

**"But you're Indian!" Cultural Hybridity and Assimilation in
*The Namesake***

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Abstract

This paper is a study of the cultural struggle and conflict survived by the protagonists in *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri as they move from their native land to America. It is an application of the theoretical concepts of hybridity and assimilation, as discussed in post-colonial criticism by critics such as Homi Bhabha. The researcher will discuss how the three main characters finally manage to develop new anti-monolithic models of cultural growth and exchange. As a result, they succeed in embracing a new culture while protecting their Bengali heritage. The novel depicts the life of an Indian couple (Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli) who settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1968. It describes the cultural challenges the heroine faces as she struggles to accommodate to a new Western society. Ashima clings tightly to her Bengali roots and identity, a fact which becomes apparent through the dilemma caused over naming their first baby. However, to survive the challenges of Massachusetts' society, Ashima welcomes its culture to a certain extent. Thus, she succeeds in overcoming feelings of loneliness and displacement. On the other hand, Ashoke's adjustment is less complicated. Although he copes with the new Western life faster, his respect for his native traditions is daily observed. His resentment of his children's attempt to give up their native identity is heartbreaking. Early in the novel, Gogol rejects symbols of his Indian culture, and later he repudiates his parents' style of life. Finally and after his father's death, Gogol's personal growth is associated not only with him welcoming his native culture, but also embracing both cultures in an excellent example of cultural hybridity.

Keywords: alienation, assimilation, contact zone, cultural clash, Jhumpa Lahiri, hybrid existence, *The Namesake*, 'third space,' trans-cultural identity

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1. Statement of the Problem

This paper is a study of hybridity and assimilation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). The researcher will focus on the conflicts faced by the three protagonists (Gogol, Ashima, and Ashoke) as they leave their native land (India) to the more modernized world of the United States. The researcher applies post-colonial terms of hybridity, assimilation, the 'third space,' and multiculturalism to study the hybrid character of the Indian immigrant as depicted in Lahiri's novel. She will look for signs of hybridity and contact zones to find out whether multiculturalism produces an acceptance or a resistance to Western culture. The primary question posed here: do these contact zones create transcultural forms or a singular fixed native identity? The paper will discuss how the characters manage finally, despite the challenges of a foreign culture, to develop new anti-monolithic models of cultural growth and exchange. As a result, they succeed in embracing a new culture while protecting their Bengali heritage. On the other hand, the researcher will discuss how the characters manage to keep the uniqueness of their culture while trying to cope with the demands of the Western world. It is worth mentioning here that despite the dominant theme of social integration, Lahiri never introduces the West as a substitute for native identity. Despite the implications of successful hybrid relations among two different races (Bengali and American), Lahiri emphasizes the significance of native identity and all the habits and rituals it dictates.

2. Significance of the Study

Different literary studies have investigated the theme of alienation and cultural identity in Lahiri's fiction (Abishmathi, 2018; Taş and Snömez, 2014; Mishra, 2008; Dawes, 2007). However, most research on *The Namesake* focuses on Gogol's identity crisis, which is the central theme of the novel and from which it has derived its title. This paper will encompass different gender characters and will study how each character deals with his/her cultural conflicts differently. In addition, it will show to what extent they accept cultural diversity while showing great respect or lack of respect for their native Indian culture. The researcher will show how personal and cultural conflicts enrich the individual experience rather than dehumanize it. In an attempt to defeat feelings of Otherness, the characters try hard to create a 'third space' of their own where they can welcome the attractive features of the new world while clinging to their original identity. Nevertheless, Lahiri does not introduce cultural assimilation or social integration as a substitute for native identity. She seems to suggest that cultural hybridity never undermines the immigrant's fundamental values and culture.

