

Reflexive Identity Construction in South Asian American Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

La construcción reflexiva de la identidad en la diáspora surasiático-americana en *The Namesake*, de Jhumpa Lahiri

MUQARRAM KHORAKIWALA

Institution address: Universidad de Valladolid. Departamento de Filología Inglesa. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Plaza del Campus s/n. 47011 Valladolid. Spain.

E-mail: muqarram.khorakiwala@alumnos.uva.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-2081-3848

Received: 02/12/2020. Accepted: 01/07/2021.

How to cite this article: Khorakiwala, Muqarram. "Reflexive Identity Construction in South Asian American Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 42, 2021, pp. 261–81.



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.42.2021.261-281>

Abstract: Cultural identity in contemporary diasporic communities is dynamic, multifaceted, and cyclical. In the age of reflexive modernity, it is imperative to think about new ways of conceptualizing the experience of individuals straddling multiple geographies. A model of identity for such individuals should not only explain the plurality of "being" but also the fluidity of "becoming." In this article, the question of multiple and shifting identities of the four main characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's intergenerational novel, *The Namesake*, is explored using an interdisciplinary model from the field of business management based on Giddens' theorization of reflexivity. The inward reflexive relationship between the "self" and the "other" through the discursive articulation of the ontological journey of the novel's characters highlights the complex nature of diasporic identity construction.

Keywords: identity construction; self-reflection; cultural hybridity; Indian diaspora; South Asian American literature.

Resumen: La identidad cultural en las comunidades de la diáspora contemporáneas es dinámica, multifacética y cíclica. En la era de la modernidad reflexiva, es imperativo pensar en nuevas formas de conceptualizar la experiencia de los individuos desplazándose entre geografías múltiples. Un modelo de identidad para tales individuos no solo debería explicar la pluralidad del "ser," sino también la fluidez del "devenir." Este artículo analiza la cuestión de las identidades múltiples y cambiantes de los cuatro personajes principales de la novela intergeneracional de Jhumpa Lahiri *The Namesake* mediante el uso de un modelo interdisciplinario de gestión empresarial basado en la teoría de la reflexividad de Giddens. La relación reflexiva interna entre "el yo" y "el otro" a

través de la articulación discursiva del viaje ontológico de los personajes de la novela destaca la naturaleza compleja de la construcción de la identidad de la diáspora.

Palabras clave: construcción de la identidad; autorreflexión; hibridación cultural; diáspora india; literatura americana sudasiática.

The question of identity is a widely discussed topic in the field of Diaspora Studies portraying the hybrid lives of modern-day Americans, as Ketu H. Katrak underlies (5). Linda Nicholson reminds us of how the understanding of who we are and what defines us has changed significantly over the past fifty years thanks to advances in psychology (41). As shown by Jonathan Friedman, the impact of globalization on cultural identity has resulted in hybrid identities manifested towards the end of the twentieth century (13), owing to what David Harvey describes as “time-space compression” (260). For Amin Maalouf, identity is no longer viewed as a static entity, it “is not given once and for all: it is built up and changes throughout a person's lifetime” (23), thus making the construct of identity dynamic, multifaceted, and even fluid; it shifts from one dimension to another, depending on the place and time in which the “self” is located. For their part, Monica Lindgren and Nils Wåhlin advocate that identity is expressed through inward and outward narratives or reflections via social interactions (360). Subsequently, the ontological development is impacted by the presence of the constitutive “other” as the Hegelian prerequisite for identity formation; as Emmanuel Levinas proposes, it is the contact with the “other” that allows us to become who we are both at the personal and collective levels (83). In the case of individuals from the Indian diaspora, Vinay Lal explains that they attempt to retain their uniqueness but face the constant dilemma of having to choose an identity to suit the context of the “other” in Western societies (165). This is mainly because the relationship between the “self” and the “other” is not an act of voluntary adaptation but is impacted by hierarchical relations in economic, political, religious, and sociocultural domination. Such complexity is glaringly visible in situations where the “self” is faced with huge differences, especially in terms of national origin, cultural norms, and values from multiple cultures. Furthermore, human beings and societies are constantly evolving in space-time, but this does not mean that the past is completely forgotten. Overlying multiple identities are constructed and shaped by discourses that the “self” is subjected to in its lifetime. If diasporic identity is the product of learning and adaptation resulting in transformation of one's state of

“being,” then it should not be a one-way process. Dynamicity means that the “self” should be able to alternate between old and new sociocultural values and norms. The process of “becoming” does not require total regeneration, especially since the “digimodern” (borrowing the term from Alan Kirby) diasporic individual desires to exist simultaneously in two homelands. In lived as well as imagined realities, the alien land and the homeland often merge.

