

**(RE) CONTEXTUALIZING *THE NAMESAKE*: A READING IN LIGHT OF  
GLOBALIZATION**

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**Abstract**

Indian Writing in English, in recent years, has been widely recognized across the globe. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikarm Seth, Sashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghose, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpadne, Kiran Desai etc. have either won the prestigious prizes or they have been shortlisted for it. It is due to their selection of 'global' subjects and themes. For Intercultural dialogue has become increasingly important in the multicultural societies, the forms of cross cultural communication are repeatedly reflected in mainstream fiction. This paper aims to examine Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* from the framework of cosmopolitan transnationalism. Since both film and literature approaches the audiences with the same variety of subjects, feelings and experiences- they affect the nerve of the audiences as they represent the layers of joys and sorrows inherited in their dreams and reality in daily life. Therefore the focus would be on the situation and longing-ness of identity of the protagonist in this globalized world felt and displayed in the novel *The Namesake* and its film version *Namesake* by Mira Nair.

**Introduction**

Globalization has been defined as the process of rapid integration of countries and happening through greater foreign trade and foreign investment. Globalization offers clear economic opportunities and benefits, but comes with substantial social costs that often appear to affect people disproportionately, given their tenuous transitional status within an uncertain and rapidly evolving global context. In the recent economic and political affairs the Globalization is one of the major issues and it is always at the centre of discussion almost in every field including literature. The issues of globalization have risen up rapidly and prominently in the present scenario. There is always a close relationship between literature and contemporary socio-political-economical situations. The most important era in Indian English literature is post-colonial writing back to the entire and affirming its own identity and its national and cultural individuality.

Indian post-colonial especially Diaspora literature reflected the migration, hybridity, loss of identity, multiculturalism, and disappearance of national identities. In the postcolonial world, highly marked by globalization, transnational migration is a fact of life. Thus, there are numerous groups of people who traverse across the national borders to reach their promised land. Young people are growing up in a world of globalization and for better education and job as well they go to abroad. Indian Diasporic literature which has caught global attention in recent times is usually by and about educated migrants or their descendants. It deals with issues like alienation, nostalgia, identity crisis, discrimination etc. It operates in a cultural space haunted by heterogeneity, and attempts to reconcile with alien realities. A literary labyrinth concerned with questions of equality and identity, it attempts assimilation with host country and culture.<sup>1</sup>

Whole Diasporas' fiction, thus, is full of issues related to location, movement, crossing borders, original home lands and adopted home lands and identity. Addressing the themes of immigration, collision of cultures and the importance of names in *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates how much struggle of immigration can be. It takes a look into the second generation immigrant's cultural dilemma, the child's struggle to realize that one's family is different from others, the teenage desire to fit into a culture so different from that of one's parents, and the adult desire to reconcile what was left behind and lost in the adaptation from one culture to another. Indian Diasporic literature and Bollywood films based on diaspora arresting global attention today, are usually by and about educated migrants or their descendants. They deal with issues like alienation, nostalgia, identity crisis, discrimination etc. operating in a cultural space haunted by heterogeneity, and attempts to reconcile with alien realities. The identities of diaspora individuals and communities can neither be placed only in relation to some homeland to which they all long to return nor to that country alone where they settle down in. They, by all means, face the crisis of hybrid or dual identity, which makes their existence all the more difficult. This is an experience universal to all Indian diaspora, irrespective of their caste, region and religion.<sup>2</sup>

*The Namesake* is a 2003 novel written by noted Diaspora writer Jhumpa Lahiri. After her first book *Interpreter of Maladies* which was a collection of short stories, she came with her first novel *The Namesake* that was almost a documentary of Indian diaspora. Lahiri, in this novel, portrays her analysis and experiences of Indian people living outside from India. This living "in-between" condition is very painful and marginalizing for the Diasporas. There is yearning for "home," to go back to "the lost origin" and "imaginary homelands" are created from the fragmentary and partial memories of the homelands. They face cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at and there is a threat to their ethnic and cultural identity. They stand bewildered and confused, nostalgic and homesick and show resistance also to the discourse of power in various forms.

