



Intergenerational Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Abstract: This paper explores the complexities of intergenerational relationships in immigrant families through a critical reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. The novel presents the emotional, cultural, and psychological tensions that emerge between first-generation immigrants and their American-born children. Central to the narrative are themes such as identity crisis, cultural dislocation, generational divide, diasporic dilemma, and the evolving concept of home. While Ashoke and Ashima, as first-generation Bengali immigrants, struggle to adapt to life in the United States while preserving their cultural identity, their children, Gogol and Sonia, navigate the challenges of assimilation and identity formation within American society. Gogol's journey, in particular, reflects the internal conflict faced by second-generation immigrants torn between inherited traditions and the desire for social and cultural belonging in a new land. His rejection and later reconciliation with his name symbolize his broader struggle with identity and belonging. The novel highlights how generational misunderstandings, cultural memory, and personal reinvention shape immigrant family dynamics. Ultimately, *The Namesake* illustrates that the notion of "home" is not fixed but rather a fluid and evolving idea shaped by both memory and lived experience. This study underscores how intergenerational relationships within immigrant families embody the broader negotiation between tradition and transformation, continuity and change, and displacement and belonging.

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Intergenerational relationships in immigrant families are often marked by complexity, as cultural differences, language barriers, and varying degrees of acculturation can lead to both conflict and adaptation. These relationships are further shaped by family structure, geographic proximity, and the broader context of migration. Scholars frequently investigate how such dynamics influence emotional well-being, social integration, and the transmission of cultural values across generations.

The research article addresses issues such as identity crisis, differences between first and second generations, the generation gap, family

relationships, love-hate dynamics, geographic and cultural dislocation, diaspora and diasporic dilemmas, psychic trauma, intergenerational conflict, home and homelessness, displacement, lack of adaptability, and related concerns. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* offers a compelling literary exploration of these themes, focusing on the emotional and cultural tensions within a Bengali immigrant family in the United States. Through the evolving relationship between first-generation immigrant parents and their American-born children, the novel highlights the generational divide in how identity, belonging, and cultural heritage are understood and negotiated.

The first-generation immigrants, Ashoke and Ashima, move from Calcutta to America in the late 1960s. While Ashoke adapts to the new country through his work and sees America as a place of opportunity, Ashima feels isolated and longs for her home in India. Ashoke integrates into the host country without being troubled by questions of belonging. His professional adaptation enables him to preserve his cultural identity at home, skillfully managing this duality. In contrast, Ashima's adjustment feels more like a necessity than a choice. For her, the "loss of roots" and "social and cultural dislocation" evoke a deep sense of nostalgia a torment rooted in memory and symbolized by the ache of being away from home. During visits to their homeland, Calcutta, Gogol and Sonia watch their parents slip comfortably from their practical American



immigrant selves into their “bolder, less complicated versions” (N 81).

Ashoke’s ability to balance his professional and cultural worlds allows him to feel at ease, while Ashima’s experience is one of displacement and longing. She tries to recreate her old life through Bengali traditions and community gatherings but never feels truly at home in the U.S. Her sense of loneliness intensifies over time, especially after Ashoke’s death. Lahiri writes:

And though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road she knows that this is home nevertheless—the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her, needing to be packed up, given away, thrown out bit by bit. (280)

In contrast, their children, Gogol and Sonia, born and raised in America, identify more with American culture. They speak little Bengali, celebrate American holidays, and show limited interest in their parents’ traditions. This identification with American culture often leads to detachment from their Bengali heritage. They oscillate between two worlds but feel fully at home in neither. The second-generation immigrants’ mimicry of American behaviors can foster aversion toward their own cultural heritage, resulting in emotional turmoil. This internal conflict is reflected in Ashima’s anxiety about her children’s growing Americanization. She represents the traditional values of their Bengali roots, struggling to maintain her cultural identity while watching her children navigate a world that often feels alien to her.

Ashima’s worries mirror a common immigrant concern: the fear of losing cultural traditions and values in the pursuit of a new life. Pattanayak’s mention of “loss of roots” and “social dislocation” effectively encapsulates the characters’ struggles. This loss breeds nostalgia and a profound sense of torment, as they grapple with fragmented identities. The second generation in particular faces psychological problems, as the quest for belonging can bring both cultural enrichment and deep-seated emotional conflict.

Gogol, more than anyone else, struggles with his cultural identity. His decision to change his name from *Gogol* to *Nikhil* reflects his desire to fit in

and escape the burden of a name that feels foreign in both cultures. From a young age, he is embarrassed by his parents’ traditions and struggles to relate to their values. He feels alienated by his unusual name, which ties him to a Russian writer rather than his Indian heritage. Unlike Ashoke, who views the name *Gogol* as a symbol of survival and family connection, Gogol perceives it as a source of discomfort and shame. His name becomes a representation of his inner conflict caught between his parents’ Indian past and his desire to fully embrace an American identity.

