

ISSN : 2395-4132

# THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

**Vol. 9 Issue 4 August 2023**

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

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[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)



## **BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: ANALYSING ALIENATION, ASSIMILATION AND ACCULTURATION IN THE CHARACTERS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE***

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### **Abstract**

Jhumpa Lahiri captures the experience of immigrants, exploring the interwoven themes of alienation, assimilation, and acculturation in her novel *The Namesake* through the lives of Ashoke, Ashima, and Gogol Ganguli. Ashoke and Ashima, who are first-generation immigrants, struggle with the contradiction between their Indian heritage and the American environment they live in. Ashoke, a first-generation immigrant, represents adaptation and calm resolve. He draws strength and embraces his new surroundings as he skillfully negotiates the cultural gap between his Bengali ancestry and American society. His tenacity and academic interests enable him to live a life in which two identities coexist. Ashima, on the other hand, portrays the intense emotional turmoil associated with displacement and estrangement. She feels isolated and culturally dissonant after being relocated from her familiar Bengali environment to an unfamiliar American context. Her adherence to ancient rituals and efforts to recreate a sense of home in a distant environment demonstrate her opposition to complete integration. However, Ashima eventually learns to negotiate her identity, balancing her heritage with her current realities. Gogol, who was born and reared in the United States, faces the challenges of acculturation and identity crisis. He rebels against his ancestry in order to integrate into mainstream American culture, despite the fact that his name is rich in personal and cultural importance. His voyage exemplifies the conflict between the urge to integrate and the inescapable pull of his ancestral identity. Gogol's growth exemplifies the difficulties of integrating inherited traditions with self-determined identity. Through these characters, Lahiri poignantly illustrates the generational and cultural aspects of immigration, highlighting the hardships and achievements of being "between two worlds."

### **Keywords**

Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*, Alienation, Assimilation, Acculturation, Immigrants, Identity Crisis, Cultural Clash, Generational Divide, Indian Diasporic Literature.



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Jhumpa Lahiri is an accomplished Indian-American woman writer known for her excellent prose and in-depth explorations of identity and cultural exile. Lahiri was born in London in 1967 to a Bengali family and relocated to the United States when she was three years old, where she grew up in Rhode Island. Her formative years were affected by the problems of negotiating a "multicultural lifestyle" (Lyer 156), which has had a profound impact on her creative voice. Lahiri's educational career is just as impressive as her literary achievements. She received a BA in English literature from Barnard College, followed by several degrees from Boston University, including an MA in Creative Writing, an MA in Comparative Literature, an MA in Renaissance Studies, and a PhD in Renaissance Studies.

Lahiri's literary career began with her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000 and propelled her to international stardom. This book, which also received the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and the New Yorker's Best Debut of the Year Award, digs expertly into the lives of Indian immigrants navigating the intricacies of cultural assimilation. Her debut novel, *The Namesake* (2003), which was eventually made into a successful film, solidified her position as a key figure in modern writing. The work, which explored issues like alienation, assimilation, and family dynamics, struck a chord with both readers and critics, receiving widespread acclaim. She feels happy also to have such experience. She reveals in an interview with Tsering, "I am lucky that I'm between two worlds" (Tsering 1).

Lahiri's subsequent publications sustained her literary success. *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), a collection of short stories, debuted at number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list and received the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, demonstrating her exceptional storytelling ability. Jaydeep Sarangi writes about her stories, "Jhumpa Lahiri's stories are the gateways into the large submerged territory of 'cross culturalism'" (117). Lahiri's second novel *The Lowland* (2013) was nominated for both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction, with praise for its complex storyline and study of political and psychological change. Lahiri later expanded her artistic horizons by writing in Italian and published *In Other Words* (2015), a very intimate memoir about her journey with language and

identity. Her Italian work *Dove mi trovo* (2018), translated as *Whereabouts* (2021), showcased her versatility as a writer. Lahiri has also received several honorary degrees and prominent fellowships, including a National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama in 2014, which recognized her commitment to the arts and literature. Lahiri's evocative works continue to enrich the literary landscape by providing significant insights into the human condition. . In an interview with Barbara Kantrowitz, she tells, "I've often felt that I am somehow illegitimate in both cultures. A true Indian does not accept me as an Indian, and a true American doesn't accept me as an American" (Kantrowitz 61).

