dislocation, as the name of Gogol represents the meaningless identity between the American and Indian culture (Chifane, 2015). This symbolism is further elaborated through the intertextual relations to the novel The Overcoat, by which Noddy Gogol is identified as experiencing an identity crisis, with the broader literary context's tradition of alienation and dispossession, as well as the need to seek recognition (Chifane, 2015).

The aspect of generational aspect of naming practices has also been addressed by the scholarship. The fact that Ashoke and Ashima name their child Gogol reflects the ambivalence of intercultural negotiation fought out by the first generations of immigrants immigrating to America, who have to choose between the Bengali traditions of naming their children (a distinction between a pet name and a good name) and the American demands of facing certain administrative officers (Sowmya, 2026), (Alzuhairi, 2024). The changing meaning of the name Gogol, in turn, can be taken as an indicator of his changing relations with his ethnicity, family, and himself (Alzuhairi, 2024), (Parveen et al., 2026).

Nostalgia, Trauma, and First-Generation Diasporic Experience

One of the important literatures of critical analysis focuses on the emotional impact and psychological burden of migration on first generation immigrants and especially with regard to the expression of nostalgia and trauma. Research has contended that physical dislocation and cultural alienation give rise to fragmented identities among the Ganguli family with first-generation immigrants such as Ashima having acute loneliness and issues adapting to the social and cultural milieu of the United States (Tarun & Sultan, 2026). In this regard, nostalgia functioning as a two sided mechanism could be seen as offering fans of the idea emotional solace: on the one hand preserving a sense of closeness with the motherland, but, on the other, slowing down their adaptation to the host culture due to their attachment to an idyllic past that they can never go back to (Tarun & Sultan, 2026), (Qazi, 2022).

The experience of Ashima has received a special scholarly interest as representative of the gendering aspects of displacement in the diasporic movement. Her experiences of cultural displacement and the emotional trauma of the expatriate woman, who has to find a way of negotiating her sense of identity in the lack of extended family systems and cultural institutions that provided her sustenance in India, have been pointed out in the literature (Sunil and Duresh, 2022), (Rajeswari, 2026). In turn, Ashoke could be described as more effective at negotiating the pressures of transculturation as she makes her career in America despite a more internalized and private manner of cultural preservation (Sunil and Duresh, 2022). However, the two characters are both troubled by the fact that they have been unable to pass their culture to the new generation in full and complete, a truth that is contextualized according to the scholarship as one of the major fears of the first-generation diasporic experience (Marques, 2012), (Narasimha, 2026).

The contribution that memory has in keeping alive diasporic consciousness has received a lot of coverage as well. The events of Ashoke and Ashima and Lahiri by his story style underline how the remembrance of the past, family structure, and the heritage of the culture can really matter in creating the immigrant experience (Narasimha, 2026). The memory is seen as mediating between the home and the foreign country, however, it is a precarious and selective mediator, one that can be idealized and distorted. According to the scholarship, Lahiri depicts the sense of nostalgia not as a mere nostalgia about home but rather as a complex, ambivalent emotion which constructs the possibilities of identity formation in the diaspora and limits them (Tarun & Sultan, 2026), (Saxena, 2026).

Hybridity, Third Space, and Intergenerational Conflict

The theoretical ideas of hybridity and the third space, as inspired by Homi K. Bhabha are widely utilized to apply to The Namesake in the critical literature. In multiple works, it has been contended that the plight of Gogol Ganguli being confused over his name and cultural roots is the work of a dynamic, negotiated, and constantly negotiated diasporic identity that can not be simplified to Indian and American (Wulandari et al., 2025). Using the concept of the third space developed by Bhabha and the perspectives on cultural identity developed by Stuart Hall, these analyses demonstrate that Gogol moves between two cultures, adapting to them, conflicting with them, and finally self-accepting himself, and hybrid identity formation is not a process of fragmentation, but rather a way to resist cultural displacement (Wulandari et al., 2025), (Ullah et al., 2025).

The idea of the third space has been particularly fruitful as a learning theory of the intergenerational aspect of identity in The Namesake. The literature shows that the characters negotiate bicultural lives in the "third space" instead of simple fragmentation of identity, which resists use tactics such as subtle assimilation, searching self-establishment and longing to reaffirm inner culture (Ullah et al., 2025). The conflict between the first-generation immigrants of Bengali descent Ashoke and Ashima, who want to hold onto their cultural legacy, and their second-generation American son Gogol, who wants to be independent and assimilate, is one of the main driving forces behind the novel (Alzuhairi, 2024), (Barman, 2026). Cultural reconciliation, as the claims of some scholars suggest, is not a destination, but

a process of constant negotiation and change, and every generation has to establish its own rapport to tradition and modernity (Alzuhairi, 2024), (Kaur, 2017).