A theoretical model that supports the manifestation of multiple identities in diasporic individuals living in what Zygmunt Bauman describes as “liquid modernity,” and where, according to Anthony Giddens, societies are more self-aware, reflective, and increasingly reflexive (8), provides an interesting overture for analyzing literary works narrating the lives of cosmopolitan world citizens. One such theorization of multiple identity construction based on self-reflection is offered by Lindgren and Wåhlin in the context of boundary-crossing individuals engaged in short-term employment in heterogenous fields. Literary narratives are reflexive by nature and through the portrayal of stories spanning multiple geographies, diasporic novels represent similar characters, who have more opportunities for reflection than many other people. The identity of diasporic individuals develops reflexively along the space-time continuum of their lives. Lindgren and Wåhlin elucidate that “[r]eflexive identity construction can be described metaphorically as a journey in both time and space, suggesting that we need to travel to other places in order to understand ourselves better and to discover more about who we are” (370). By extending the reflexive identity model from the field of management studies to the analysis of a diasporic novel, I argue that just like real-life boundary-crossing employees, the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003) also tend to exhibit a reflexive identity. Amid repeated exposure to cultural tensions, they seek to shift between different identity modes and discourses throughout their lifespan. This model also allows us to explain the continually evolving nature of identity construction in the novel. Due to the self-reflexive essence of identity, some of the novel’s characters tend to increasingly use discontinuities across space-time to create new discourses in the future. My analysis moves away from a traditional postcolonial reading of the novel and enhances the discussion of multiple identities in the field of diaspora studies. Relying on an interdisciplinary approach, and through the analysis of various reflexive narratives, I discuss the development of complex identities in four main characters of *The Namesake*.

The key premise of Lindgren and Wåhlin's model is rooted in the field of sociology, and it describes the construction of social identities in the absence of a stable and long-term professional and social environment. In this sense, diasporic individuals also struggle with preserving and (re)constructing their identities resulting in a complex identity. Their identity is influenced by social interactions with the "other" and continually evolves, both forward and backward, through the process of repeated self-reflection. Therefore, the process of identity construction becomes a reflexive phenomenon for the "self." According to Lindgren and Wåhlin,

[b]y using the word 'reflexive' we draw attention to the fact that people reflect upon life in different critical situations, and also that their reflexivity is revealed when they articulate their narratives in interaction with others (for example, ourselves as researchers). This reflexive identity can also be described as a bridge between the theoretical concept of 'self-identity' and the concept of 'social identity' which again emphasizes the continual re-definitions associated with identity construction. (361)

Furthermore, the authors propose that these reflections exhibit different narrative patterns of identity formation among individuals in conjunction with associated underlying ontological discourses and can thus be used to understand the multifaceted nature of identity. Self-reflection allows the boundary-crossing and, by extension, the diasporic individual to make sense of their present, not only in terms of who they are, but also who they want to become. Lindgren and Wåhlin have classified the manner in which individuals reflect on past episodes coupled with social contexts into four identity dimensions: the integrated identity dimension, the multi-identity dimension, the traditional identity dimension, and the emancipated identity dimension. All four identity dimensions are either linked to the personality or to the social context of an individual. Lindgren and Wåhlin also propose four ontological discourses which "can be seen as different ways of expressing reflexive awareness of the double interaction between the 'self' and the context. These discourses represent chains of connected statements that could be identified in the narratives" (372). Analogically, these discourses can be considered to represent the space where the diasporic individuals "construct their narratives and become authors of their own journeys" (372). The four discourses are described as rationalistic, idealistic, relativistic, and voluntaristic. Individuals move from one

discourse to another throughout their lives and develop a heightened sense of self-reflexivity when confronted with crises and changes.

The Namesake tells the story of first- and second-generation diasporic individuals of Indian origin residing in the United States. Struggling to come to terms with their identities, Gogol and Moushmi represent the second-generation that experiences all the ambivalence and the dilemmas of first-generation immigrant parents, represented by Ashoke and Ashima, who have not been able to fully assimilate into the new homeland. A constant combination of distance and intimacy binds the parents to their native homeland. They have no home there, yet they insist on calling Kolkata their home. Each character is juggling their past, present, and future to come to terms with their way of “being” and who they are “becoming.” The novel explores the process of identity formation among the South Asian American diaspora where the “self” is seen as a reflexive project: “We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (Giddens 75). In the post-traditional social universe in the United States, Ashima is the least inclined to lose her Indian identity, Ashoke is somewhere in the middle whereas Nikhil is more inclined to fully embrace an American identity, and Moushmi finds herself in a third cultural space, neither Indian nor American, but French. However, as we shall see below, these identity preferences are not fixed but are rather fluid and they revolve from one dimension to another in a cyclical manner when faced with the stresses and strains “in the charged reflexive settings of high modernity” (Giddens 126).