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* poignantly explores the diasporic experience, weaving themes of alienation, assimilation, and acculturation into the lives of its characters, particularly Ashima Ganguli. The novel follows the story of Ashima Ganguli, a Bengali woman steeped in tradition. As depicted, she dresses in traditional Bengali costume, including a sari, a crimson bindi on her forehead, anklets on her legs, and a garland in her hair. Her unusual manner appeals to the Bengali children, who value her dedication to tradition. Ashima's caring personality is conveyed through her genuine singing, which helps to console her husband, Ashoke, when he is troubled by memories of his train disaster. They travel to the United States together, where Ashoke enrolls in a graduate program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This stage of Ashima's life reveals her emotional disposition and allegiance to cultural conservatism.

However, as the narrative progresses, there is a substantial change in Ashima's character. She progressively loses some of her emotional and narrow-minded characteristics, embracing a newly American style without reservation. While she initially feels isolated in Cambridge, lacking companionship, her changing personality begins to adjust. Ashima and Ashoke moved from Kolkata to Central Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, almost immediately after their marriage. Ashima, a woman who truly respects her husband, follows the ancient Indian habit of not addressing him by name. Instead, she communicates with him with the greatest respect, reflecting her traditional values. She does not call her husband by name; rather, she speaks to him with respect:

When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first. It is not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. (Lahiri 2)

Ashima's pregnancy progresses over time. When the labor pains start, she and her husband rush to the hospital. The nurse warns them that they would need to wait because the delivery will take several hours. As a result, Ashima faces the hardships of displacement and cultural clashes, including extreme childbirth pains with no one to empathize or bargain with. Left alone by her husband, she experiences an enormous terror in the presence of strangers, confronting her first night of sleeping alone:

It is the first time in her life she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents or with Ashoke at her side. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American woman. (Lahiri 3)

Ashima's journey begins with a profound sense of alienation, both physical and emotional. Arriving in the United States after an arranged marriage to Ashoke Ganguli, she finds herself in a landscape drastically different from the bustling familiarity of Calcutta. Her initial days in

America are marked by a deep sense of isolation. At the time of her deliver in hospital, she thinks, "In India she thinks to herself, women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, recreating briefly to childhood when baby arrives" (Lahiri 4). The absence of family, friends, and cultural familiarity magnifies her feelings of disconnection. Lahiri masterfully depicts this alienation through Ashima's small, intimate gestures—wearing a sari while stepping outside, preparing Indian snacks to evoke a sense of home, and writing letters to her family in India.

Ashima's alienation is further intensified by her struggles with language and social interaction. Her hesitant, broken English becomes symbolic of her marginalisation in a society where she feels perpetually foreign. This linguistic barrier restricts her ability to form meaningful relationships, compelling her to seek solace in Indian traditions and community gatherings. She says to Ashoke, "I'm saying, hurry up and finish your degree." And then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time, "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol in this country. It is not right. I want to go back" (Lahiri 33).

Even though she feels alienated, Ashima grudgingly starts to blend in. She is forced to get more involved with American society after the birth of her children, Gogol and Sonia, which turns out to be a turning point. Lahiri draws a comparison between Ashima's hesitant engagement with the outside world and her kids' easy assimilation. The generational divide that results from Gogol and Sonia's growing identification with American society highlights the difficulties of assimilation. Ashima makes modest but important integration efforts. She starts to embrace some aspects of American culture, such as Thanksgiving celebrations and socialising with neighbours. But rather than being done out of conviction, these actions are frequently carried out with a sense of compromise. Although she engages in American traditions, her heart is still bound to India.