Adopting the new name *Nikhil* gives him a sense of emancipation from his embarrassed identity. “He wonders if this is how it feels, for an obese person to become thin, for a prisoner to walk free. ‘I’m Nikhil,’ he wants to tell the people” (102). Yet he never feels completely at home with it. His renaming triggers new complications and psychological tensions. During his initial days as Nikhil, he laments that “he doesn’t feel like Nikhil” (N 105). Still, he clings to the name to make himself more accessible to the American way of life. “He did not want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to Pujas and parties, to remain unquestionably in their world” (126). This shows his disaffection with his own culture and his disinterest in Bengali traditions in America. Torn between *Gogol* and *Nikhil*, he mediates between conflicting realities, forced to reconcile with a heteroglossic and heterogeneous identity. Ultimately, he emerges as an inferential, marginalized, and hyphenated character in the Asian-American diaspora.

Through a series of relationships and personal experiences, Gogol learns that, to the outside world, he will always remain *Gogol*. His American identity is inseparable from his ethnic heritage. He does not experience such conflict during his visits to India, where he “never thinks of India as desh. He simply thinks of it as Americans do as India” (118). For others, however, his heritage becomes a marker of difference and exclusion. To Maxine and her family, he is Indian; even Lydia, Maxine’s mother, doubts his American-ness. The American-born generation thus finds itself exilic, with no roots in the native country. They are deprived of native culture and home, alienated from their homeland, and caught between the homeland and the host land—unable to sever



ties with the roots, yet unable to fully assimilate. Sunita Agarwal, in *Generational Differences in Diasporic Writings: Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake*, observes: "It is here they face a sense of alienation in the sense of 'insider' 'outsider'" (32).

This generational divide is marked by differing ideas of "home." For Ashima, home is Calcutta, a place tied to memories and belonging. For Gogol, America is home, yet he still feels out of place because of how others perceive him. The parents wish to maintain their Bengali identity, while the children seek assimilation. This difference creates tension in the family, as each generation struggles to understand the other's values and choices. Ashima, in particular, works hard to preserve traditions and a sense of "home" in an unfamiliar land. But for Gogol, home is shaped by a different reality—one defined by cultural hybridity and identity confusion. Commenting on the second-generation attitude in *The Namesake*, Smita Mohanty, in *The Namesake: An Exegesis of Ethical Consciousness*, writes: "When the first generation vacillates between Indian identity and American nationality, the second generation in their frivolity deconstructs their identity and self in 'abrogation'" (56).

Ashima worries about her children losing their cultural roots. Meanwhile, as a teenager and young adult, Gogol tries to distance himself from them. He changes his name to Nikhil, dates American women like Ruth and Maxine, and adopts a Western lifestyle. His relationship with Maxine symbolizes his attempt to fully integrate into American society. Maxine comes from an affluent background, living in a luxurious Manhattan home with open-minded parents. Gerald and Lydia point out:

Gogol knows that his parents' "lives bear no resemblance to that of Gerald and Lydia [...] two of them kissing openly [...] all his life he has never witnessed a single moment of physical affection between his parents" (N 138). Gogol tells Maxine that "they all not be able to touch or kiss each other in front of his parents, that there will be no more wine with lunch" (145).

Gogol, by contrast, is the child of immigrants who live modestly and privately. He is drawn to Maxine's lifestyle not only for its comfort and ease, but also as a way of distancing himself from his parents' cultural world. His relationship with Maxine highlights how far he has drifted from his family. Immersed in her life, he feels temporarily liberated from his Indian identity. He adopts her habits, spends holidays with her family, and neglects his own parents—symbolizing his growing detachment from his roots. As Homi Bhabha observes:

the feeling of alienation in him is strong due to his desire to merge with the life of the adopted country and his inability to understand the cultural past because of his parents' clinging to the culture and tradition of their homeland. This creates a conflict in his mind and the tension aggravates in his psyche, which may be called in Homi Bhabha's term "the tension of difference, the difference of the historical and geographical past and present" (The Location 177).

The turning point in Gogol's journey comes after the death of his father. Forced to reconnect with his family's traditions, Gogol begins to reflect more deeply on his identity. He revisits his cultural roots, reads the book of Gogol's stories his father once gave him, and briefly enters into an arranged marriage with Moushumi, a Bengali woman. The marriage, arranged in the traditional Bengali way, initially appears to signal a return to his roots. Yet it fails, as both Gogol and Moushumi are shaped by hybrid identities and unresolved personal histories. Moushumi resists traditional expectations, refusing to take Gogol's name and remaining emotionally tied to her past lovers. Her rebellion reflects her own struggle between inherited culture and personal self-determination. Their failed marriage demonstrates that a simple return to cultural roots does not guarantee emotional or personal stability.