Ashoke, the father, is a first-generation immigrant. We come across him for the first time in the opening of the novel when he visits Ashima’s house. This is after spending two years in the United States before coming back to India to get married as per his parents’ wishes. Before going to the United States, he was involved in an almost fatal train accident, which led him to reprioritize his life. He is quite strong-willed and determined to turn his life around and, despite disapproval from his parents about his decision to study in the United States, he leaves India. Ashoke has suffered a trauma and so by moving into another geographical space he tries to renew his identity. His move is connected to the accident, but whether he has decided to move to the United States for financial success, or whether he chooses to displace himself to keep distance from traumatic memories, is not apparent.

In Ashoke’s character, we find a reflexive description of episodes pertaining to changes in social and cultural contexts, therefore constituting

the integrated identity dimension. This dimension of reflexive identity posits that such episodes always form a pattern and individuals who exhibit this dimension tend to combine their life episodes in a more synthesized manner. Lindgren and Wåhlin contend that “[t]here are profound ontological assumptions (based on ideology and/or religious beliefs) that keep life, and different parts of it, together. These individuals express grounded values that they use to integrate their life, despite the variety of social contexts” (371). Ashoke is pragmatic and he takes what he needs from the United States culture in order to integrate into American society: “Accustomed to wearing tailor-made pants and shirts all his life, [he] learns to buy ready-made. He trades in fountain pens for ballpoints, Wilkinson blades and his boar-bristled shaving brush for Bic razors bought six to a pack” (Lahiri 65). Ashoke simultaneously maintains a very strong connection with his native homeland. He mingles socially with fellow Bengalis and their families in the United States for the sake of the children, so that they can learn about Indian customs and festivals. However, Ashoke does not seem to have too many questions or conflicts when compared to his American-born children, whose allegiances are constantly shifting and adapting to a different reality, as suggested by Madhurima Chakraborty (613).

Lindgren and Wåhlin also posit that individuals exhibiting an integrated identity dimension are extremely aware of their interaction with the environment in different episodes during their life; these events cannot be reduced to formal positions or informal social roles. Instead, such individuals seek to find explanations at a more articulated level, a pattern expressing deeply rooted values from the past (374). We learn that Ashoke always carries with him in his psyche a trace of terror of the bygone train accident. At times, certain outside stimuli make him relive that nasty experience: “Seven years later, there are still certain images that wipe him flat. They lurk around a corner as he rushes through the engineering department at MIT, checks his campus mail” (Lahiri 20). If this traumatic experience has shaped Ashoke’s self-identity, then he is also equally in tune with the realities and practical needs of day-to-day life in the United States. He does not regret it much when his son changes his name from Gogol to Nikhil. Neither does he interfere when Nikhil (Gogol) dates American girls or decides to study architecture instead of engineering, the preferred field of education among the South Asian diaspora as it offers better career advancement opportunities.

According to the characteristics associated with the integrated identity dimension, Ashoke is less preoccupied by the details of various episodes in his life, tends to focus more on what is common between them, and seeks to find an overall pattern where coherence can be found. At the same time, he also displays traits of adherence to cultural traditions. While not to the degree of his wife Ashima, there are distinct traces of the traditional identity dimension in his personality. At the discourse level, he tends to think and act rather rationally by treating cultural traditions as important value bases for different episodes in his life. But he is also part of the modernistic project, and so he applies traditions in a rationalistic manner. Lindgren and Wåhlin argue that the rationalistic discourse stresses the importance of being connected to cultural traditions (372). Individuals with such narratives want to rationalize all episodes and differentiate their experiences so that each experience becomes a separate identity that is hard to relate to the others. Though Ashoke displays an integrated identity, his rationality tends to divide his identity into multiple layers. Each layer which is separate on the surface tends to bind into a whole at a deeper level. In many ways, Ashoke's character is the most complex in the novel.

Ashima, the mother, also a first-generation immigrant, is portrayed as a sober, subdued, and traditional housewife. She performs her duties towards the family silently and scrupulously, without expecting anything in return. At nineteen, she is married to Ashoke and when asked if she would be able to live alone in a cold country, she poses the innocent counter question, "Won't he be there?" (Lahiri 9), indicating, from the beginning, a dependency on Ashoke which lasts throughout her life until his death. After marriage, she moves to the United States and settles down to a routine in which her role is traditional: to wait for her husband to return from the university and to cook food for him. But the most grueling experience is motherhood in a foreign land because it is to happen "so far from home, unmonitored, and unobserved by those she loved" (6). After the birth of her son, she wishes to go back to Kolkata to raise him there amongst her relatives, but she knows she cannot do it for the sake of her husband. Alone at home, she tends to her baby, singing lullabies to him and crying herself as well, moved as she is by her lonely state. To her, the entire stay in a foreign land appears nothing less than a life-long pregnancy, "a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (49). In the context of diasporic families, it is seen that the process of displacement can have opposite effects on women; they either "become victims or emerge as stronger, more empowered and innovative beings"

(Jain 2312). In Ashima's case, we see an emancipation and independence towards the end of the novel.