At the end of the novel, Ashima's journey turns into a complex acculturation process in which she learns to integrate aspects of her Indian identity with her American environment. She joins the Bengali community in Massachusetts, where a microcosm of India is created through common customs, language, and holidays. She feels less alienated and her cultural heritage is preserved because of this community's sense of belonging. Simone de Beauvoir astutely observes in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 295). After Ashoke's untimely death, Ashima's acculturation becomes most apparent. She emerges from her cocoon and starts to discover her uniqueness after being abandoned in a strange country. She considers life outside of her well-defined responsibilities as a wife and mother for the first time. She demonstrates her readiness to interact with American society on her own terms by accepting a position at the local library. Consequently, she decides to split her time between India and Gogol. With her daughter Sonia soon to be married, she plans to reside at the home of her younger brother, Rana:

In Calcutta, Ashima will live with her younger brother, Rana, and his wife, and their two grown, as yet unmarried daughters, in the spacious flat of Salt Lake. There she will have a room, the first in her life intended for her exclusive use. In spring and summer she will return to the Northeast, dividing her time among her son, her daughter and her closest Bengali friends. (275-6)

The journey of Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake* is proof of the human spirit's tenacity in the face of cultural strife and displacement. Her story of assimilation, acculturation, and estrangement is a multifaceted, very human one that speaks to the larger experience of immigrants. The delicate balance between maintaining traditional heritage and adjusting to a

new environment is captured by Lahiri in *Ashima*. In the end, Lahiri uses Ashima's persona as a prism to examine the complex realities of cultural hybridity, identity, and belonging in a globalised world.

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49-50)

Themes of alienation, assimilation, and acculturation—all essential to the experience of immigrants—are explored in great detail through Ashoke Ganguli. For Ashoke, alienation is a significant theme, especially during the early years of his American existence. Ashoke, an immigrant who came to the US in pursuit of better prospects, is separated from his family and his native country. He feels both culturally and emotionally alienated. Even though his career has advanced, he remains alienated from the larger American society, where his foreignness makes him a social outcast. Ashoke struggles with the psychological effects of living in a place where he does not truly belong, dealing not only with language and cultural barriers but also with a deeper sense of estrangement. Ashu Yadav writes about this novel: “The theme of alienation, of being a stranger in a foreign land, is prominent throughout the novel” (Yadav 400).

Throughout the novel, Ashoke's assimilation is a continuous process. He tries to fit in with American society even though he feels alienated. Ashoke assimilates gradually and subtly. He secures a steady job, speaks English, and blends into the neighbourhood. However, Ashoke's integration is more a practical decision than a heartfelt desire, in contrast to his son Gogol, who is more eager to adopt American culture. He recognises that to survive, he must adjust to the culture of his new home, yet he never completely relinquishes his Bengali roots. The balance between maintaining his customs and navigating his place in American society defines his character.

The idea of acculturation is essential to Ashoke's growth as a person. The process through which immigrants preserve characteristics of their own culture while adapting to the host culture is known as acculturation. Like many immigrants, Ashoke passes through two stages of acculturation. He strikes a careful balance between engaging in American culture, which values individualism and independence, and upholding his Bengali traditions, which include speaking Bengali at home, celebrating traditional holidays, and prioritising family bonds. As a reciprocal process, Ashoke's acculturation involves both his culture and American culture influencing one another. His effectiveness in acculturation is demonstrated by his ability to accept American ideals, such as the significance of individual liberty and achievement, without letting go of his ties to Bengali customs.

Thus, the complex experience of an immigrant in a new country is embodied by Ashoke Ganguli's character in *The Namesake*. Gogol Ganguli, the main character in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, also grapples with alienation, assimilation, and acculturation, particularly as he navigates interpersonal relationships and his evolving sense of self. His struggles with cultural belonging, relationships with women, and personal identity are deeply entwined with these themes, ultimately shaping his character by the end of the novel.

Gogol experiences a profound sense of isolation right from the start of *The Namesake*. Raised in America after being born in Calcutta to Bengali parents, Ashoke and Ashima, he

witnesses the collision of two distinct cultures. His name, inherited from Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, comes to symbolise his alienation. Gogol dislikes his name in his early years, which makes him unpopular with his American peers and a subject of ridicule. He finds it difficult to fit in and feels alienated from both his Bengali family and his American environment.