Mira Nair, on the other hand presents the same situations and issues in a visual form. In her film version of this novel she makes certain changes. *The Namesake* (2004) directed by Mira Nair narrates what Lahiri says but with her personal touch. The film is about movement and crossing borders in a deeper way than just a narrative tale of an arranged marriage couple who come to America. Nair brings multiculturalism and the intractable conflicts associated with multiculturalism on to the screen with her film *The Namesake*. In her most personal film to date, Nair brings to the screen a poignant and transporting version of the novel. Lahiri gradually developed her own technique by shifting the mode of narration from past to present and again

reversing it without being nostalgic while films cannot present action in the past as swiftly as the novels chiefly do.

Mira Nair in an objective approach to adaptation throws more light on the processes, problems and possibilities of multiculturalism. For Mira Nair, it is a captivating love story—a story of two strangers who get married and afterwards fall in love, which was an “enchanted idea”. A saga of thirty years is projected by the lens of the director in two hours. Every scene has been shot with an intention to propel a story, to build around the audience the sweetness of the story very quickly and with great economy and then moves on to the next chapter. Mira Nair felt the pangs of translating the semiotic version into photographic medium.

In recent years, (the past few years are also not an exception) Cinema is widely considered a microcosm of the social, political, economic, and cultural life of a nation. It is the contested site where meanings are negotiated, traditions made and remade, identities affirmed or rejected.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, they shape and impose exemplarity by broadcasting role models, figures of idealization and identification at once. Popular cinema is thus a major factor of social engineering. Both Lahiri and Nair showcase the crises of identity through their protagonist Gogol who is member of traditional family of Bengali roots.

### **Whether the “Name” is the Epitome of the “Global Identity”**

The protagonist of the novel and film is a boy named Gogol. He was given this name by his father Ashoke Ganguli who is fan of a Russian author Nikoi Gogol. Mr. Ganguli was a reading of the novel of the same author when he met a train accident. He thinks that he was saved due to that novel. But dilemma is that his son Gogol does not know the story but he is frustrated with his nomenclature. He is a fellow belong to a family with an Indian (Bengali) roots. He is brought up in USA (In the film USA is replaced by UK). And his name is Russian. He lives with American children. They make fun of him. He thinks who he is— A Bengali, an American or a Russian. He is divided in three identities. He thinks that only due to his name he is not comfortable with his friends, he cannot court with girls. In fact, others do not hate his name as he does. His pugnacity creates a veritable storyboard defining various cultural hazards, displacement, and transformation in their identities, new possibilities, and new ways of thinking and complex experiences he faces in his daily life. Gogol goes through a cycle of accepting his name that is very similar to the cycle of accepting himself. As a child, he does not question who he is and, he doesn't mind his name. He does not know any difference; therefore he does not wish to be anyone else.

On his first day of kindergarten, he even insists on being called Gogol rather than Nikhil, the "good" name his parents chose for him. As he was catching up in years he begins to question who he is. He spends his teenage and young adult years trying to discover his identity. However, he seemed too allergic to his name—rejecting a part of himself. Before stepping into college, he legally changes his name to Nikhil, which is symbolic of his self-conscious attempts to completely disown his real self and tries to metamorph himself to a different persona. It is not until the end of the book that he finally accepts himself as Gogol when he realizes that "Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no comfort. The fact that he finds no comfort in

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the thought that ‘Gogol could disappear’ shows that he has accepted himself as Gogol instead of trying to be Nikhil.