3. The Theoretical Approach

Whenever hybridity is the focus of literary discussion, Homi Bhabha is immediately quoted. He uses the concepts 'third space' and 'in-between space' to describe the overlapping of cultures in a contact zone. The result of this cultural encounter is cultural hybridity, which results in "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone" (Ashcroft et al., 1995, p. 118) usually produced by the more dominant culture (that of the Self). Bhabha argues that these new forms come together as a counter-discourse to the dominant and hegemonic structures of the Self. This counter-discourse opposes national narratives of culture and belonging. Furthermore, these hegemonic discourses blend culture and society in an attempt to "authorize cultural hybridities that

emerge in moments of historical transformation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). Similarly, Michael Wolf (2007) uses the term "mediation space" (p. 113) as he refers to Bhabha's 'third space.' At the same time, Schaffener and Adab (2001) suggest that this space is "of fuzzy and merging borders which in turn affect cultural and linguistic identities" (p. 278). Thus the latter indicate that hybridity is a constituting characteristic of social interaction, which is inevitable in a world featured by the globalization of communication. In her fiction, Lahiri depicts the issues of identity and cultural distinctiveness as significant themes. She focuses on the distinguishing aspects of her native culture (the culture of the Other) within a clash of civilizations, which initially motivates a resistance of the foreign culture only to stimulate, eventually, the development of a hybridized form of culture. Consequently, Lahiri's literature introduces models of cultural exchange and growth.

4. Cultural Hybridity and Assimilation in *The Namesake*

The Namesake tells the story of two generations: the elderly generation- an Indian couple (Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli) who settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1968, and the American-born younger generation (the Ganguli's children Gogol and Sonia). It depicts multiple experiences of the Gangulis who seek a better life in America. The elderly generation more specifically suffers alienation, loneliness, cultural dilemma, and a sense of displacement. The center of narration is the life of this ethnic family in a community that celebrates personal freedom and independence. Each character struggles to balance the Western and Indian cultures and values. As the parents succeed in creating such balance by managing cultural hybridity, it seems more difficult for their children to appreciate their native culture and roots.

4. i. Gogol

While the parents try hard to implant love of India and respect for Indian values and Hindu rituals in their children, Gogol and his sister find such loyalty to a homeland they have never known or lived in absolutely ridiculous. For Gogol, India is a primitive setting where he and his sister will be deprived of all means of civilization they have grown up used to. As a teenager, Gogol's trip to Calcutta with his family is disappointing. When they meet their relatives at Dum Dum Airport, both Gogol and Sonia do not feel close to them as their parents do. They think that the whole trip is "cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 88). Soon American meals and fast food which Gogol desires badly are replaced by "plates of syrupy, spongy rossogollas" (p. 82) for which he has no appetite but which he dutifully eats. Gogol realizes that he must adjust to a less civilized accommodation. He sleeps under a mosquito net and bathes by pouring tin cups of water over his head. At the Ganguli house, he sees the ebony four-poster bed on which they would have slept all together had his parents remained in India. The mere thought of the lack of privacy is terrifying for Gogol. He is never compassionate about the place where his roots lie. He never feels that he belongs there. Ironically speaking, Gogol is a foreigner in India.

He feels alienated in his homeland. His alienation is not only spatial, but it is also linguistic. His American-accented English is not understood by his Indian relatives though it is "a source of endless amusement" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 118) to them. Gogol can understand his mother tongue and speak it fluently, but he cannot read or write it. On the other hand, Gogol refuses to be called

ABCD (American-born Confused Deshi) because the term suggests marginality, which Gogol never feels in America. He refuses to be a victim of the label, which implies a confusion regarding identity (hypothetically suffered by all South Asians born in America). On the contrary, Gogol feels he is the exotic alien in 'desh' (India)! India, for him, is not a homeland. It is a "foreign country" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 118) in which he is physically and psychologically alienated. Here, Lahiri raises the question of what is one's homeland: is it the place where one is born, brought up, and lives? Or is it the place where his roots lie? Though this question is to the core of the characters' personal and cultural conflicts, the novel leaves the question unanswered.

Gogol is the novel's central character. He imitates the language, the dress, and cultural attitudes of Western society where he was born and raised. He rejects his native roots and intentionally suppresses his own cultural identity. As a child, he hates being dragged off with his sister to "Knights of Columbus hall overtaken by Bengalis where they are told to throw marigold petals at a cardboard effigy of some goddess and eat bland vegetarian food" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 64). For Gogol and Sonia, such ritual cannot compare to Christmas, "when they hang stockings on the fireplace mantel, and set cookies for Santa Claus, and receive heaps of presents, and stay home from school" (pp. 64-65). As an adult, he welcomes the symbols of the dominant foreign culture while complaining about Hindu rituals that his parents are keen to practice. After four years in New Haven, Gogol is reluctant to go home on weekends or to go with them to Pujos and Bengali parties (p. 126).