Lahiri uses these failed relationships to highlight the emotional and cultural dislocation of second-generation immigrants. Amit Saha argues that it is not Gogol who fails, but rather the complex circumstances of diasporic life that prevent him from achieving fulfillment. Unlike his sister Sonia—who builds a relationship with Ben, a symbol of multicultural integration—Gogol



remains suspended between two worlds. While the first generation clings to the culture they left behind, the second generation often seeks to redefine themselves within the context of their adopted homeland.

Ashima and Gogol eventually find their respective niches in life, embarking on paths that lead them back toward their roots in India. The novel consistently unveils the conflicts between two generations of immigrants. Even the practice of naming creates chaos within the family. The traditional ritual of naming, deeply tied to cultural identity, comes under the pressures of modernity in the host country. It unsettles the household and creates psychological divisions between the two generations.

The first-generation immigrants—Ashoke and Ashima—strive to retain their native identity within the home, but the second-generation grapples with a dilemma over where “home” truly lies. Lahiri portrays this clash as a conflict of cultures, where the first generation negotiates between memory and adaptation, and the second-generation challenges inherited traditions in search of belonging. Ashoke and Ashima try to adapt for the sake of their children: they prepare American dishes, celebrate American festivals, and avoid interfering in their children’s personal lives. These efforts symbolize their willingness to create a “home away from home” in America, even though they remain unsettled in memory, unable to erase their instinctive attachment to their homeland.

Gogol, meanwhile, yields to his mother’s wish and marries Moushumi, a Bengali woman. Yet Moushumi, too, cannot sever ties with her past. Ultimately, Gogol separates from her, undergoing a transformation as he realizes he cannot adjust to the version of “home” Moushumi creates. After his father’s death and his failed marriage, he becomes more aware of his Bengali identity, even as he remains a liberated American. As Banibrata Mahanta observes:

Gogol realizes that neither Said's rigid adherence to identity nor Lyotard's amnesia would work for him. Gogol is thus an embodiment of 'disjunctive temporality' described by Homi Bhabha. The resolution of Gogol's predicament lies in remembering that he is a fragment of a larger reality. It is only

with his remembrance that he will be able to redefine, forge and justify his identity. (70)

Ultimately, *The Namesake* presents a powerful portrayal of intergenerational relationships among immigrants, where love and care persist despite cultural misunderstandings. It demonstrates how each generation must navigate identity in its own way, and how the idea of “home” can mean different things across generations. The tension between cultural inheritance and personal identity is central to Gogol Ganguli’s experience as a second-generation immigrant. While his parents, Ashoke and Ashima, strive to preserve their Bengali heritage in a foreign land, Gogol grows up shaped by American values and desires. Through Gogol’s struggles, Lahiri reveals the emotional and psychological complexities of second-generation immigrants. He eventually learns that his name, and the cultural history behind it, cannot simply be erased. Returning to the book of Gogol’s stories that his father gave him symbolizes his gradual reconciliation with his past and his parents’ world.

To conclude, the first generation holds onto their past, while the second generation attempts to forge a new future, often at the cost of cultural disconnection. Gogol experiences identity as a shifting terrain. He moves from one romantic relationship to another—first Ruth, then Maxine, and later Moushumi—seeking belonging but never quite finding it. Each relationship reflects a stage in his search for identity, shaped by both his desire for assimilation and the pull of cultural memory.

The novel also explores the meaning of home. For Ashima and Ashoke, home is rooted in memory and tradition; for Gogol, it is elusive, shaped more by displacement than belonging. Ashima’s journey from Calcutta to Massachusetts and back again at the end of the novel underscores the cyclical and shifting nature of home for immigrants. Gogol’s return to his father’s gift—the book of stories by Nikolai Gogol—marks his quiet reconciliation with his heritage. He begins to accept that his identity is not defined by either assimilation or rejection, but by a layered and evolving sense of self. As Banibrata Mahanta observes, Gogol does not resolve his crisis by choosing one identity over the other, but by



realizing that he is part of a larger cultural narrative.

In the end, *The Namesake* portrays the emotional and psychological journey of immigrant families as they navigate the spaces between tradition and modernity, memory and reinvention. The intergenerational conflict lies in the parents' attempt to build a home in a new land and the children's struggle to define their identity. This interplay of longing and belonging, evolving across time, cultures, and generations, forms the very heart of the novel.

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