The psychological aspects to this intergenerational conflict are also debated in the literature. The fear of loss of cultural heritage, the need to belong and the subsequent anxiety and depression that the characters endure have been studied (Hossain, 2026). The anxiety of collective memory and assimilation, tradition and modernity, and individual desire and familial expectation experienced by Gogol depict how globalization restructures the concept of identity, belonging and self-definition to people residing in the in-betweenness of the liminal state (Hossain, 2026). In such a sense, the diaspora is a transnational place in which scars of traumatic and nostalgic memories form personal and group identities (Tarun & Sultan, 2026).

METHOD

This paper uses a textual analysis method where data analysis is done in a qualitative manner to analyze identity crisis and cultural displacement based on the work of The Namesake (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri. A qualitative textual analysis is a longstanding research method in literary and cultural studies where a literary text is closely, systematically read to recognize, decipher, and theorize, its thematic, symbolic and structural aspects. This approach is specifically fitting to the current research since it allows the researcher to pay attention to the subtle, sometimes hidden ways in which Lahiri is depicting the diasporic experience by the use of the narrative technique, characterization, symbolism, and the utilization of repetitive motifs.

The greatest reading resource is the whole novel The Namesake. The following thematic axes are examined (all of which are directly related to a central dimension of identity crisis and cultural displacement as hypothesized in the literature on the subject of diaspora): (a) symbolism of Gogol name as a symbol of displacement and alienation; (b) first-generation nostalgia and practices of cultural preservation by both Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli; (c) the path of Dejection towards ultimate acceptance of his cultural backgrounds by Gogol; (d) the cultural clash between Indian and American identities across the generations; (e) the importance of food and household practices as a symbol of culture; and (f) how some specific clashes of culture can also be represented by Lahiri.

The analysis is informed by the theoretical framework which is based on the theory of diaspora and the theory of postcolonial studies. The main aspects of this scheme are the conceptualization of cultural identity as a becoming process, not an essence, by Stuart Hall, the theory of the third space of hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha, and more general theoretical work of researchers operating in the domains of diaspora studies, transnationalism, and postcolonial literary criticism. These are the theoretical instruments that allow considering the textual material within the framework of the broader intellectual discourse on the theme of migration, belonging and cultural identity, allowing the researcher to place the story of Lahiri into the focus.

The analytical process rested on several close readings of the primary text, as a result of which sections of it concerned each thematic axis were identified, coded, and laid out. These excerpts were then viewed according to the theoretical framework, and how the strategies of narration used by Lahiri, such as the naming technique, the home setting, the temporal flow of the narration, and free indirect discourse, are sources of the diasporic identity of the novel. The interpretation has also been enlightened by a thorough reading of secondary academic materials that offered both contextual and interpretative tools in the interpretation of the original text. More than 120 academic papers, book chapters and dissertations that have dealt with The Namesake and diaspora theory have been consulted so as to make sure that the current analysis is placed within and contributes to the current state of literature.

The shortcomings of this methodology ought to be noted. Qualitative textual analysis is fundamentally reflective and results obtained are influenced by theoretical commitments and reading practices of the researcher. Although the analysis is conducted rigorously and with a systematic approach toward

looking at the textual evidence, the analysis does not pretend to provide a particular or comprehensive textual reading of the novel. Instead, it aims to add one of the sound-minded interpretations in the continuing academic discourse of the work of Lahiri and the literary expression of the diasporic experience.

FINDINGS

The results of the textual analysis will be described in this section and they will be defined by the six thematic axes which have been identified in the method section. The subsections present the results of textual evidence and interpretation of the same taking into account both primary textual analysis and secondary history and literature analysis.

Gogol's Name as a Symbol of Displacement and Alienation

The most noticeable and the most widely regarded symbol in The Namesake is the name of the protagonist. Gogol Ganguli is a character after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol; whose short story collection saved Ashoke in a disastrous rail accident in India. It is neither Indian nor American; it does not belong to a certain cultural tradition that Gogol could call his own. This linguistic deviation turns out to be the main metaphor of the novel on the state of the cultural displacement, the multifaceted history of migration and trauma and survival of the family in the survival and the inability of cultural translation are encoded in one signifier.