At a certain point, Gogol becomes obsessed with particular codes associated with Western values such as independence and personal freedom. When he graduates from college, he lives in a separate apartment. He is engaged in different romantic relationships with different women. Like his American friends, Gogol drinks, smokes, prefers the Beatles, and never enjoys Kathakali's performance at the Memorial Hall. He deliberately distances himself from his parents, seeking an American lifestyle. He is fascinated with the free and pleasurable lifestyle of Maxine, his American girlfriend. He sleeps with her in her parents' house, which is something that Ashima refuses to tell her Bengali friends. He spends his Christmas holiday with Maxine. Her parents warmly welcome him. When Gogol introduces Maxine to his parents, he warns her about kissing him or holding his hand in front of them, an expression of emotions that remains private among Bengali couples. Gogol realizes the difference between his parents and Maxine's parents' lifestyle. When they receive Gogol for the first time, the Ratliffes are not formal with him. They serve him small dishes, and Lydia, Maxine's mother, pays no attention to Gogol's plate. Gogol knows that his mother would never serve a few dishes to a guest. When Ashima receives Maxine for the first time, she offers her flavored pink lassi, samosas, and then a big heavy lunch. Gogol's parents remain silent during the meal because, in India, one should not talk while eating. On the other hand, Gogol enjoys dinner parties with the Ratliffes because they are loud and lively. The tables are candlelit, and wine is served. He likes their intelligent talks and the elegance of the whole atmosphere. Preeti Puri (2015) suggests that Maxine's parents are the center of attraction in these dinner parties while "Ashima and Ashoke behaved like caterers in their own home" (p. 35). Gogol desires his girlfriend's free life. Maxine deepens his sense of independent maturity away from his native culture and Indian values, which he believes to be restricting.

Gogol's confrontation with Indian culture can be seen in the main conflict over his name. His Indian birth name has been chosen by Ashima's grandmother, who has posted it in a letter to the United States. Unfortunately, the letter is lost in transit, and the name remains a mystery. Heinze (2007) comments that Gogol's Indian name "remains part of the realm of the imaginary, with the imaginary connection to the homeland due to its origin" (p. 194). For bureaucratic reasons, Ashoke and Ashima have to choose a name for their newly born baby. Gogol, a name chosen by Ashoke, connotes a story of survival and motivation. Nonetheless, when Gogol enters Kindergarten, he needs a good name. 'Nikhil' is the good name that is chosen by his parents and used by strangers in the outside world. However, 'Gogol' is the pet name that is used by members of the family. As a kid, Gogol is terrified by the idea of changing his name: "He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him?" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 56). As a child, Gogol identifies well with his pet name because the outside world has not yet shaped him. As he grows up, he allows that world (school mates and friends) to partake in the creation of his new identity (an American teenager). Only then does Gogol reject his pet name and is willing to change it. He despises his "awkward," "wrong name," which is a "last name turned first name" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 78). It is neither Indian nor is it a first name. It is the last name of the genius yet mentally troubled Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. Thus, Gogol believes, "[t]here is no such thing as a perfect name" (p. 24). He hates his name to the point that he prefers to replace it simply by a pronoun: "I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen. Until then, pronouns" (p. 24).