Gogol attempts to blend in with American culture as he gets older by adopting the customs and values of his contemporaries. His effort to integrate into mainstream American society, represented by his adoption of the name Nick, signifies his desire to shed the complexities of his cultural heritage. However, this quest for assimilation leaves him feeling unfulfilled. He struggles to meet his parents' expectations and is never fully accepted by his American friends. His internal need for cultural authenticity frequently clashes with his desire to integrate, resulting in a profound sense of confusion and an ongoing identity crisis.

Gogol's interactions with women throughout the book shed light on his changing identity as well as his experiences with assimilation and estrangement. His identity struggles are reflected in his early relationships. He is caught between his romantic feelings for Ruth, a girl of American heritage, and his feelings of cultural disconnection from his parents when he first starts dating her. He uses their relationship to further distance himself from his roots, but it also exposes the emotional voids caused by his incapacity to reconcile his two separate realities.

However, Gogol's isolation is most noticeable in his relationship with Maxine, a more important and serious romantic relationship. Gogol wants to live the life that Maxine, who comes from a wealthy, forward-thinking American family, exemplifies, but he feels out of place in her world. He seems to fit in with Maxine's family quite easily, yet he feels cut off from his own roots. When Gogol recognises that he cannot completely adopt Maxine's way of life or distance himself from his parents' principles, this distance grows even further. As he realises that his assimilationist quest has left him without a genuine sense of belonging—either in America or in his family's Bengali world—his relationship with Maxine ultimately comes to an end. Gogol's feeling of estrangement progressively gives way to a more intricate acculturation process. Despite having distanced himself from his Bengali identity for most of his life, he begins to appreciate its significance as he grows older and more mature. A significant turning point in his acculturation process is his relationship with his parents, particularly his father. Gogol is deeply impacted by his father's passing, which compels him to face the cultural ideals he has long disregarded. After his father passed away, his trip to Calcutta becomes a symbolic act of re-engaging with his heritage. During this period of grieving, he starts to comprehend the importance of his parents' sacrifices and the intensity of the connection that binds him to his cultural heritage.

When the novel comes to an end, Gogol has undergone significant change. His interactions with women—particularly Ruth, Maxine, and Moushumi—reflect his own process of assimilation, alienation, and ultimately acculturation. His identity issues and unsuccessful assimilation attempts serve as stepping stones to his eventual revelation that he does not have to choose between his American identity and his Bengali heritage. Rather, he gains the ability to navigate both realities with understanding and self-acceptance. Gogol marries Moushumi Mazoomdar, but their marriage lasts less than a year. Moushumi, a Bengali girl settled in America, feels uncomfortable and begins to regret her decision to marry Gogol. She starts engaging in a relationship with her ex-boyfriend. When Ashima learns about Moushumi's affair with Dmitri from Gogol, she feels devastated and guilty. Thus, Gogol and Moushumi's marriage comes to an end when she reaches this extent:

With no hesitation, she had allowed men to seduce her in cafes, in parks, while she gazed at paintings in museums. She gave herself openly, completely, not caring about the consequences. [...] There were days she slept with one man after lunch, another after dinner.' (215)

Gogol's transformation from a young man divided between cultures to a more mature person who embraces his ancestry while actively engaging in American life is symbolised by this journey of self-discovery. Salman Rushdie's thoughts on homesickness and immigrants come to mind:

The Indian writer who writes from outside India... is obliged to deal with broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost... [and he] will create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (Rushdie 10-11)

Through Ashima, Ashoke, and Gogol Ganguli—all of whom represent distinct aspects of alienation, assimilation, and acculturation—Jhumpa Lahiri deftly captures the immigrant experience in *The Namesake*. Ashima embodies the emotional burden of relocation, grappling with intense loneliness and cultural disorientation. Ashoke, by contrast, exemplifies composure, seamlessly balancing traditional values with professional aspirations, feeling less alienated due to his purposeful migration. Gogol's tumultuous journey reflects generational struggles with identity, vacillating between rejecting and embracing his heritage. Collectively, their narratives highlight the profound challenges of belonging and identity. Dr. Dheva Rajan S. aptly notes, "Jhumpa Lahiri's novel explores the alienation and rootlessness of the two characters, Gogol and Ashima, who are seen striving for their identity" (Rajan 85).

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