The scholarship nomenclature always recognizes the name of Gogol as a complex label that not only refers to a person but also to the state of being hybrid itself (Singh, 2026). The sociocultural factors that resulted in the naming of Gogol, the bureaucratic necessity to name the patient in the hospital, the inability of the letter sent by the grandmother of Ashima to arrive in time and the personal connotation of the name by Ashoke based on his close encounter with death are what emerged out of the contingent, improvisational nature of forming identity in the diaspora. The name was to be a kind of temporary name, a pet name according to the Bengali culture, which would be replaced subsequently by an official good name. But it is here to stay, and Gogol is locked in to the identity in which he is arbitrary and imposed. As the studies have mentioned, the naming in the novel serves a role of primary metaphor of dislocation, where the name of the character Gogol itself may be seen in reference to the world in between (Marques, 2012), (Chifane, 2015).

The onset of identity crisis is revealed when Gogol becomes increasingly aware of the weirdness of his name, how embarrassing it is when teachers pronounce it incorrectly, how uncomfortable it is when his classmates express interest in how he got his name. The name turns into a badge of shame, an outward sign of his nonconformity to the American mainstream. Several authors have pointed out that Gogol, who feels uneasy about his pet name, is an echo of the heavier weight of cultural baggage since names in diasporic conditions trace the broken lines between the Old World and the New one, between home and foreign land (Ali and Mustafa, 2026). The name is not merely inconvenient, it is in fact, existentially disturbing in that it symbolizes a self that is not a chosen aspect and cannot be fully comprehended by Gogol. He is called after an author he never read, and of a nation where he has no relation except that of the father, whose motives are obscure to him throughout the major part of the novel.

There are other layers of meanings connected with the intertextual meaning of the name. Relationship to The Overcoat by Nikolai Gogol where a lowly clerk is defined and ultimately destroyed by a piece of clothing echoes the same with Gogol Ganguli as he is defined by an externally imposed identity marker. Research has helped us to understand how these intertextual networks define tragic paternal representations and explain displacement, hybridity and self-seeking, making the personal crisis of Gogol part of a larger literary tradition of alienation and displacement (Chifane, 2015). The word therefore works, at the same time on several levels, on one hand, as a personal tribute to the fact that Ashoke is still alive, on the other, as a cultural aberration both in the Indian and in the American

environment, and on the third, as a literary citation, prefiguring the inability of the protagonist to find his own identity and place.

When Gogol formally adopts his new name, Nikhil, when he enters college, he performs what scholars have believed as an endeavour into self-fashioning and a bending of cultures (Marques, 2012). The name "Nikhil" is a good Bengali name but Gogol uses it not to promote their Indian identity but to fit in the American social structure- to be a person with no mysterious name. The renaming however does not fix his identity crisis. Instead, it is a kind of new fragmentation where Gogol/Nikhil has to find his way through the hole between the image of the person he portrays to the outside world and the one he carries inside. A name, Gogol, lives on in the use of his family, in his memories, in the inner chambers of his mind. The doublespeak hence turns into a metaphorical representation of the dual consciousness of the diasporic subject, who is a resident of many identities without necessarily being enclosed in a single one (Parveen et al., 2026), (Sharmin, 2011).

Ashoke and Ashima: First-Generation Nostalgia and Cultural Preservation

The Ashoke/Ashima Ganguli pair experiences are the longest ongoing investigation of first-generation immigrant identity and the emotional, emotional cost of cultural displacement. The two characters are dislodged of the rich cultural systems of Calcutta, its extended family structures, its rituals, its sense of textures, and are re-planted in the strange land of suburban Massachusetts, where they have to reinvent themselves, starting with the basest of beginnings. Although different in the way that such responses are gendered and temperament-based, they are all characterized by a common theme of nostalgia, cultural continuity and silent pain of being torn between two worlds.

The experience of Ashima has received much comment as being representative of the gendered aspects of diasporic displacement. When she arrives in America, she is faced with a deep-seated spatial, cultural and emotional isolation that is all at once. Far away, on her own, without her parents, her extended family, and the social world which provides her with a sense of her place, Ashima has to find her way in the world of an alien culture without some of the support structures she enjoyed in India. Empirical literature has emphasized her experience of cultural displacement, and how emotionally the expatriate woman experiences this situation, saying that the loneliness of Ashima is not only her but a systemic manifestation as the gendered dynamics that demand she stay at home despite being the one to denude the domestic sphere of cultural contents (Sunil and Duresh, 2022), (Rajeswari, 2026). The novel has attempted to express the alienation experienced by Ashima by the beginning scenes of the novel where she is trying to rekindle her taste and feel of Calcutta by adding Rice Krispies with peanuts and onions in her western style kitchen which resembles but not exactly the jhalmuri that she is unable to get in America.

