Chapter III
Cultural Dislocation and Changing Identities: Jhumpa Lahiri’s
The Namesake and Unaccustomed Earth

Travelling and adapting new cultures are major issues in the contemporary globalizing environment. Diasporic fiction attempts to offer credible solutions to this crisis of communication between cultures. It is through literature that many contemporary writers try to come to terms with their immigrant condition, to find a voice of their own by making the two worlds they are forced to live in coexist harmoniously within the site of the traumatized self.

The Namesake is set against the backdrop of the 1970s and 1980s when Indian migration to the West, particularly the United States, was rampant due to the effect of rising globalization. The novel celebrates the cultural hybridity that emerges from globalization, reveals the interconnectedness of the modern world and rethinks conventional immigrant experience. Lahiri’s text exploits the possibilities of living differently. She produces new forms of identity in her characters who cross geographic, cultural and political borders and constitute centred and mobile identities for themselves. It explores the conflicts of Indian immigrants of both the first and second generations, over a period of two decades starting from the 1960s. Generally, the first-generation migrant stories centre on dislocation, displacement, uprootedness, racism, and the effects of cultural difference, while the fiction about the second generation migrants growing up in United States has a different emphasis, focusing primarily on the questions of identity and belonging. While the first-generation settlers display identities formed by their country of origin which may shift in varying degrees through the changed and changing social relations of gender, class, and race in America, their children are faced with the problem of creating a positive sense of the self as American in the face of every day and institutional discrimination. The experience of the second-generation children who attend American schools and who are directly exposed to American culture serves to question the ideas, values and practices of the first generation migrants in the United States.

The Namesake stresses the flow of people coming and going on the borderland that blurs the national boundary and suggests hybrid and transnational identities. Lahiri also emphasizes how the immigrants with their endless process of crossing and recrossing the borders inevitably create familial, cultural, linguistic and economic ties across national borders. Her characters live in-between, straddling two worlds, making their identity transnational. She deterritorializes the national and cultural identities of India implying that individuals need not constrain themselves to the narrow concept of national and cultural boundaries in this globalized world.

The novel follows the story of the Ganguli family - Ashoke and Ashima, and their Americanized children, Gogol and Sonia in America. They arrive as strangers and spend the rest of their lives negotiating the
complex dynamics of home and homeland, immigration and integration. The novel begins with an epigraph from Nikolai Gogol’s critically acclaimed short story “The Overcoat”:

The reader should realize himself that it could not have happened otherwise, and that to give him any other name was quite out of the question.

This quotation is a concise rendering of the novel’s central concern; it also highlights the centrality of intertextuality. The reference to Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat,” a story written in early nineteenth century, stresses the perpetuity of the concern. The fiction examines the significance of name-giving in the novel, the significance that Gogol’s name has for his life: how his name gives shape to his life and determines its course. In this context, Ruediger Heinze comments:

The entire novel hinges on a name: Gogol. Gogol is the protagonist and, beyond addressing obvious questions of personal identity, telling his story through a focus on his name reflects crucial issues of cultural identity, diaspora and multiculturalism. Gogol’s story is dominated by the effect of his name on his relationships to family, friends and lovers: in other words on his affection. (193)

Heinze means that serious issues like identity, diasporic experience and multiculturalism are discussed in relation to the pivotal event of naming.

The novel revolves around two major events: Ashoke’s death and Gogol’s consequent reconciliation with his Indian heritage. Although The Namesake is an account of Indian settlement in America spanning two generations, parents and children do not ultimately present opposing narratives in the text. The accounts of the parents, Ashima and Ashoke, are complemented by those of the children, Gogol and Sonia. They form a continuum which contributes to the novel’s capacity to encapsulate both the past and the present in order to assess critically the ongoing implications of a diasporic process of identity construction in the United States. Ashoke Ganguli, whose name is “a legacy of the British, an anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, “Gangopadhyay,” was born in India(67). The surname of “Ganguly” is a sort of “third space” created when colonialism intervened in the indigenous history of Calcutta.

After a train accident that nearly took his life and left him in bed for over a year, he decides after his recovery to change his life plans and be as far as possible “from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died” (20). After graduating as an engineer, he goes to the United States to continue his studies leading to a PhD degree. He returns to India in order to find a wife, and he has his marriage arranged with a young woman, Ashima. After the wedding the couple fly to the United States where Ashoke spends the rest of his life. The beginning is hard for Ashima as she not only misses her relatives but also has difficulty in adapting to the new culture. Things get worse when she gets pregnant as it accentuates her fears and afflictions:
But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all . . . But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare. (5-6)

The narrator expresses in telling phrases the apprehensions of a woman faced with the problems of acculturation.

