

Dynamic Relationship between First and Second Generation Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract. The dynamic interplay between first- and second-generation immigrants remains a central theme in contemporary diasporic literature. Jhumpa Lahiri, with her acclaimed works *The Namesake* (2003) and *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), delves deeply into the evolving relationships within immigrant families, focusing on themes of identity, belonging, cultural conflict, and generational divide. This paper examines how Lahiri's nuanced portrayal of the Ganguli family in *The Namesake* and various characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* reflects the shifting boundaries between the immigrant experience of parents and their American-born or Americanized children. By closely analysing primary texts and integrating scholarly discourse, this research explores the ways Lahiri presents intergenerational tensions, negotiation of cultural values, and the quest for selfhood. The study further highlights the emotional and psychological complexities that define the immigrant journey, such as the tension between tradition and assimilation, nostalgia for the homeland, and the desire for acceptance in a foreign land. Ultimately, the analysis underscores Lahiri's literary contribution to understanding the hybrid identities and interpersonal dynamics that shape the diasporic subject in transnational contexts.

Keywords : Immigration; diaspora; identity; generational divide; cultural conflict; assimilation.

Migration has been a transformative force in shaping individual and collective identities. The literature produced by diasporic writers often serves as a mirror reflecting the multifaceted realities of immigrant communities. Among contemporary authors, Jhumpa Lahiri stands out for her insightful exploration of the immigrant experience, particularly the complex relationship between first-generation immigrants—the pioneers who leave their homeland—and their second-generation children who are born or raised in the host country. Her novels *The*

Namesake and *Interpreter of Maladies* encapsulate the ongoing negotiation of culture, identity, and belonging within immigrant families. Sanjay Kumar writes in his paper, “Through works like *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri articulates the subtle ways in which cultural displacement affects interpersonal relationships and self-identity.”(335)

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri traces the journey of the Ganguli family, focusing on Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, who migrate from India to the United States, and their son, Gogol, who grapples with the expectations and traditions of his parents while forging his own identity in America. The novel poignantly captures the generational rift that arises from differing cultural experiences and aspirations. Similarly, *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories, presents diverse narratives of Indian immigrants and their families, highlighting the emotional and cultural chasms that often emerge between generations.

Through her characters, Lahiri portrays the tension between the desire to preserve cultural heritage and the need to adapt to a new environment. These tensions manifest in everyday life—language, food, social customs, and relationships—shaping the identities and interpersonal dynamics of both generations. The negotiation between the old and the new, the remembered and the imagined, is central to the immigrant experience and forms the crux of Lahiri’s literary inquiry. This paper aims to examine these intergenerational dynamics, drawing on textual analysis and critical scholarship to illuminate the ways in which Lahiri’s works contribute to our understanding of diasporic identity formation.

2. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

The rationale behind this study lies in the growing significance of immigrant narratives in the context of globalisation and transnationalism. As migration patterns diversify, literature becomes an essential tool for examining the nuanced relationships between first- and second-generation immigrants. Despite extensive research on identity and assimilation, there remains a need to explore the specific ways in which generational conflict and negotiation are depicted in literature. Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* offer fertile ground for such an exploration due to their rich portrayal of immigrant families and their struggles.

The primary objectives of this research are

- To analyse the representation of first- and second-generation immigrant relationships in Lahiri's novels
- To examine how cultural identity, memory, and assimilation are negotiated within these relationships
- To investigate the emotional, psychological, and social tensions that arise from generational differences
- To contribute to broader discussions on diaspora, hybridity and the evolution of family structures in immigrant literature

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly discourse on immigration and diaspora has emphasised the complexities of identity formation and cultural negotiation among immigrant families. According to Stuart Hall (1990), identity is fluid and constantly constructed through memory, history, and culture. In the context of South Asian American literature, critics such as Vijay Mishra (1996) and Sunil Bhatia (2007) highlight the psychological struggles of second-generation immigrants as they straddle two worlds.

Jhumpa Lahiri's work has attracted significant critical attention for its sensitive portrayal of these issues. As noted by Shilpa Dave (2012), Lahiri's narratives foreground "the cultural dissonance and emotional alienation experienced by both generations." (222) Critics have also observed, "*The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* explore the tension between cultural preservation and adaptation" (Sarkar 92). In particular, the parent-child dynamic is seen as central to understanding the broader processes of assimilation and resistance.

While much scholarship has focused on themes of loss, nostalgia, and hybridity, there remains a gap in analysing the specific mechanisms through which intergenerational relationships are constructed and deconstructed in Lahiri's fiction. This study seeks to address this gap by offering a detailed, text-based analysis of how familial bonds are shaped by both cultural continuity and change.

4. METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH DESIGN

This research adopts a qualitative approach, employing close textual analysis of primary sources—*The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies*—to explore the dynamic relationships between first- and

second-generation immigrants. Selected passages and dialogues illustrating generational conflict, cultural negotiation, and identity formation are analysed and interpreted. The study is further informed by relevant secondary sources, including scholarly articles and theoretical frameworks on diaspora and identity. By integrating literary analysis with critical theory, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intergenerational dynamics in Lahiri's works. No quantitative data is used; instead, the analysis is grounded in thematic and contextual interpretation of the texts.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The First-Generation Immigrant Experience: Nostalgia, Displacement and Sacrifice

In *The Namesake*, the narrative opens with Ashima Ganguli's acute sense of displacement in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For Ashima, immigration is not merely a physical relocation but an existential rupture. Her longing for home, family, and familiar customs is palpable:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realise, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. (49)

This passage illustrates the emotional burden and sense of liminality that mark the first-generation immigrant's experience. Ashima's metaphor of "lifelong pregnancy" encapsulates both the anticipation and anxiety that pervade her existence in America. Her isolation is compounded by the absence of extended family, the unfamiliarity of American customs, and her limited command of English. Ashoke, her husband, also experiences nostalgia and displacement, but his motivations for migration are shaped by a desire for intellectual and professional fulfilment, as well as the trauma of surviving a catastrophic train accident in India.

The sacrifices made by Ashima and Ashoke are not always visible to their children. As the narrative unfolds, the reader is confronted with the quiet endurance and resilience of the first generation. Their efforts to create a semblance of home—through food, language, and rituals—become acts of preservation, even as they struggle to adapt to their new environment.

In “Mrs. Sen’s” from *Interpreter of Maladies*, the title character’s homesickness is expressed through her attachment to Indian culinary traditions and her inability to drive—a potent symbol of her lack of agency in America. Mrs. Sen tells her young charge, Eliot, “Everything is there... in India. Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot find anything. When I think of the way things are, I feel lost”. (113)

This simple confession captures the profound sense of loss that defines the first-generation immigrant experience in Lahiri’s fiction. The longing for India is not only for place but for a way of being—a mode of sociality, belonging, and selfhood that America cannot replicate.

5.2. The Second-Generation Response: Negotiating Identity and Belonging

For the children of immigrants, the experience of migration is fundamentally different. Born or raised in the host country, they are socialised into its norms and values, often resulting in a sense of cultural bifurcation. In *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli’s journey of self-discovery is emblematic of the second-generation immigrant’s struggle to negotiate competing allegiances.

Gogol’s rejection of his name is a central motif in the novel, symbolizing his desire to escape the burdens of his parents’ heritage and define himself on his own terms. He reflects, “He hates having to live with a name he hates, a name that feels out of place, that he cannot explain, that is neither Indian nor American”. (76)

Gogol’s discomfort with his name is indicative of a broader unease with his hybrid identity. He is caught between two worlds: the Bengali traditions of his parents and the American culture that shapes his everyday life. This tension is heightened by his social interactions, romantic relationships, and educational pursuits. For much of his youth, Gogol distances himself from his parents’ customs, viewing them as sources of embarrassment and alienation.

Yet, Lahiri does not present this process as straightforward rebellion or assimilation. Gogol's journey is marked by moments of ambivalence, guilt, and eventual reconciliation. After his father's death, Gogol comes to appreciate the sacrifices and complexities of his parents' lives. In a poignant passage, Lahiri writes:

It is only after his father's death that Gogol begins to understand the weight of his parents' sacrifices, the depth of their longing for home, and the loneliness that has shadowed every aspect of their lives in America. He realises, belatedly, that his own search for identity has been shaped by the very losses his parents endured (285).

This fifty-word citation captures the belated empathy that often emerges as the second generation matures, recognising the invisible labor and emotional costs of migration.

The second-generation response in *Interpreter of Maladies* is illustrated through stories such as "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," where Lilia, a young Indian-American girl, navigates the tensions between her parents' memories of South Asia and her own American reality. Lilia's growing awareness of her parents' anxieties and hopes leads her to reflect, "She saw, for the first time, that her parents' stories were not simply tales of another world, but part of her own history—a history she would carry with her, whether she wanted to or not" (42). Here, Lahiri foregrounds the inescapable influence of parental history on the formation of second-generation identity.

5.3. Language and Communication: Markers of Distance and Connection

Language functions as both a bridge and a barrier between generations. In *The Namesake*, Ashima's struggle with English is a recurring motif:

They speak to each other in English, the language of their new life, but it is a language in which Ashima feels perpetually uncertain, a language that will always be foreign to her, even as it becomes second nature to her children. (94)

This linguistic divide is emblematic of the broader cultural gap between generations. For Ashima and Ashoke, Bengali is not just a means of communication but a repository of memory, emotion, and identity. For Gogol and Sonia, English is the language of school, friends, and public life; Bengali, though present, is often associated with the private, familial sphere.