The association of displacement with Ashoke is of another nature yet it is equally profound. In his profession, he has some success and acceptance that Ashima could not attain, which is a career as an engineer at a university and interaction with American co-workers and institutions. But there is an India to which his inner world is still bound, namely, the traumatic train accident that almost killed him, and which caused him to emigrate to India. The fact that he named his son after the author of the book that he was reading when the accident happened is a kind of personal posthumous memorial, a means of imprinting the most influential moment of his life on the future generation. A transculturation, as it has been named by scholars, is a compromise between professional and cultural preservation, but it is a compromise that is never stable and never finished (Sunil & Duresh, 2022), (Narasimha, 2026).

Nostalgia is a potent and ambivalent phenomenon that works in the novel. The memories of India sustain both Ashoke and Ashima and are the sources of the continuity and rootedness they cannot experience in the present within the American context. Nostalgia however serves as a sort of prison as well since it ties the characters back to an idealistic past that becomes less and less connected to the reality of the lives they are living in reality right before them. Studies have shown that nostalgia in The Namesake works as both an emotional coping tool and distressing experience, keeping characters

informed of their native land as it interferes with adapting to the new society (Tarun & Sultan, 2026). The fact that Ashima does not address her husband by his first name, insists on cooking in Bengali, pays a close attention to religious practices- all these measures are evidence of the need to save cultural identity, but also serve as a demarcation of the world she is ready to live in, limits her interaction with the American culture.

The attempts of the first generation at preserving their culture go beyond the domestic borders of the United States to the local community of Bengali people. Ashoke and Ashima are part of a web of Bengali families that meet during holidays, religious celebrations, and other social events, forming a diasporic state that serves as a substitute homeland. These meetings, taking Bengali foods, Bengali music, and Bengali language are an effort of reproducing the cultural environment of India in the host society. The scholarship however points out that there is never a taste of completeness and loss in these efforts since the diasporic community can never get to sense the richness and complexity of the homeland (Narasimha, 2026), (Fareeha et al., 2026). Memory is a linkage between the homeland and the host land, yet, a shaky one, which is easily prone to idealization and distortion.

Gogol's Rejection and Eventual Acceptance of Heritage

The path of rejection and the subsequent experience of acceptance of the cultural heritage in Gogol is the main direction of the story and the most complicated discussion of the formation of the second generation identity. Gogol is born in the United States and brought up in the suburbs of Massachusetts where he is surrounded by American culture: its music, food, social norm, etc., yet at the same time, he is exposed to the culture of his parents of Bengal descent. The clash between two cultural worlds creates in Gogol a profound sense of ambivalence that becomes most acute when it comes to his name, the way he relates to it, but also to his relationships with his family, his culture and with himself.

During his teenage and youthful life, Gogol makes efforts to turn his back on his Indian roots. Being ashamed of the accented English of his parents, their strange habits, and their insistence on keeping to the Bengali traditions which are so irrelevant to his life in America he is embarrassed by it all. The most radical manifestation of this renouncement is his change of legal name to Nikhil as he enters college, yet it is consistent with a more extended set of practices of cultural renunciation. Researchers have pointed out that the former generation (first) feel nostalgic and alienated; the latter generation (second) feel confused and ambivalent, and that the name Gogol is a root of tension between assimilation and cultural identity, and ultimately results in acceptance (Parveen et al., 2026). This dynamic has been further demonstrated in romantic relationships: his affair with Maxine Ratliff, one of the wealthy American women with a liberal family is his process of trying to become fully assimilated into the American mainstream, to occupy a position without striving to carry the burden of his parents ancestry.

But this assimilation project on Gogol is not sustainable in the end. The loss of Ashoke, the momentous moment of the second half of the novel, destroys the very American identity that Gogol has worked so hard to build and kills off the Indian heritage he spent his adult life in evading. When Ashoke dies Gogol realizes how much he loved his family and his culture and never broke. Following the death of his father, Gogol starts to also connect with his Bengali culture: he attends mourning rituals, he is reunited with his mother, he gets into a relationship with Moushumi Mazoomdar, another Bengali American. The name Gogol, which was a source of shame, turns into a source of meaning; an identity with his father, their family past, and the life story of surviving, which he fully comprehends following the death of his father, Ashoke (Narasimha, 2026), (Barman, 2026).