Ashima tends to display an integrated mode of reflexive identity in a sense that her identity is first linked to that of her husband, and later to that of her children. She knows she cannot go back to India and so she learns to compromise and adjust. At the same time, she displays a very strong tendency to hold on to Indian traditions, especially religious ones. Lindgren and Wåhlin posit that in constructing their narratives and reflecting on past episodes, some individuals continuously refer to "cultural traditions in order to explain their line of reasoning" (372). They operate from a profound ontological assumption based on ideology and religious beliefs that keep their life and different parts of it together, despite the variety of social, cultural, and geographical contexts where the "self" is located. In this sense, Ashima also embodies the traditional dimension of her reflexive identity. However, after her husband's death she does not wish to leave America because her husband breathed his last breath there. She tells people, "[n]ow I know why he went to Cleveland. He was teaching me to live alone" (Lahiri 183). True to the meaning of her name in Bengali, which means "without borders," she decides to spend six months in India and six months in the United States. Rashna Wadia Richards espouses that "Ashima remains in between worlds—mobile, not fixed, still pulled by tradition and yanked by the potential of new beginnings" (77).

At the discourse level, Ashima is more of an idealist. She wants to be connected to her Indian roots and feels that it is her role to pass on the traditions to her children. The idealistic discourse is also strongly connected to traditions, but this way of reasoning emphasizes "the importance of individuals as bearers of ideological and spiritual needs, as well as their responsibility for 'using' these traditions in a way that makes their lives more integrated and consistent" (Lindgren and Wåhlin 373). As time passes and as her children grow up, Ashima learns to drive and takes up a job at the local library. She celebrates Christmas and Thanksgiving with equal zest as she does *Diwali* and *Durgapuja*. She learns to selectively change her lifestyle for the sake of her children and adopts the American cultural routines, albeit begrudgingly. According to Giddens, "[I]festyle are routinised practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favored milieux for encountering others; but the routines followed are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity" (80).

Not only does Ashima's identity cyclically move between the integrated and traditional dimensions, but as the novel progresses, her reflexivity changes from an idealistic discourse to a more rationalistic one. According to Lindgren and Wåhlin, the rationalistic discourse stresses the importance of being connected to cultural traditions (373). Individuals with such narratives want to rationalize all episodes and differentiate their experiences so that each experience becomes a separate identity that is hard to relate to the others. If Ashima personifies the loneliness of a woman in exile, then she also shows ways of overcoming that solitude. She decides to do something for herself and pursues her interest in music. She is finally able to assert her individuality thanks to her American experience. Rather than following in the footsteps of her late husband, who idolized the life of a wanderer, she seeks a sort of permanence in these wanderings. Giddens describes the process of life-planning as the "substantial content of the reflexively organized trajectory of the self" (85). Ashima's diachronic identity construction is also indicative of life-planning, which "presupposes a specific mode of organizing time because the reflexive construction of self-identity depends as much on preparing for the future as on interpreting the past, although the 'reworking' of past events is certainly always important in this process" (Giddens 85).

Gogol or Nikhil Ganguli, the second-generation immigrant son, is the central character in the novel. He is the namesake of Nikoloi Gogol, the Russian writer, and is the central consciousness around whom this diasporic tale is constructed. Gogol's identity is first problematized by his parents. It was a custom in their family for the grandparents to choose a name for their grandchildren. However, the letter bearing the child's name from Ashima's grandmother was lost in transit. Ashoke had to provide a name for the hospital records, and he decides to name his son Gogol. However, it is also customary in Bengali families to assign a *bhalonaam*, a formal name, to be used outside the familial context. His parents choose the name Nikhil when Gogol is about to begin school. But Gogol creates the second problematization of his identity by preferring to be called Gogol rather than Nikhil. In Krushna Chandra Mishra's words:

For quite some time the reader is confronted with the insistent question so skillfully raised in *The Namesake*, namely, how indispensable is a name in the recognition, success, and satisfaction in one's life. In other words, how inseparably intertwined with one's name is one's entire identity? How, like

the body-soul or the body-shadow duo conception, does name-identity duo stay in a kind of unimaginable inseparableness? (166)

By the time Gogol is fourteen, he has come to hate questions pertaining to his name and having to constantly explain its meaning: “At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear” (Lahiri 76). Ashoke tries to explain the significance of Gogol’s namesake to him, but Gogol has a very different perception of his name, because “[n]ot only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name” (78). Gogol changes his name to Nikhil when he starts attending university. He wants his friends and acquaintances to only call him by his new name: “[N]ow that he’s Nikhil it’s easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas” (105). Thus, he relates the nominal identity to behavior. Since he has adopted the new name, he feels he is the master of his own “self” and he need not be concerned about his parents’ expectations of him. In other words, it is his coming of age, a yearning for another identity, distinct from the shadow of his parents.