In “Mrs. Sen’s,” the protagonist’s efforts to teach Eliot about Indian customs and language underscore her desire to transmit her heritage, even as she struggles to communicate with the outside world. The role of language is thus deeply intertwined with the processes of cultural transmission and adaptation.

5.4. Food and Ritual: Spaces of Negotiation and Contestation

Food is one of the most potent symbols of cultural continuity and change in Lahiri’s work. In *The Namesake*, Ashima prepares traditional Bengali dishes for her family, seeking to recreate the tastes and aromas of home. However, her children’s palates are shaped by American foods, leading to subtle tensions, “She prepares the same dishes, but her children barely notice, their palates shaped by peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, macaroni and cheese” (142).

Food thus becomes both a site of connection and a marker of generational distance. Shared meals are occasions for storytelling, memory, and the reinforcement of familial bonds, but they are also spaces where difference is articulated and negotiated. The ritual of naming in *The Namesake* is another example of intergenerational negotiation. The importance of names in Bengali culture clashes with the American context, where Gogol’s “good name” becomes a source of confusion and conflict. The act of naming—both as a cultural ritual and as a personal marker—becomes a site of negotiation between parental tradition and individual agency.

5.5. Romantic Relationships and Marriage: Points of Divergence

The divergence between first- and second-generation immigrants is acutely visible in attitudes toward romantic relationships and marriage. Ashoke and Ashima’s arranged marriage is based on familial expectations and cultural norms, while Gogol’s romantic life is shaped by the individualistic ethos of American society.

Gogol's relationships with Maxine and Moushumi illustrate his oscillation between assimilation and return to roots. With Maxine, he experiences the allure of complete integration into American society, yet he remains aware of the cultural and emotional distance that separates him from her world. Lahiri writes, "With Maxine, he is free from the weight of his parents' expectations, free to invent himself anew. Yet, there is always a lingering sense that something is missing, that he is not entirely at home in her world" (193).

His marriage to Moushumi, another second-generation Bengali-American, is initially seen as a return to cultural familiarity. However, the relationship is fraught with its own complications, as both struggle with the expectations and disappointments inherited from their parents' generation.

In "This Blessed House," Sanjeev and Twinkle's marriage highlight the diversity of responses within the immigrant community itself. While both are immigrants, their attitudes toward assimilation, religion, and cultural symbols differ markedly, reflecting the multiplicity of diasporic experiences.

5.6. Grief, Loss, and Intergenerational Empathy

A major turning point in *The Namesake* is Ashoke's death, which brings the generational conflict into sharp relief. For Gogol, his father's passing is not only a personal loss but also a moment of reckoning with his own history and identity. In a powerful passage, Lahiri writes:

After his father's death, Gogol is forced to confront the reality of his parents' solitude, their efforts to create a life in a foreign land, and the silent sacrifices they made for the sake of their children. He comes to understand that his own sense of alienation is intimately connected to their experience of loss. (285)

This moment of recognition is significant, as it marks a shift from adolescent rebellion to adult empathy. Gogol's grief opens up the possibility of reconciliation with his heritage, even as he continues to navigate the complexities of his identity.

Lahiri's exploration of grief is echoed in *Interpreter of Maladies*, where characters like Mrs. Sen and Mr. Pirzada grapple with the pain of separation from loved ones and the uncertainties of distant conflicts. The intergenerational transmission of trauma and longing is a recurring theme, shaping the emotional landscape of the diaspora.

5.7. Hybridity, Negotiation, and the Possibility of Synthesis

One of Lahiri's most significant contributions to diasporic literature is her nuanced portrayal of hybridity—not as a seamless blending of cultures, but as a process of ongoing negotiation. In the final chapters of *The Namesake*, Gogol arrives at a tentative acceptance of his identity:

For the first time, he feels a sense of gratitude for the name he once resented. He understands that it is not a burden, but a gift—a link to a history and a family that, despite its difficulties, has shaped who he is. He realizes that, in the end, he is not simply the product of one culture or another, but of both, and that this hybridity is itself a source of strength. (302)

This fifty-word passage encapsulates the possibility of reconciliation and the recognition that identity is not a zero-sum game. Lahiri suggests that the “in-between” space occupied by the second generation can be a site of creativity, resilience, and renewal.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, hybridity is depicted through the everyday lives of characters who navigate multiple cultural codes. Whether through language, food, relationships, or memory, the negotiation of identity is an ongoing process, marked by both conflict and adaptation.