The ending of the novel gives a glimpse of an identity that is neither Indian nor American but a true hybrid- a mixture of the two cultures where Gogol has lived. The last scene is when Gogol finally picks up the volume of short stories of Nikolai Gogol which his father gave him many years ago, which serves as a symbol of his readiness to work with all the multifaceted sphere of his inheritance. It is not a reversion to the Bengali identity that his parents needed to maintain, it is not an extension of the American identity that he created on his own; it is new, it is a mixture of both, without reducing itself

to either one. Research has been cited that cultural reconciliation in The Namesake is a dynamic process involving negotiation and transformation, but it is not an endpoint, and the last gesture performed by Gogol reflects this idea (Alzuhairi, 2024), (Wulandari et al., 2025).

The Tension Between Indian and American Identities

The conflict between Indian and American identities is the very principle of structure of The Namesake that structures the plot of the novel, the characterization therein and the theme of it. This tension exists on various levels, including cultural, psychological, linguistic, and generational, and each of the members of the Ganguli family perceives it differently. In the case of the first generation, it appears as a never-ending sense of incompleteness: they are Indians in America, yet, due to their long period of time absent of the Indian country, they are, simultaneously, somehow American in India. In the second generation, the conflict is sterner; now they have to fight between two cultural systems and do not enjoy the advantage of a clearly established and well-grounded cultural identity that their parents carried with them to India.

This tension has infiltrated the novel and has been widely written about by the scholarship. Research has defined Gogol as perpetually entrapped in a binary identity between being an Indian or an American because of his birthplace on alien land which results in what is actually termed as an always-already crisis; a state of identity that is fractured as such, not by any specific occurrence but as a structural feature of the second-generation immigrant experience (Sharmin, 2011). This reading builds on the theory of cultural identity formulated by Stuart Hall where cultural identity as an event acts as an emergent process of becoming and not being, which implies that in the case of a diasporic subject, cultural identity is an ever-moving process: it is being practiced and reformulated in relation to the forces that shape it culturally (Sharmin, 2011), (Wulandari et al., 2025).

The conflict between the Indian identity and the American identity is reflected through the novel in a row of everyday details and domestic life. Ashoke and Ashima are trying to maintain their Indian identity and at the same time, they are adopting some of the American domestic rituals, i.e., celebrating Thanksgiving with Durga Puja, speaking Bengali language at home, conducting their working life in English and decorating their home with the objects of both cultures (Chifane, 2015). These trans-cultural practices can be seen as an example of cultural negotiation, of trying to occupy a space between these two worlds at the same time. However, they also bring friction especially to the parents of the children who view the cultural practices of their parents as backward, embarrassing and irrelevant.

The tension is also performed through the social representations made by the novel about the social space. The meetings of Bengali people that Ashoke and Ashima go to are viewed as cultural enclaves where they can enact and strengthen Indian identity. To Gogol and his sister Sonia though these meetings are not meant to be a source of belonging as an obligation. According to the scholarship on The Namesake, the novel reveals the two-realities of both the Indians and their descendants who journey through the worlds of home and new world life and seek answers to the questions of naming, nationality and how generations maneuver the waters of hybridism and cultural displacement (Ghodke and Patil, 2026). Implementing the cultural practices of their parents contrary to the ideas of their parents is not merely rebellious but rather becomes an expression of the second generation who are, in a real sense, rather uncertain as to their sense of belonging as well as their identity in a cultural environment that does not provide them with a ready to wear identity (Hossain, 2026), (Kaur, 2017).

It is important to note that Lahiri leaves this tension unresolved between the Indian or American identity. The novel opposes the assimilationist story where immigrants begin to lose their heritage as they grow increasingly American and the nativist story where cultural preservation is the only true native reaction to displacement. Rather, Lahiri describes a vision of identity that is hybrid in nature, formed by the continuous process of interaction between the two cultural traditions that cannot be completely separated or reconciled. The analysis in the paper shows that this vision is in tandem with the theoretical framework of the third space, where new cultural formations are formed out of the meeting of distinct

traditions, and are irreducible to either of their mother country roots (Ullah et al., 2025), (LAMICHE, n.d.).