Gogol's maturity is complicated because of his name. He refuses to have a girlfriend to whom he has to reveal his pet name. At high school, choosing to 'become Nikhil' gives him the courage to kiss his date. Through Nikhil, he feels "protected as if by an invisible shield" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 96). He never reveals to his friends the fact that he lied to Kim about his name. "[H]e doesn't tell them that it hadn't been Gogol who'd kissed Kim. That Gogol had had nothing to do with it" (p. 96). It is here where Gogol clings to Nikhil as a signifier for his new Self. Nevertheless, the new Indian name (Nikhil), which he rejected as a child, does not deepen the admiration of his native identity. It does not make him more attached to his Indian roots. Ironically, 'Nikhil' is his passport to enter a more liberal world of sexual relationships. The first thing he does after he legally changes his name at court is to sleep with a girl; he does not even remember her name! For Nikhil, the name Gogol is the real obstacle to a free life far away from the restrictions of his parents' conservative world. As a mature man, no one in Nikhil's world is called Gogol. Thus, he never tells Maxine the story of becoming Nikhil after long years of being Gogol. Similarly, as a child, Gogol cannot find his name among the names of the dead in the cemetery. At that point, 'Gogol' is a unique name yet not weird. Only when Gogol is exposed to the Western World as a mature man does he realize the oddness of his name. He fears being rejected by American society, which he is eager to join and blend with. However, the name Nikhil does not emphasize any connotations of hybridity. Nikhil ignores the Indian identity of the name as he behaves as pure American. On the other hand, this renaming process does not help him "to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 287). He thought it would correct the "randomness" and the "error" (p. 287) of his earlier name, but it does not.

Eventually, Gogol reunites with his family after his father's death. As he reads Akaky Gogol's book, which his father gave him as a birthday gift years ago, Nikhil finds the 'Gogol' inside himself. He is ready to read the book "he [has] once forsaken, has abandoned until now" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 290). Not only has he salvaged the book "as his father was pulled from a crushed train forty years ago" (p. 291), but he has also saved 'Gogol'. He takes one more step towards recognition of an authentic identity after years of assimilation into Western culture and denial of his Indian roots. Losing his father, Gogol is more aware of his duties as an Indian son. Now his admiration of American life is enfeebled. The bond between him and Maxine becomes weak. So, he goes through a resistance of the relationship, rejection, and finally, redefinition of his native cultural identity. Now, he does not want to get away from his family. Immediately after the funeral, he tells Maxine in a decisive tone, "I don't want to get away" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 186). When Maxine realizes Gogol's rejection of her presence among his mourning family, she decides to remove herself from his life. On the other hand, Gogol becomes aware of the fact that relationships are transitory and temporary and that the only stable and permanent relationship is the one he enjoys with his family. After spending years maintaining distance from his family, "his origins," Gogol now values their love and, more important, he does not hate his name anymore. On the contrary, he fears to miss the name as he is losing the loved ones who have always known him as 'Gogol': "Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once for all, vanish from the lips of the loved ones, and so, cease to exist" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 289). That thought provides him no sense of victory and no solace!

The following details of the novel show that Gogol redefines his identity outside Maxine's shadow. When he identifies with his native heritage, Gogol identifies with a Bengali wife. He becomes aware of himself as an Indian, his father's son. The closing scene of the novel is impressive in its emphasis on Gogol's admirable epiphany. He is ready to join his parents' friends in the crowded party, to take photographs of the "people in his parents' life, in this house," to "eat as well, seated cross-legged on the floor, and speak to his parents' friends, about his new job, about New York, about his mother..." (Lahiri, 2003, p. 291). Leaning back against the headboard and adjusting a pillow behind his back, Gogol is ready to start reading his father's legacy. Finally, Gogol manages to resolve the tension between his conflicting identities and creates a deeper understanding of Indian-American identity.

By recognizing his Indian-ness, Gogol does not denounce his Western culture fully. Though he eventually embraces his native culture, he realizes he is not a Bengali only. He has been affected mentally and subconsciously by his Western world (his school mates, university colleagues, and work associates). As he redefines what it means to be a descendent of a Bengali family within a white-dominant society, Gogol incorporates his native culture into the American culture. Now he realizes that the values of the two cultures have enriched his life. He is genuinely a symbolic embodiment of the new hybrid generation. Asha Choubey (2013) suggests that Gogol, an Indian-American, "lives like a pendulum till he finally attains maturity to self-realization" (p. 4). Thus, he brings his conflict to an end. The moment he allows the two cultures to overlap in one cultural contact Zone.