The nominal and cultural dualities in Gogol’s narrative represent the multi-identity dimension of his reflexive identity, where patterns connecting different episodes appear more ambiguous and inconsistent. Individuals in this category tend to separate the episodes according to different social contexts and often find it difficult to connect external incidents and their self-conception with each other (Lindgren and Wählin 371). The Gogol part of the “self” is unable to reconcile his multiple identities for quite some time. Being the offspring of Indian parents, he is not brought up to embrace American values. It is a matter of satisfaction for his parents that

Gogol does not date anyone in high school. He suffers quiet crushes, which he admits to no one, on this girl or that girl with whom he is already friends. He does not attend dances or parties His parents do not find it strange that their son doesn’t date, does not rent a tuxedo for his junior prom. They have never been on a date in their lives and therefore they have no reason to encourage Gogol, certainly not at his age. (Lahiri 93)

On the other hand, the Nikhil part of the “self” can voluntarily do and does everything that Gogol cannot:

It is as Nikhil, that first semester, that he grows a goatee, starts smoking Camel Lights at parties and while writing papers and before exams, discovers Brian Eno and Elvis Costello and Charlie Parker. It is as Nikhil that he takes Metro-North into Manhattan one weekend with Jonathan and gets himself a fake ID that allows him to be served liquor in New Haven bars. It is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party at Ezra Stiles. (105)

Lindgren and Wåhlin posit that the voluntaristic discourse relates to individuals who exhibit narratives of emancipation, having generally suffered from some crisis, or some other important change in their lives, which leads them to develop a more holistic view through deeper internal reflection (373). Such individuals do not restrict themselves to any one culture or tradition, rather, they tend to break patterns and choose their own way. Gogol truly inhabits multiple cultural spaces at different points in his lifespan. As he enters adulthood, his Americanization process is accelerated, especially when he starts living with Maxine, his white girlfriend. Unlike his parents' house, the house of Maxine's parents is replete with numerous artifacts and is aesthetically designed. As an architect, Gogol feels interested in it. At the dinner table, there is a genial atmosphere which strikes Gogol, for he has not been used to this kind of frankness in his own house when his father's Bengali friends have visited. It is just not possible for him to fall in love with Maxine without falling in love with "the house, and Gerald and Lydia's manner of living, for to know her is to know all of these things" (137). He likes their lifestyle and molds himself to be a part of this American family. The distancing of the "self" from Indian traditions leads to the discovery of a new life and lifestyle in America. As Giddens explains, "[i]n a post-traditional social universe, reflexively organized, permeated by abstract systems, and in which the reordering of time and space realigns the local with the global, the 'self' undergoes massive change" (80).

We learn that Nikhil has in fact always been ashamed of his Indian identity. He compares his parents with those of Maxine's and observes the differences in their physical and emotional relationships. He notices how the Radcliffs go to their lake house every year for the sheer pleasure of living away from the hustle and bustle of their busy lives in New York. He compares these with his family's annual visits to Kolkata, which are undertaken as part of a duty and not for the sake of pleasure. In living at the Radcliffs, a strange feeling overtakes Gogol. He feels that he is not independent: "And yet for some reason, it is dependence, not adulthood he

feels. He feels free of expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his own life” (142). Gogol’s parents smugly believe in his innocence, but the fact is that he has interiorized the influence of his environment and has grown up like an American teenager. At the same time, we gradually realize that even though Nikhil tries to adopt the mainstream culture of America, he is unable to fully reject the heritage culture passed on by his parents. He learns to relativize his experiences and reflections in order to come to terms with his multiple identities. Giddens contends that

[b]eing ‘at ease’ in the world is certainly problematic in the era of high modernity, in which a framework of ‘care’ and the development of ‘shared histories’ with others are largely reflexive achievements. But such histories often provide settings in which ontological security is sustained in the relatively unproblematic way, at least for specific phases of an individual’s life. (126)