Another motif that runs concurrent to Gogol's journey of self-discovery is *The Overcoat* by Nikolai Gogol. Gogol Ganguli was named after Nikolai Gogol, his father's favorite author, and in fact, during his young years he did not harbor any dislike for the name because the author's name, and therefore his own, is known throughout the world and will live on forever. However, as he grew older Gogol shifted loyalties and wanted to abdicate *The Overcoat* and to make matters worse, kept his father's photo out of sight and out of mind, thinking that reading the story would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow.<sup>4</sup>

At this point in his life, Gogol wanted nothing more than to forget this part of him. To his embarrassment, his English teacher initiated a discussion on Nikolai Gogol one day. Miffed, Gogol does not bring the discussion handouts home with him conveniently choosing to push them to the back of his locker and forget all about them. This is symbolic of how he contrived to hide part of his own divided soul from the world. All through this tumultuous time, he was drifting farther away from understanding his real self. Towards the denouement, when Gogol stepped into his childhood room, the book his father had given him years ago did not miss attention. However, he had wanted nothing to do with it, only to ruminate about his real identity. Although Gogol Ganguli had a harrowing time coming to terms with his real self and accepting himself in his teenage and early adult years, he eventually turns the corner and discovers his identity at the end of the novel. Throughout his life, he struggled with the dilemma of uncovering the veneer of his real self.<sup>5</sup>

The sense of alienation does not cease to occur even after changing the name. Perhaps, he is more confused with his dual identity as “Gogol” for the family and “Nikhil” for the outer world. The new name comes with its own dilemma and conflicts. With it he feels that he stands nowhere. Moreover multiculturalism considers itself the route to a more tolerant and inclusive society because it recognizes that there is a diversity of cultures and rejects the assimilation into the cultural traditions of the dominant group. With an aspire to amplify the internal harmony of cultures, the idea of assimilation coagulates the differences that are currently more fluid and makes people from other culture seem more exotic and distinct than they really are. Gogol is the victim of multicultural assimilation, which, then appears not as cultural redeemer but as a cultural straitjacket.<sup>6</sup> Multicultural heterogeneity forces all those who are described as a marginalized cultural assemblage into an establishment of genuineness, refuting them the possibility to traverse the cultural borders, borrow cultural influences and relentlessly identify and classify themselves.

Mira Nair repeats the train accident of Ashok again and again where Gogol gets his name. Cinematic narrative becomes the focal point in the study of adaptation of *The Namesake*. From the semiotic perspective, film *The Namesake* as an art can be compared to its counterpart novel-in terms of the different sign systems, it could not narrate and vice versa. Ultimately, when Gogol tries to expunge the former nomenclature, and becomes isolated from his family and home-the narrative of the novel is successfully transposed into film. In his itinerary of living a gratifying life, he brazen outs three unsatisfactory, abortive affairs. His love life becomes catastrophic because he is not convinced about the assertion of his identity. His relationship with all and sundry around him muddles because he fails to get grasp of any fraction of his identity. Nikhil suffers from alienation not only because he is living in a country to which he does not

belong, but also because of the name which increases his ambiguity regarding his nationality and his identity.<sup>7</sup> The inner conflicts of Gogol are reflected in his intimate relationships with women. He hopelessly struggles with his hyphenated identity. Even his marriage does not last long. When his wife, Maushami, reveals the secret of his former name, it becomes one of the reasons to end their marriage. Lahiri, in this way shows that identity is behind everything in the life of Gogol. In an interview Lahiri says,

“The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. (This is of course complicated by the fact that I was born in London.) I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children.”<sup>8</sup>

Through the prism of Mira Nair’s film, *Namesake* the ideals enshrined in the notions of ‘transnational citizenship’ or ‘flexible citizenship’ and the gamut of cultural conflict so beautifully encapsulated may be viewed with an ostensible aim to explain the underlying nuances. In the film *Namesake* women is a central characters who accompany her husband’s to a foreign land, and, eventually, recover her own subjectivity. The increased migration of women across borders in professional and non-professional sectors under the impact of globalization has resulted in terming the new trend as ‘feminization of globalization.’ The economic opportunities provided by globalization have allowed women from across the globe to transgress stereotypical gender roles by subverting domestic/public dichotomy. Women from the traditional societies have learned to negotiate the boundaries of domestic and public spaces by performing professional roles in the public sphere while, simultaneously, performing the typical gendered roles in the domestic sphere.<sup>9</sup>