Finally, Gogol allows the two cultural spaces to create a hybrid subject. He accepts the new signs of his hybrid identity because such identity is, as Bhabha (1994) suggests in *The Location of Culture*, is productive and innovative (p.1). Peterson and Rutherford (2003) suggest that the search for one's roots can be positive or may lead to narrow nationalism, which results in "prejudices, hideous biases, leading to implacable animism" (p. 188). Lahiri shows how Gogol finds his 'third space' and realizes that his search for his Indian roots is a positive force. The novel closes with Gogol refusing to invest in a single (American) identity. He is now part of two cultural horizons as he brings the two different spaces of American culture and Indian heritage in one 'third space'. The loud objection by Pamela, the white friend of the Ratliffes, "But you're Indian" (Lahiri, 2003, p.157) which emphasizes the "supposed inferiority" (JanMohamed, 1985, p. 63) of Gogol's native culture, and the "putative superiority" of the Western culture (JanMohamed, 1985, p. 63), does not deepen his hatred for his roots anymore. Pamela's categorization of Gogol as the Other who should never get sick or get affected by the climate when traveling to India will not annoy him because he has accepted the reality of his hybrid existence. Eventually, Gogol realizes the reality of him being an Indian born in America.

4. ii Ashima

As a new immigrant in the United States, there is the pressure to acculturate to the norms of the society where Ashima lives and has become part of. Through the character of Ashima, Lahiri addresses the problem of acculturation and the thin line between adapting as an immigrant to a new culture, and transforming completely, which means a character risks giving up her native identity. Soon Ashima realizes that survival in this Western society requires a balance between two heterogeneous cultures. However, Ashima's efforts to possess a more hybrid identity initially lead to a cultural clash. She refuses to suppress her native way of living to adopt American cultural values. Although she has achieved linguistic hybridity by developing a thick accent, she speaks Indian with her children most of the time. She refuses to give up her religious beliefs in pujos and ritualistic ceremonies, to take off her traditional Sari, or to stop cooking Indian meals daily. The novel opens with Ashima trying to prepare Jhal Muri, a spicy Indian snack, from American ingredients ("Rice Krispies" and "Planters peanuts" (Lahiri, 2003, p.1)), wishing there was mustard oil, which is important for the traditional recipe. While the snack is "a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and railway platforms throughout India," (Lahiri, 2003, P. 1), the missing ingredient reminds her of what she has left behind in Calcutta. She always remembers the instructions by her family members and relatives who came to see her off at Dum Dum Airport: "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston" (p. 37). This emphasis on native identity early in the novel motivates Ashima's clinging to her Indian culture, which is again supported by too many Indian friends in the States. Ashima enlarges her circle of Indian friends in America by inviting them to numerous parties she holds at her house. Thus, Alfonso-Forero (2007) believes that Ashima creates a surrogate India in America and that she plays the role played by all Indian women: "the guardians and propagators of Indian culture" (p. 854).

On the other hand, Ashima understands the fact that her children are fated to be American. Thus, she realizes that she cannot isolate them from their surrounding social setting. She decides

to be more open about her children's desires, so she allows them to celebrate Christmas, which is an event the children "look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 64). Besides, Ashima prepares roasted turkey on Thanksgiving, and she cooks American food once a week for Gogol and Sonia (p. 64). She and Ashoke submit to their children's demands: "In the supermarket they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume..." (p. 65). Indeed, hybridity allows Ashima to supplement a lifestyle that recognizes her native roots and her children's American identity. In her family life, traditions are still practiced, Indian language is still spoken, and rituals are still preserved. Lahiri shows how native Hindu culture lives on because of hybridity and adaptation to the dominant social norms.