Consequently, Nikhil tends to package his experiences in different realities, and to a certain extent he tries to integrate these conflicting reflections, especially after his father’s death. As Gogol, when he goes to Cleveland to get his father’s body, he reaches the apartment where his father had been staying. It is here that the seriousness of the loss overwhelms him. Thinking of his father living there alone for the last three months of his life, Nikhil/Gogol feels the “first threat of tears” (174). Lying on the couch, his mind tries to guess the sequence of events leading to his father’s death. On the next day, when he takes the flight to Boston where his mother, sister, and some family friends are waiting for him, he feels terrified. He feels guilty, for he could do nothing for his father: “He knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside at being able to do nothing when their parents died in India, of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing left to do” (179). It is with his father’s death that he first experiences remorse at his lack of regard for his parents and this indicates his true coming of age.

If, as Nikhil, he displays a voluntaristic discourse and wants to be liberated from cultural traditions by disconnecting the multiple parts of his identity, then after his father’s death, as Gogol again, he develops a more relativistic way of reasoning. Though he has deliberately stayed away from his parents, he hovers close enough to their house. He realizes that he only came home for the sake of his family. This means that he is unconsciously tied to his family and their lifestyle even as he interiorizes the ways of the

Americans. Lindgren and Wåhlin suggest that individuals who reflect relativistically “construct their own collage of cultural impressions. Stimulating experiences in the present are the dominant memories related, providing a way for emphasizing self-images” (373). Gogol comes to terms with dividing his life into separate parts. His father’s death is a crisis that has forced him to develop a more complete view of life. It is the repressed part of his consciousness that manifests at this stage of his life. Along with the physical part, the emotional part of the “self” cannot be disinherited from his Indian parents. It is no less than an epiphany to him and this need for self-knowledge creates an inward journey.

Giddens urges us to consider that “[f]ateful moments are transition points which have major implications not just for the circumstances of an individual’s future conduct, but for self-identity. For consequential decisions, once taken, will reshape the reflexive project of identity through the lifestyle consequences which ensue” (143). Sitting in his old room, at his mother’s farewell party, Gogol realizes that after his mother is gone, the name Gogol Ganguli will vanish from the lips of his loved ones. This is disconcerting rather than reassuring for him. His loss is much more at the end: his wife deserts him, his father is dead, and his mother also leaves him to lead an independent existence. However, it is now that he reaches a true level of self-understanding and free will and switches between voluntaristic and relativistic reasoning. He makes it a point to break patterns and choose his own direction independently. Somewhere, the legacy of the diaspora left behind by his father is sought to be claimed by him. He has come to possess the will to pursue his dream of making it big as an architect and creating his own identity. This layer of the “self” is not built by destructing his former identities, rather, it is an amalgamation of his past “selves” that will continue to be a part of his “being” and “becoming.”

The last major character in the novel, Moushmi Mazoomdar, the second-generation immigrant daughter or daughter-in-law, is portrayed as a beautiful, sensuous and an intellectually accomplished girl, who sometimes oversteps the limits of her freedom. Her lack of commitment and rootlessness are evident in her numerous affairs with men and ultimately in the breakdown of her marriage with Gogol. Hers is an interesting psychological study, for she reacts strongly against any restriction on her impulses and instincts. Despite her parents’ efforts to cultivate her as a demure Bengali girl fit for a Bengali husband, she “had made a pact with two other girls she knew, never to marry a Bengali man”

(Lahiri 213). As she enters adolescence her parents try to introduce her to Bengali bachelors, but Moushmi does not like it. At the end of her college education, she has no stable boyfriend, neither Indian nor American. Instead, she has had a series of short-term relationships with students and professors from her university. In this sense, Moushmi tends to exhibit multi-identity construction tendencies. In such individuals, Lindgren and Wåhlin have observed that “the pattern connecting different episodes and contexts appeared more ambiguous and inconsistent” (371). In various phases of her life and in her liaisons with different men, Moushmi attempts to develop a sense of coherence, but when she transitions into a new relationship, she tends to leave her past tendencies behind and develops a new sense of identity. Lindgren and Wåhlin further remark in their study of individuals exhibiting the multi-identity dimension that “[t]heir narratives were ‘packaged’, in the sense that each episode was described as a single ‘parcel’ with its own wrapping and its own content” (371).