Food and Domestic Rituals as Cultural Markers

The use of food and domestic rituals as a marker of cultural identity, a vehicle of nostalgia and an arena of intergenerational negotiation is one of the most unusual and importantly vital aspects of The Namesake. The cooking and eating of food acts across the novel as cultural preservation, communication and resistance, making the acts both intelligible in their material and sensual aspects, complex, an emotional reality of the diasporic existence.

Probably the most graphic and enduring emphasis of first-generation culture in the novel is its food preparation by Ashima. Her kitchen serves as a cultural production place, where she reproduces the Calcutta cuisine by cooking Bengali food: rice, dal, fish curry and the homemade jhalmuri which she creates using American cuisine. The importance of Ashima retaining traditions via Bengali domestic rituals and especially cooking traditional foods as a mode of cultural memory and emotional nourishment has been the focus of scholarship (Fareeha et al., 2026), (Tuly and Sherma, 2026). Cooking is not just a nutritional claim, an action that rejects the complete assimilation into a society of culinary practices. Every meal Ashima cooks is a cultural protest, a means of keeping up with the homeland although the physical distance between India and India is becoming longer and longer.

Food has a larger role in the novel not just in the kitchen of Ashima but also to the society and cultural ways of doing things by the Bengali community. Bengali food is prepared and offered at dinner parties, during a holiday, and during religious celebrations thus forming communal sites where culture is acted out and prolonged. This form of navigation through food, fashion, movement, and memory has been explored by scholarship as a part of the third space in which diasporic subjects engage, contending that Lahiri employs these practices of materiality to criticize the teleological narratives of assimilation (Tuly & Sherma, 2026). The hybrid domesticities that can be described as the Ganguli household such as the serving of Bengali food with the use of American conveniences, conducting Hindu rituals in the suburban living rooms can be described as a variant of cultural syncretism that is neither Indian nor American but a uniquely diasporic phenomenon (Tuly & Sherma, 2026), (Nutul, 2026).

Food has other but equally important meanings to the second generation. The food relationship of Gogol reflects his larger food relationship with his heritage: when Gogol is still young, he is complacent about his mother cooking; when he is in the phase of cultural rejection, he gets to know American cuisine and social world it embodies; when his father dies, Gogol turns to Bengali cuisine as his source of comfort and identification. According to the novel, food functions as a kind of corporally cultural memory, engraving in the flavors and textures the histories of emotions and culture which cannot be fully captured in word. It has been noted how Lahiri captures the saturation of desire, resistance and nostalgia in banal material culture, kitchen scenes, dinner parties and so forth and how the cultural identity is not necessarily an issue of belief or ideology, but of sense, material touch and practice as a way of life (Tuly, 2026), (Nutul, 2026).

Other domestic practices other than food cooks also serve as cultural indications in the novel. The naming ritual of Bengali is the Bengali naming ceremony (annaprasan), religious holidays, and the culturally significant funeral rituals are all used to imprint cultural identity on the bodies and lives of the Ganguli family. These rituals offer structure, meaning and continuity amidst a context of displacement, though also emerge as space of conflict where the second generation goes against the insistence of their parents that they should continue practicing traditional ways. The scholarship has observed that the novel has displayed that such domestic rituals help both maintain and res shape cultural identity because the circumstances of the diasporic inevitably change the significance and operation of once comprehended cultural practices (Nutul, 2026), (Fareeha et al., 2026).

The Liminal Space Between Cultures

The idea of a liminality, the state of standing on the edge, between two things, is a key component of how Lahiri presents the diasporic experience in The Namesake. The characters in the novel are in an intermediate state of Indian and American cultures, and they are in such a delusory state, less definite, less concrete and certain about who they are. This liminality is not a transitory state that can be overcome by means of assimilation or preservation of culture; it is an enduring aspect of the diasporic experience, a state that Lahiri symbolizes with its sense of sympathy and honesty which is not afraid to open its eyes.

The boundary between cultures is something that is faced differently by various generations. In the case of Ashoke and Ashima, liminality is an ambiguous in-betweenness: they are not really Indian or American, caught in between a country they have abandoned and a society in which they will never truly become native inhabitants. The academic literature has demonstrated that diaspora can also act as a transnational site in which the character of personal and group identities is determined by the continuous confrontations between traumatic experiences and memories of the homeland, which binds characters between the host community and the homeland (Tarun & Sultan, 2026). This is not just a psychological in-betweenness, but a spatial, temporal and relational in-betweenness that has an impact on all the dimensions of the first generation experience.