Ashima goes through different stages of identity formation. Early in the novel, she suffers a deep sense of displacement and alienation in a foreign land. Later, she assimilates to a certain extent to the modern American society as she is transformed into a transnational figure as her Indian name suggests: 'Ashima' means someone who is "limitless, without borders" (Lahiri, 2003, p.26). Nevertheless, Ashima's loneliness is emphasized early in the novel. She flies alone to Boston to join her husband. In their small apartment, she feels lonely and suffers homesickness. She misses her father's home full of warmth and love and yearns for a family reunion. Home is a "mystic place of desire" (Brah, 1997, p. 192) in the immigrant's imagination. Ashima finds solace in the memories of her family. Not only she feels spatially alienated, but she also feels lost in time. "She calculates the Indian time on her hands," which is "ten and a half hours ahead in Calcutta" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 4). She tries to overcome her alienation by rereading a "tattered copy of *Desh* magazine that she brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away" (p. 4). Also, her family's letters, which she keeps safe in her bag, are a consolation to her. They help her to overcome the pains of alienation and displacement. Dubey (2002) describes the immigrant's experience as a complicated one because the "sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world" (p. 22). Worse for Ashima is "motherhood in a foreign land" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 6). "Raising a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (p. 6) is Ashima's nightmare. Far from home, without a single grandparent or parent or aunt at her side, Ashima feels too lonely and pities her helpless lonely child. "She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived" (p. 25).

Ashima is spatially displaced. Her earlier sense of 'lack of fit' between the new liberal world and her conservative cultural environment is depressing. When her water breaks at the beginning of the novel, she calls out to Ashoke but never uses his name because "[it] is not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or a caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 2). Equally, Ashima is shocked when the public declarations of affection violate such intimacy. She hears the voice of one American husband addressing his wife, "I love you, sweetheart" (p. 3) on the maternity floor at Mount Auburn Hospital. Such words, Ashima has not heard nor expects to hear from her husband because "this is not how they are" (p. 3). Ashima feels alienated in a new setting where women dress differently; they wear miniskirts and bikinis, and couples hold each other's hands on the street

and lie on top of each other on the Cambridge Common (p. 3). Ashima's forlornness deepens as she lies on the bed in the hospital "[sleeping] alone, surrounded by strangers" (p. 3). All her life, she has slept either in a room with her parents, or with Ashoke at her side.

The gap between the lived space and 'back home' pushes Ashima towards the reclamation of her native landscape through happy memories of her family (her parents, siblings, and her grandma). For Ashima, home is not merely a place; it is an interaction of the environment, language, and history. Such interaction is interrupted by distance in the Western world. Consequently, Ashima desperately waits for the postman to bring her some news from back home. Still, the dominance of the lived space is much beyond Ashima's ability to adjust. She is lonely and helpless. She refuses at the beginning to accept the reality of her new world and clings tightly to the symbols of her Indian heritage. Waiting for her grandma's suggestion for her child's name, Ashima is trying to change the empty lived space into a meaningful place. This process of naming is part of Ashima's efforts to survive the misery of her new setting, where she cannot fit in easily. Early in the novel, she rarely takes serious steps towards assimilation because she is shocked by feelings of estrangement. The emptiness of the lived space leaves deeper marks on Ashima's psyche.

In "The Commitment to Theory," Bhabha (1988) discusses the difference between 'cultural difference' and 'cultural diversity.' The earlier is the process of the annunciation of culture as knowledgeable, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. 'Cultural difference' is the field of "force, reference, applicability, and capacity" (Bhabha, 1988, p. 18). We have seen how Ashima, early in the novel, believes that her native culture is empowering. It is the reference point by which she decides what is applicable and what is not. As a result, her understanding of how different her culture is widens the gap between her respect for her traditions and her acceptance of modern alien traditions. Consequently, 'cultural difference' has become a space of conflict and struggle. She cannot accept the new modern world easily. She feels she is a foreigner and that her life in the States will be "a constant burden" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 49). The feeling that her past life has vanished only to be replaced by "something more complicated and demanding" (p. 49) tortures her. However, soon Ashima discovers that culture is epistemological and that it is an object of empirical knowledge. As much as she reveres her pre-given cultural contents and customs, she learns that cultural diversity is enriching. Such epiphany gives rise to notions of multiculturalism and cultural exchange. Now she is more tolerant of her children's life choices, and she is ready to exchange cultural signs with her American friends. Finally, Ashima becomes aware of the fact that beyond individual cultures, we all share one culture of humankind.