Moushmi’s first serious relationship is with Graham while she is in Paris. Graham is an American businessman who is learning French with Moushmi. At first, she hides this relationship from her parents but later when her parents meet Graham, they do not say much, because many other Bengali girls had married outside the community. Graham even visits Moushmi’s relatives in Kolkata, but he finds Indian culture “repressive and the society somewhat provincial” (Lahiri 217). Moushmi realizes that he has been fooling everybody and after a series of arguments she breaks up with him. When she meets Gogol, she does not tell him about Graham as she is afraid that he might reject her:

By the time she’d met him, she’d begun to fear she was retreating into her former self, before Paris—untouched, bookish, alone. She recalled the panic she’d felt, all her friends married. She’d even considered placing a personal ad. But he had accepted her, had obliterated her former disgrace. (249)

Her marriage to Gogol is an arranged one, for which initiative was taken by their parents. Moushmi retains her independent identity by not changing her surname after marriage, life after which continues smoothly for a while. They party frequently and enjoy life, but then the familiarity that brought them together starts working against their intimacy. She appears faithful to her husband by having revealed her past to him. On their first marriage anniversary she receives an offer to teach French in Paris, but she rejects it. For a while, we are assured of her seriousness in matters

concerning marriage, but she is unable to continue much longer as she sees her parents' repressive marriage in her own life as well. Despite agreeing to an arranged marriage, with her liberal views, American education, and European experience, Moushmi wants to break away from her traditional Indian upbringing. She wants to have choices and independence in her relationships, offered to her by the reflexive modernity across all her homelands. According to Giddens,

[a]nyone who contemplates marriage today, or who faces a situation of the break-up of a marriage or a long-term intimate relationship, knows a great deal (not always on the level of discursive awareness) about 'what is going on' in the social arena of marriage and divorce. Such knowledge is not incidental to what is actually going on, but constitutive of it—as is true of all contexts of social life in conditions of modernity. (14)

While having lived in many different cultures, if the “self” in Moushmi tends to fluctuate towards a multi-identity dimension, her true yearning is to move towards an emancipated mode of life. For individuals rooted in a single culture, they “refer continuously to cultural traditions in order to explain their line of reasoning, while others make an explicit point of being emancipated from all sorts of traditions and social structures” (Lindgren and Wåhlin 372). Moushmi regrets having been so prudish in the past: “She regrets herself as a teenager. She regrets her obedience, her long, unstyled hair, her piano lessons and lace-collared shirts. She regrets her mortifying lack of confidence, the extra ten pounds she carried on her frame during puberty” (Lahiri 214). Moving between two extreme cultures, British and Indian, and a further push into American culture, Moushmi wants to transform herself physically and psychologically. In Giddens's words: “The body, like the ‘self,’ becomes a site of interaction, appropriation and reappropriation, linking reflexively organized processes and systematically ordered expert knowledge. The body itself has become emancipated—the condition for its reflexive restructuring” (218). Having felt dominated by her parents during her childhood, when Moushmi enters university, she goes against their wishes and decides to study French. She finds refuge in French culture and civilization. Though Moushmi seeks freedom from traditions, her need for constructing an emancipated identity is met neither by Indian culture nor by American culture, but in French culture, which is a sort of third space. It appears that she does not have much time for deep self-reflection as she moves from one geography to

another, from one man to another, from one cultural space to another through the course of her life.

In the end, Moushmi attempts to live in the present and creates her own collage of cultural traditions in a completely alien French culture. In general, she displays a relativistic approach to reasoning in her life. In Dimitri she seeks to find relative happiness, since he's neither Indian nor American. In their theorization of relativistic discourse, Lindgren and Wählin characterize such individuals in a way that their "[a]ction and the outer dynamic tempo provide a vigorous pulse in the different narratives These individuals live in an overwhelming stream of present experiences and have distanced themselves long ago from cultural traditions in classical ways" (373). Thus, Moushmi is a diasporic rootless girl living in the age of reflexive modernization. For her there is no question of getting tied to a center. Neither family nor culture can bind her. Moushmi is an example of complete disconnection from her home culture and emancipation in every sense of the word. Even though she gets married to an Indian American and seems to make an attempt to be happy, she soon realizes that it is not her true "self": "Along with the Sanskrit vows she'd repeated at her wedding, she'd privately vowed that she'd never fully grow dependent on her husband, as her mother has!" (Lahiri 247). She defies all patterns, and her identity takes on a kind of unpredictability. There is no closure given to Moushmi's relationship with Dimitri, indicating the perpetual nature of her "becoming."