When the baby is born, Ashoke and Ashima have different feelings about having a child in a foreign country. When the baby receives books as presents in the hospital, Ashoke analyzes this fact as a benefit of being born in the United States: “[I]ucky boy,’’ Ashoke remarks . . . ‘‘Only hours old and already the owner of books.’’ What a difference, he thinks, from the childhood he has known”(24). However, Ashima only sees the negative aspects, showing once more how she feels about living far from India:

Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby’s birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can’t help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. (24-25)

She loses the sense of community and belonging in the United States. Ashima feels lonely because she has no members of her family with her. If she were in India, things would be different and her baby would be born at her parents’ house surrounded by people taking care of her, not in a place (hospital) where people come “either to suffer or to die” (4). Thus, right from the beginning, Gogol is not where he is supposed to be, at his grandparents’ house instead of a hospital. He is not born the way he is meant to be, surrounded by members of family instead of nurses, doctors and strangers. These are heart breaking and depressing facts for Ashima and “she can’t help but pity” Gogol, as he has arrived to this world in such deprived circumstances (25). Before they leave the hospital Ashoke and Ashima are asked to give a formal name to their child, to complete the hospital formalities. Despite their great effort to explain the Bengali way, which requires the newborn to be named by an elder from the family, the hospital
officials insist on a name to be given to the child immediately. They name him after Ashoke’s favourite Russian writer’s last name, Gogol. However, they intend to keep it as their son’s pet name to be used by the members of family and give him his proper name when the long awaited letter, bearing the baby’s name arrives from India. The letter is lost somewhere in-between United States and India. So, Gogol is named the American way, immediately after his birth.

The significance of his name is more important than Gogol being named the American way. He is a boy born to Bengali parents in America. However, he is given the name that is neither American nor Bengali, but Russian. Actually, it is not even a name, but a last name. So, the whole naming story is an important marker of his hybridity. However, the Gangulis have to seriously think about Gogol’s good name only when he is about to enter kindergarten. At this time, Ashoke considers he has found the perfect name, Nikhil, as it has a meaning in Bengali and also resembles Nikolai, the first name of the Russian writer.

Ashima and the baby start a very secluded life. Gogol sleeps listening to Bengali songs in a house filled with the smell of samosas and other Indian food (35). He grows up eating Indian food made with American ingredients because the necessary ingredients are not available in the United States, thus creating “hybrid” meals (38). Things are only “half true” as Ashima complains and she feels the worst when they have to celebrate Gogol’s annaprasan (25). This ceremony usually takes place in the presence of close relatives and the first solid food the baby is to taste is rice, “the Bengali staff of life.” This is traditionally given to the baby by his uncle or grandfather, but none of these people are present at Gogol’s annaprasan. So, Dilip Nandi (a close family friend) is entrusted with the role of Ashima’s brother, “to hold the child and feed him rice” (38-39). The service plates are also melamine whereas they should ideally be silver or brass. Nothing is truly Indian or authentic; they are make-believe, only substitutes for what they are
supposed to be. Gogol is in between two cultures right from the first days of his life. As Gogol grows older, he gets to know the American way of living and he is introduced to another culture and language by his parents alongside his Indian education at home.

When Gogol is ready to enter kindergarten his parents decide to give him a new name Nikhil. It is a perfectly respectable Bengali name meaning “he who is entire, encompassing all” (56). It also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai the first name of the Russian writer Gogol. Young Gogol refuses to accept his new name for “[h]e is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him” (57). His parents' explanation that “they each have two names, too, as do all their Bengali friends in America, and all their relatives in Calcutta. It's a part of growing up, part of being a Bengali” does not convince him of the necessity to have a new name (57). Subsequently, Gogol refuses to answer by his new name at school and the name Nikhil is crossed out from his records. Ashowe and Ashima have a feeling that they have failed to follow an important tradition of their culture.

When their second child is born, they decide that she will only have a good name to avoid the trouble they had with Gogol: “[f]or their daughter, good name and pet name are one and the same: Sonali, meaning 'she who is golden’” (62). Contrary to Gogol, Sonali will not face any problems with her name as they soon start calling her Sonia: “at home they begin to call her Sonu, then Sona, and finally Sonia. Sonia makes her a citizen of the world” (62). When Gogol is young he does not mind his name: “[i]t all seems perfectly normal. It doesn’t bother him that his name is never an option on key chains or metal pins or refrigerator magnets” (66). However, when he is at high school, his name becomes a concern:

For by now, he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it doesn't mean anything in "Indian"... He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. (75-76)

For Gogol his name is a cultural paradigm of his identity or the self. Since he is in the process of constructing his cultural identity, he feels uneasy when encountered by the question of meaning of his name.

The concern he has with his name is related to his condition as a hybrid subject, of not belonging, and of not quite seeing himself as entirely American or Indian. In fact, he feels that his name does not translate well who he is. Since it is Russian, it does not contribute to telling him who he is: Indian, American, or Indian-American. Besides, as he considers later, Nikhil, the good name his parents tried to give him could be shortened to Nick, and therefore would be a Bengali name that could be perfectly translated into an American name. It is, therefore, possible to say that the distress about his name is a result of an identity issue related to his hybrid