Consequently, as her children grow up, Ashima indulges more in the American lifestyle. Gradually, she develops appropriate identifying relationships between herself and the place around her. Besides her role as an Indian housewife, she embraces a more independent role where she enjoys freedom like any American woman. She finds a job as a librarian, which introduces her to new American friends. Her circle of Bengali acquaintances becomes more hybrid as it now embraces friends from a different race. After her husband's death, Ashima is even more independent. Her husband's duties are now hers. She pays the bills, buys tickets, drives the car,

and moves to a different house. Ashima welcomes this transformation in her identity without losing contact with her roots. Now she is both American and Indian. After her husband's death, Ashima decides to divide her time between her family in America, and her other family in India. Consequently, "she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 276) and, thus, true to the meaning of her name.

In developing her hybrid identity, Ashima chooses to create her own 'third space'. In that space, Ashima allows the interaction of feelings of nativeness and adaptation of a new culture. As an immigrant, she questions her difference in comparison to the dominant Western culture. At a certain point, she resists the new roles and identities ascribed to her only to accept later on the complexity of her situation and the multiplicity of her identity. In an in-between state, she welcomes a plural cultural interaction with the new world. Being the mother of American-born children and the wife of a well-educated Indian immigrant who is appreciated as a distinguished professor in the American academic sphere, Ashima comes to understand that hybridity is the offspring of a permanent interaction with a different culture. Ashima's family (especially her children) have embraced this culture easily. Consequently, hybridity creates a "transcultural identity" (Ashcroft et al. 1995, p. 20) within the contact zone produced by the dominating culture. Ashima finally becomes trans-cultural and allows the interaction of the symbols of her native culture and those of the Western culture. Homi Bhabha (1994) asserts that the 'third space' is an in-between setting where symbols of culture have no stability, that even the same signs can be translated, rehistoricized, and read a new (p. 37). Truly, Ashima is rereading all these symbols as she allows them to redefine her identity.

4. iii. Ashoke

Ashoke is an example of the ambitious Indian who excelled in an American university. Through the character of Ashoke, Lahiri depicts cultural interaction at its best. Ashoke leaves India after the train accident, which left him paralyzed almost for a whole year. Entrapped in his bed, Ashoke realizes that he is missing much of what is going on in the world. He cannot wait to leave India and explore new horizons as the strange passenger on that train advises him to do before it is too late. Thinking of traveling away, Ashoke cannot read the books his grandfather has given him to entertain himself while he is unable to move. "Those books set in countries he had never seen, reminded him only of his confinement" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 20). To break out of this confinement, Ashoke leaves India and starts a new life in America. Consequently, the new Western world is not only Ashoke's land of dreams but also a true rescue.

Unlike Ashima, Ashoke's cultural conflict is less evident because he welcomes the new Western culture to a larger extent. For him, this culture is a source of knowledge and advancement. Although Ashoke clings to the ethics of his own native culture, he allows the positive aspects of his surroundings to nourish his personality. For instance, he enjoys reading *The Boston Globe* while Ashima adheres to *Desh*. He has mastered English and shown distinguished efforts and skills as an academic working for an American University. While America is a source of alienation and displacement for Ashima, it is a source of success and prosperity for Ashoke. He has managed to gain a good reputation as a Professor at MIT, to purchase a house in Boston, and to raise a family

in a world different from his native world. Back in India, he has a loving extended family, history, and culture, which he leaves behind when he travels to America. However, Ashoke tries to create in Boston a simple version of that precious Indian life by raising a family, practicing Hindu rituals, eating Indian food, and establishing relationships with Bengali friends. Realizing that his dream has come true in America, Ashoke is the only character in *The Namesake* whose hybridity develops smoothly in a foreign country and who quickly develops a 'third space,' which helps him to avoid an undesirable identity crises. Knowing that his children are conforming to their Western world, Ashoke consciously blends two cultures while protecting his own native identity. This cultural hybridity is much easier for Ashoke than it is for Ashima. The latter detests, at least in the first two-thirds of the novel, most American habits and can hardly appreciate her children's conformity to a world alien to her. Ashoke is more reasonable as he realizes that his children's compliance with the American society is inevitable and can hardly be challenged.