In the film, Ashima’s decision to spend six months in Calcutta and six months in New York is indicative of the emergence of a new class of transnational citizens, whose condition could be described as a constant “dwelling-in-displacement.” Ashima’s transnational crisscrossing confounds the conventional notion of belonging to a particular geographical territory. In her farewell party, Ashima says, “For twenty five years I missed my life in India and now I will miss my life here, and all of you who became my family...And I will miss this country in which I had grown to know and love my husband and, though, his ashes are scattered in the Ganges, it is here in this house, in this town, amongst all of you that he will dwell at my heart.” The abstract notion of space/territory is personalized and a “flexible understanding of national belonging, embedded in mobility and migration” is fashioned. The film, as such, is flooded with images of bridges, planes, trains, cars, and boats denoting transnational movement blurring the edges of concrete geographical spaces/territories. Significantly, the film ends with Gogol’s decision to see the world. He remembers his father’s words, “Pack a pillow and blanket. Go and see the world. You will never regret it Gogol.” *Namesake*, thus, celebrates the possibility of transnational movement and, thereby, normalizes the differential experiences of globalization.<sup>10</sup>

### **Their “Personal” Touch**

Every author sees the things from his/her personal frame. His/her description could be influenced from his personal life. Both Jhumpa Lahiri and Mira Nayar reveal their experiences through their respective work of art. Jhumpa who was born in a middle class Bengali family living in London and brought up in Rhodes Island; USA, drafts a plot similar to his personal situation. Lahiri seems at home when she talks about the expatriate community of Bengali’s in the Boston area, their peculiar lonely lives with extended families made up of fellow expatriates, the custom and world view through which they see their own everyday experiences and the struggle of their American children with their own question of identity and belonging. In a way, *The Namesake* is a personal experience which is given a mutual expression. Growing up with ties to all three countries created in her a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted. She has been gaining first-hand experience of ‘living two lives in one’ since her childhood. Her life divided among three worlds has made Lahiri very much aware of “the intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new”. She realistically and succinctly portrays her diaspora experiences in her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (which won her the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 2000) , again doing an encore in her first novel, *The Namesake*, grabbing instant recognition and also a piece of cinematic history. An autobiographical streak unmistakably runs through the novel, *The Namesake* as Lahiri’s protagonist in the novel, Gogol mirrors her own experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants.

*The Namesake* is a personal experience which is given a mutual expression. Growing up with ties to all three countries like India, London and America created in her a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted. Lahiri sensitively portrays the individual trials and tribulations of being a part of the larger ethnic group authentically. She uses very simple, yet a very impressive language. The conflict of generations is shown in a sophisticated manner. One can feel the pain of the parents who make every effort to keep children intact with their roots. As she says,

“When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts were, for some reason, always set in Calcutta, which is a city I know quite well as a result of repeated visits with my family, sometimes for several months at a time. Still, though I’ve never lived anywhere but America, India continues to form part of my fictional landscape. *The Namesake* is, essentially, a story about life in the United States, so the American setting was always a given. The terrain is very much the terrain of my own life - New England and New York, with Calcutta always hovering in the background. Now that the writing is done I’ve realized that America is a real presence in the book; the characters must struggle and come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here.”<sup>11</sup>

The film is also set in the same way. Mira Nair, before the release of *The Namesake* (2004), had already established herself as a great director of the “Diasporic Cinema” through her previous projects like *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001). She had already worked which evidently manifests itself in that one can perceive rationality, coherence and comprehensible sense of direction in every facet of *The Namesake*, from the music to the

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cinematography employed. Nair successfully engaged her clear expertise with theatrical traditions with an innovative exercise of conventional filmic codes, assembling the translation of multicultural heterogeneity of the novel *The Namesake* into film a success. She proficiently organizes in concert the array of scenes to amplify attention and sustain pace and immediacy into the action. Mira Nair translates the indistinguishable interpretation of heterogeneity she experienced while reading and extensively comprehending *The Namesake*.<sup>12</sup> Mira left India at an age of nineteen, while Gogol was born in New York like Jhumpa. Mira Nair came from a place where her roots are very strong. If the movie deviates, the deviation branches from showing as much of the book as viably possible into two hours. The result can seem rushed -Gogol decides to become an architect on a visit to see the Taj Mahal. In the next change of scene, he is an architect in Manhattan and choppy, while other moments are repeated -Ashoke's train accident - i.e. why Gogol got that name, Ashima stepping into Ashoke's footwear.