The Namesake can be primarily viewed as a diasporic text to which the sub-themes of family ties, clash of values, cross-cultural relationships, love and loneliness contribute. Lahiri, herself a second-generation diasporic writer living in the United States, occupies what Bhabha refers to as the "interstitial" position (4) and is eminently qualified to represent the immigrant experience of the Indian diaspora in American society. She has experienced, firsthand, the community of expatriate Bengalis in the Boston area; their lonely lives punctuated by periodic get-togethers of fellow expatriates; the customs and worldviews through which they see their own everyday experience; and the struggle of their American children with their own questions of identity and belonging. The novel also strongly explores the question of diasporic identity, apparent in the title itself and the importance attached by the protagonist to his name. However, to view it as simply a portrayal of a struggle for defining oneself in an alien culture is to adopt a reductionist viewpoint. Min Hyung Song argues that *The Namesake* is distinct from other ethnic narratives representing a

postmodern allegory (345–46) of individuals displaced from their homeland in the age of globalization, and who consequently adopt, what Arjun Appadurai calls “multiple homelands” (189) as their permanent “dislocation” for constructing the “self” in a reflexive manner. The diasporic individual in the contemporary era has to make lifestyle choices according to the specific cultural requirements in each homeland. Giddens advocates that

[s]elf-identity for us forms a trajectory across the different institutional settings of modernity over the *durée* of what used to be called the ‘life cycle’, a term which applies much more accurately to non-modern contexts than to modern ones. Each of us not only ‘has’, but lives a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life. Modernity is a post-traditional order, in which the question, ‘How shall I live?’ has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat—and many other things—as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity. (14)

The trajectory of a diaspora follows the pattern of location, dislocation and relocation, each one of these phases being liminal rather than sharply defined. K. Satchidanandan asserts that the process of integration is a slow one-sided one and is not without a sense of loss and exile (51). Being American should not exclude being Indian, being Bengali, or being Hindu. The identity construction process does not involve a clear transformation; it gives rise to hybridity throughout the acculturation stages. In Homi K. Bhabha’s words, “[t]his interstitial passage between fixed identifications, opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4). Identity, therefore, is not static at any given moment, but is constantly under formation. We cannot really proclaim Moushmi a successful convert to a new culture and Gogol a denizen of the twilight region. In fact, we need to be careful while labeling the diasporic because, as Atanu Bhattacharya suggests,

the expatriate’s (the erstwhile exile or the diasporic intellectual) identity needs to resist the theorizing centripetal pull of ‘dislocatedness’—a category that now defines, and therefore limits ‘authentic marginality’—by counterpoising it with a ‘relocatedness’ a ground that creates stability and equipoise, however fleeting that may be. The diaspora has now to be understood in terms of not as a site of contestation where ignorant (or not so

ignorant) armies clash by night, but as a site of constellation—a space that provides equal weightage to the logic of identity. (142)

If the second-generation of the diaspora has been torn between two cultures, such a situation may not arise at all in the case of the third- and subsequent generations, for, as Gogol and Moushmi have shown, they do not feel duty-bound to adhere to the cultural code of their parents' heritage country. In problematizing the category of the diasporic, Lahiri seems to be hinting at the irrelevance of the linkage of identity with race and nationality. Adesh Pal explains that “[u]ltimately Lahiri anticipates the prevalence of global identity that relies upon neither nationality nor ethnicity, but personal prerogative, an identity to be forged by the third-generation and beyond” (149).

Viewed in this way, a definition of identity for diasporic individuals straddling multiple geographies in what Manuel Castells calls the “network society” (69–70) must not only include personal biographical aspects, but also cater to the diversity and complexities of the cosmopolitan lives led by what Ronald Niezen terms “glocal” individuals (81–82). It should describe the individual's present in terms of their past in the former homeland, and also explain their links with the unfamiliar environment and their attempts to (re)create personal identity in the new homeland. Cultural identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’”. It belongs to the future as much as to the past” (Hall 23). Therefore, identarian development for the contemporary diasporic individual comprises both the Heideggerian experience of “being” as well as the process of “becoming” rooted in Giddens' characterization of reflexive modernization. To this effect, Stuart Hall maintains that “[i]dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (23).

Finally, it can be said that identity creation is a reflexive process where the individual shifts from one dimension of self-expression to another, sometimes in a linear fashion, and at other times in a cyclical manner. Lindgren and Wåhlin's four-factor reflexive identity construction model, largely based on Giddens' conceptualization of self-identity in late modernity, not only helps us to understand the ontological development in *The Namesake's* characters, but also helps us to identify developmental patterns associated with intergenerational differences. Within the context of a late modern culture like the United States, we see that the first-generation individuals primarily show an integrated identity dimension,

and their underlying narratives are rationalistic. The second-generation individuals mostly display a multi-identity dimension with a preference for relativistic discourses. These dimensions should be seen as a continuum with a possibility for the “self” to shift when it encounters various social and personal dilemmas associated with late modernity. Diasporic individuals continuously reflect upon sociocultural interactions within their heritage and adopted cultures. Incorporating parts of the peripheral identities, and searching for a home in what Gordon Mathews calls the global cultural supermarket (9), the diasporic “self” therefore constructs its own narrative and develops a reflexive identity with discernable constitutive and hybrid components.

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