As much as *The Namesake* is Gogol's story, the novel is Ashoke's story of rebirth and survival. Early in the novel, the narrator tells us about the train wreck and the pages of Akaky Gogol's book, which have saved Ashoke's life. However, when Gogol officially changes his name, Ashoke retells the story to his son in an attempt to help Gogol to appreciate the heritage, which the latter, sadly enough, decides to give up. When Gogol asks his father if his name reminds him of the horror of that tragic night, Ashoke says, "You remind me of everything that followed" (Lahiri, 2003, p.124). Gogol, the son, is part of Ashoke's success, which followed; he is the source of all motivation and ambition for a better life. Gogol is part of Ashoke's story of hybridity. Had he challenged the values of the new Western world, Ashoke wouldn't have achieved his dream, and he would have lost all possible communication with his American-born son. Nevertheless, Ashoke has always determined to give his son a trans-cultural identity knowing that Gogol will conform easily to the American lifestyle. So, Ashoke chooses an Indian good name for his son (Nikhil) and another Russian pet name, which connotes resurrection and a new beginning (Gogol). Ironically enough, Nikhil becomes 'Nick'; the American version of an Indian name and a symbol of assimilation. On the other hand, Ashoke wishes that such trans-cultural identity will enable Gogol to explore better horizons and to defeat spatial confinement as his father once did when he decided to leave India and explore the world before it is too late. In a highly symbolic scene, Ashoke accompanies his little son on a walk on Cape Cod. They step on rocks to the last point of land. There, Ashoke and Gogol could not go any further. The earlier addresses his boy and says, "Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 187). Ashoke wants his son to explore the boundless world; to reach the farthest point. Ashoke knows very well that without embracing the Western culture and respecting Indian roots at the same time, his son shall never be able to experience such exploration.

Indeed, Ashoke is a more subtle character. His outlook is more modern and pragmatic. He welcomes the icons of Western culture in his everyday life details: his dress, his work, his readings, etc. Nevertheless, when it comes to naming his son, he follows the Bengali tradition of naming the newly born baby by the eldest person in the family. Consequently, both Ashoke and Ashima manage to protect their authentic identity despite their eventual successful hybrid existence as two Indian

immigrants living in America. In a country where personal freedom and independence are guaranteed on the individual level, Ashoke and Ashima manage to balance Western and Indian values admirably. Surrounded by her Bengali and American friends, Ashima mourns the death of her husband as an Indian wife should and gives him a proper funeral where all Hindu rituals are observed. The gathering in Ashima's house immediately after the funeral is an excellent example of the coexistence of multiple cultures. Ashoke and Ashima's American and Hindu friends are there mourning the death of an Indian friend. On the other hand, the novel introduces a bright image of religious hybridity. Though Ashima and Ashoke never convert to Christianity, the book shows how different belief systems (Christianity and Hinduism) interact within a local cultural-religious framework. The fact that the novel introduces a whole society of Hindus in which Hinduism is practiced freely in a Western environment suggests that Hinduism has gained legibility and acceptance within the modern social system. On the other hand, we hardly see Hinduism imposed rigidly on Gogol or Sonia. *The Namesake* introduces an excellent model of religious hybridity. Although early in the novel Ashima, Ashoke, and their children join their Bengali acquaintances for ritualistic parties, Ashima- towards the end of the novel- sends her American friends Christmas cards with a drawing of "an elephant with red and green jewels" (Lahiri, 2003, p.160). she has done herself. Even though Ashima's cards are characterized by secular images rather than the image of an angel or the cross, they are a symbolic acceptance of the religious culture of her Western companions.

Conclusion

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri celebrates cultural diversity, which paves the way for cultural hybridity. She introduces an 'in-between' space for her characters. Thus she allows them to find their home in a 'third space' where they can speak of "Ourselves" and "Others" in a friendly tone. Through this 'third space,' Lahiri manages to escape the rigidity of the binary opposition of the Self and the Other. Lahiri's three main characters finally develop a trans-cultural identity without giving up their native culture. Had they assimilated wholly to the new Western world, they would have risked the loss of their Indian roots. Instead, they choose to create their 'third space' through a meaningful process of cultural hybridity.

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