### **Conclusions**

The Globalization scattered the need of English language throughout the world. The English languages become the important lingua franca for Global community. The literature is an important and easily available means through which one can take an overview of the whole world. A writer has the abilities to expose his/her readers to the stark realities of the world. Most of the writers indirectly or sometimes directly mention the effects of Globalization. Economic liberalization and globalization have facilitated unprecedented movement of people across the borders, which demand a new theory of citizenship in order to formulate the aspirations of people who simultaneously inhabit a geographical space away from the homeland and maintain strong ties with it. Lahiri's characters, estranged in the conflict to balance two different worlds, enable us to understand the complexities and existential confusion of the immigrants in the new land of settlement.

By juxtaposing the immigrants 'initial experiences and practices in the United States with their latter adoption and immersion into the U.S. culture, she suggests the nomadic nature of identity, pushing the characters towards inhabiting transnational space in American society. Therefore, her characters confront immigrant experiences in the United States and, constantly negotiate between different aspects of their lives, recreate a third space that transcends the definite cultural and national boundaries. Examining the experience of upper-class South Asian immigration through the eyes of American-born children, Lahiri's novel contains moments and tropes that resemble those of the travel narrative genre, particularly in its detached tone and digressive, pluralist narration.<sup>12</sup> The novel does a precise job of highlighting the emotional struggle of living between as a person raised in the ways of two very different lands. The frustration and anger with his parent's mother country and his reluctance to be a part of it are countered by his immense respect for the accomplishments of his parents; the sacrifice of their arranged marriage, their courage in leaving their families for a life in the United States, and his own inability to make any commitment himself. It not only speaks of immigrants but also of the original settlers at different levels. It portrays people who need to make sense of their own destinies, on their own terms. The crises of identity and the everlasting longingness for 'self' have been remarkably portrayed by both the narrators- Jhumpa Lahiri and Mira Nair. Lahiri with autobiographical note presents the feelings, desires, dreams and, their struggle for all things in an alien country.

A sense of quest for identity in present globalized is highly palpable among the Diasporas who lead lives of duality through all the complexities of life. It tells its tale through the pathetic story of Gogol as he nervously walks down the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and devastating love affairs. It glides us through the path discovering the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents, but also the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves. Jhumpa dexterously deals with a plethora of themes like, the complexities of the immigrant experience and foreignness, the clash of lifestyles, cultural disorientation, the conflicts of assimilation, and the intertwined ties between generations.<sup>13</sup> All these issues and themes posit *The Namesake* as a milestone towards the recognition of modern Indian English Writings on global arena.

The film version on *The Namesake* by Nair is not merely an attempt at expressing the ideas in a different medium, but rather a re-interpretation and an ideological radicalization of the original text cast in terms of the social, economic and psychological realities of the Post-Modern Global World. Practically, transformation through the intercultural conversation is a necessary condition for immigrants living in the metropolitan cities. Lahiri has fully voiced the desires of her characters to form a nomadic identity in her works. She not only has demonstrated the importance of nomadic becoming, but also has, by deconstructing the narrow national and cultural identity for the immigrants, attempted to locate them into a global society.

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<sup>7</sup><https://sites.google.com/site/journalofenglishliterature/archives/january-2012/4-the-quest-for-identity>

<sup>8</sup><http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/extra/bl-jhumpainterview.htm>

<sup>9</sup><http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Diaspora/diaspora.html>

<sup>10</sup><http://www.museindia.com/regularcontent.asp?issid=39&id=2854>



<sup>11</sup><http://www.hindu.com/mag/2003/04/13/stories/2003041300300500.htm>

<sup>12</sup>[www.imdb.com/Namesake/review](http://www.imdb.com/Namesake/review)

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