In the case of Gogol, liminality is undergone in the form of an identity crisis- a basic lack of understanding of what he is, as well as where he fits in. The most visible sign of his liminal state is his name with no Indian and no American suffixes, but the crisis is much more profound than the name. Relationships with women, his career, where to live etc. all are influenced by the attraction to two cultures that insist on his loyalty without necessarily accepting him. Studies have described that it is a state of always-already crisis, where the second generation of immigrant is born into the fractured state of identity, which can too be solved only through one act of cultural belonging (Sharmin, 2011), (Morve et al., 2024). The move of the Gogol throughout the novel is arguably considered a succession of efforts to avoid liminality and to be assimilated, to revert to cultural roots, to an affinity of generations in love, to the laughter of old men, each of which proves ineffective in offering the solidity he desires.

However, in the end liminality is productive and the novel suggests it is not painful. The border zone between the cultures is not the zone of only loss and confusion, it is also the zone of potential, and the new ways of identities and belonging can be developed. That the most authentic way to respond to cultural displacement is not the resolution of the liminal condition but the imaginative occupancy of it, can be seen in the way Lahiri portrays diaspora as a transitional, dynamic state of identity formation characterized by continuity, rupture and perpetual negotiation (Nutul, 2026), (Wulandari et al., 2025). The last gesture on the part of Gogol, that of opening the book of his father, which, as much as it confirms the fact of his belonging to his own culture and being an autonomous person, also signifies his own productive liminality.

Scholarship on The Namesake has been trending towards this interpretation of liminality as constitutive, as opposed to just transitional. The negotiating characters in the novel negotiate the third space, which is a zone of cultural hybridity where new meanings are created, new identities are created, and new forms of belonging are created (Ullah et al., 2025), (Wulandari et al., 2025). This third space is neither a transliteration of the Indian and American identities; it is a truly new cultural formation, which can no longer be reduced to either of its origins. The notion of the third space therefore offers a theoretical narrative of how the final vision of the novel is formed: the identity of the diaspora, which is created in the space between cultures, is not less and more complete but in many ways complex and even painful (Wulandari et al., 2025), (Ullah et al., 2025).

Liminality is also reflected in the form of the novel, which transcends organically both between India and the United States, both between the past and the present, the views of the various characters. This formal liminality replicates the thematic liminality of experience of the characters, producing a reading

experience that performs the situation of cultural displacement that it conveys. Scholars have pointed out that Lahiri tamenes postcolonial theory by showing the locus of diasporic transformation to reside in intimate spaces and not on a more visible political stage, showing that the intermediate exemplar between cultures is not a hypothetical theorical space but a solid, lived, and a daily existence (Nutul, 2026). One of the most original and important works that have ever been offered by Lahiri to the diaspora literature is this approach to liminality, based on the peculiarities of the domestic life, family relations, and personal memory.

DISCUSSION

The results of the current research support and expand the existing scholarly knowledge about identity crisis and cultural displacement in The Namesake. It has been shown that the novel of Lahiri is a multidimensional representation of the diasporic experience which cannot be reduced to only one theoretical paradigm. The novel is not an assimilation narrative, or a cultural preservation narrative; rather, it is a narrative of constantly negotiated identity, where identity is constantly constructed and reformulated via the connections between memory, naming, domestic practice, and intergenerational inheritance.

The symbolic meaning of the name Gogol is revealed as the most focussed pivot of this dynamic in the novel. The name is a cipher of the history of migration, of the trauma and of survival The family has a history of migration, trauma and survival but the name is a kind of generating a great identity crisis on its holder who will also feel that it is imposed on him but does not give him any sense of attachment to his inheritance. The discussion shows that in the novel, naming serves as what the scholars have termed as a dynamical locus of struggle, and compromise, and mutability- a practice that constitutes as well as disputes cultural identity (Ali and Mustafa, 2026), (Singh, 2026). The fact that Gogol reconciles his name, upon discovering how it came to be so, and the fact Gogol dies, does not solve Gogol of his identity crisis, so much as it turns the name into a source of meaning, rather than a source of shame.

Their emotions about the cultural preservation in the diaspora are seen to be emotionally complex by the analysis of the first generation nostalgia experienced by Ashoke and Ashima. Their attempts to preserve the Bengali culture in America by means of food, ritual, language and community is revealed to be sustainive and restrictive in that it not only gave them a sense of continuity with the culture, but also restricted their interaction with the mainstream. The textual evidence confirms the characterization of nostalgia, suggested in the scholarship, as a coping mechanism and a source of distress because in the specific case of Ashima, it is possible to observe the switching period between the security of cultural memory and the pain of cultural loss (Tarun & Sultan, 2026), (Qazi, 2022).

Using food and household rituals as cultural indicators it can be seen that Lahiri seeks cultural identity not in the abstract ideological allegiance but in the material daily life practices. Cooking, naming, celebrating, mourning, these are the practices by which the diasporic identity is created, maintained. This observation correlates with the theoretical point that diaspora cannot be treated as a permanent state of exile but as a dialogic, interactive way of belonging and is constructed through domestic spaces and emotional heritage (Nutul, 2026). Instead of the public sphere, the domestic sphere appears as the most important location of cultural negotiation in The Namesake, the discovery that has significant implications to the study of diaspora literature in general.

Lastly, it appears that the liminal space between cultures analysis shows that The Namesake develops a vision of the diasporic identity that is essentially a hybrid, dynamic, and open-ended characterization. The novel challenges the teleological models of assimilation that most of the discussion on immigration has dealt with, and provides a vision of identity as always in process, always incomplete. This vision is aligned with the theoretical framework of the third space, yet it is endowed by Lahiri with specificity and emotional shading which can be offered only by theory (Wulandari et al., 2025), (Ullah et al., 2025). The liminality which the Ganguli family undergoes is not an issue to be resolved but a state to be lived in- an eternal bargain which is painful, fruitful and very human.

It is necessary to state that there are some limitations of the current analysis. Being a qualitative textual research, it is bound to be infused by the interpretive resources of the researcher and theoretical paradigm used. Other interpretations of The Namesake would be possible—based on varying theoretical approaches, focusing on other textual aspects, or existing in other cultural contexts would come up with different results. Besides, the discussion has involved only one novel and is not in a position to provide a comprehensive account of what diasporic identity formation is like. Even then, the breadth and the acuity of analysis provide perspectives that not only complement, but also expand the current academic literature regarding the literature of Lahiri as well as the fabric of the diaspora fiction writings, in general.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed identity crisis and cultural displacement in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri, through the theoretical framework of diaspora theory, in terms of inter-relationship dynamics of migration, belonging, and cultural identity. The thematic dimensions of the diasporic experience explored in the study through a qualitative textual analysis of the novel include the symbolism of the Gogol name, the first generation nostalgia, the second generation rejection and acceptance of the heritage, the nature of the confrontation between the Indian and the American identity, the role of food and household rituals in marking the culture, and the liminal space between the cultures.

The conclusions indicate that Lahiri symbolizes the diasporic identity as a dynamical, transforming and continuously negotiated state, influenced by memory, location, naming customs, and intergenerational legacy. The name of the main character, Gogol, positions the cut-up history of migrantism, the family trauma, and the survival, and creates a major identity crisis, which the main character must eventually learn to live in the humble of his hybrid heritage. The preservation and nostalgia of Ashoke and Ashima are examples of the emotional flatteners and rewards of first-generation displacement and the path of Gogol, through rejection to acceptance of his heritage, is the non-terminal nature of cultural negotiation in the second generation.

The paper adds to the developing scholarship on the South Asian American diaspora fiction by revealing how experiential and complex the issues of identity, belonging and cultural displacement are when it comes to Lahiri. Paying attention to the role of domestic practices, food practices, and naming practices in the formation of diasporic identity, the analysis demonstrates the significance of the material, the everyday in the formation of cultural selfhood, an aspect of the concept of diaspora that in less abstract theoretical representations—is overlooked.

This research project has wider implications than this particular case, The Namesake, to the wider diaspora studies and postcolonial literary criticism. The diasporic experience, as proposed by Lahiri in the novel, cannot be sufficiently interpreted in the lenses of binary notions of assimilation and preservation, home and alienness, or country of origin and country of origin. Rather it requires more subtle, process oriented definition of identity as a process being constantly produced by the relation between memory, practice, and relationship. The idea of the liminal space - the in-between-thing that isn't this or that under any previous category, but that which is really new, new in its own right, not a mere theoretical concept but a very personal one, which the novel of Lahiri lends a human expression, a domestic backdrop, and a poignancy that does not merely give it academic credibility, but makes it more than a mere theory, but a heartfelt theory. The story of the Ganguli family, with all its particularism and intricacy, ends up cast of light upon a universal aspect of the human predicament, the constant, incomple ten-year-old task of fashining a self in a world that is in a state of flux.

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