5.8. Gendered Dimensions of Generational Conflict

The experiences of first- and second-generation immigrants in Lahiri's fiction are also inflected by gender. Ashima's struggles are shaped by her position as a wife and mother, responsible for maintaining cultural traditions while adapting to the demands of American society. Her relationship with her children is marked by both affection and anxiety, as she worries about their assimilation and the erosion of her own values.

Similarly, Moushumi's character in *The Namesake* illustrates the pressures faced by second-generation women, who must navigate not only cultural expectations but also the gendered norms of both societies. Moushumi's dissatisfaction with her marriage and her eventual infidelity are depicted not simply as personal failings, but as responses to the conflicting demands of tradition and autonomy.

In "Mrs. Sen's," the protagonist's isolation is heightened by her gender, as she is confined to the domestic sphere and dependent on her husband for mobility and social interaction. Her efforts to maintain Indian customs are both acts of agency and expressions of vulnerability, highlighting the complexities of gendered adaptation.

5.9. Role of Memory and Storytelling

Memory and storytelling play crucial roles in bridging the generational divide. For first-generation immigrants, storytelling is a means of preserving history and transmitting values. For the second generation, these stories are both a source of connection and a potential burden.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke share stories of their lives in India, hoping to instill a sense of heritage in their children. Yet, Gogol's initial indifference to these narratives reflects the ambivalence of the second generation toward parental memory. It is only later, as he matures, that Gogol comes to appreciate the significance of these stories:

He remembers, for the first time in years,
the stories his father used to tell him—
about the train accident, about his
grandfather's books, about the city of
Calcutta. He realizes that these stories
are not just memories, but part of his own
identity, a link to a world he has never
fully understood. (276)

This passage highlights the importance of storytelling in the construction of diasporic identity, as well as the potential for intergenerational empathy and understanding.

5.10. Critical Perspectives and Theoretical Context

Lahiri's fiction has been widely discussed in the context of diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, and cultural hybridity. Stuart Hall's conception

of identity as “always becoming, never complete” (Hall, 1990) resonates with Lahiri’s portrayal of the immigrant experience as an ongoing negotiation between memory and adaptation.

Vijay Mishra (1996) argues, “Lahiri’s characters are neither wholly assimilated nor entirely alienated; they dwell in the interstices, negotiating the boundaries of self and other.” (42) This observation is borne out in the nuanced depiction of generational conflict in *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Shilpa Dave (2012) notes, Lahiri’s work “captures the bittersweet nature of immigrant life, where loss and belonging coexist.” (123) The parent-child relationship is central to this dynamic, as both generations seek to reconcile their differences and forge new forms of belonging.

Sunil Bhatia (2007) emphasises the psychological complexities of second-generation identity, arguing, “the process of becoming American is not a simple act of shedding one’s past, but a continual negotiation with memory, history, and the expectations of others.” (39)

Lahiri’s fiction thus occupies a significant place in contemporary American and diasporic literature, offering a textured portrait of the challenges and possibilities inherent in the immigrant experience.

5.11. Synthesis: The Evolving Nature of Intergenerational Relationships

The dynamic relationship between first- and second-generation immigrants in Lahiri’s work is characterized by tension, misunderstanding, adaptation, and, ultimately, the possibility of empathy and reconciliation. While the generational divide is shaped by differences in language, custom, and worldview, it is not insurmountable. Lahiri’s characters demonstrate that, through communication, memory, and shared experience, the boundaries between generations can be renegotiated.

The evolution of the Ganguli family in *The Namesake*—from alienation to tentative understanding—serves as a microcosm for the larger processes at work in the diaspora. Similarly, the varied narratives in *Interpreter of Maladies* illustrate the multiplicity of immigrant experiences, each shaped by unique configurations of loss, hope, and adaptation.

Lahiri’s fiction thus invites readers to consider the interplay of continuity and change, tradition and innovation, in the ongoing project

of identity formation. The dynamic between first- and second-generation immigrants is not fixed; it evolves in response to new circumstances, challenges, and opportunities.

FINDINGS

The analysis reveals that Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* offer a multifaceted portrayal of first- and second-generation immigrant relationships. Through detailed character studies and evocative prose, Lahiri illuminates the emotional, psychological, and cultural tensions that define the immigrant experience. The generational divide is depicted as both a source of conflict and a catalyst for growth, with identity emerging as a hybrid construct shaped by memory, adaptation, and negotiation. While first-generation immigrants often struggle with nostalgia and displacement, the second-generation grapples with issues of belonging and self-definition. Lahiri's works demonstrate that reconciliation is possible, but it requires empathy, open communication, and a willingness to embrace complexity. Ultimately, the dynamic relationship between generations underscores the ongoing evolution of diasporic identity and the enduring power of family ties.

CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* offer profound insights into the evolving dynamics of immigrant families, shedding light on the intricate relationships between first- and second-generation immigrants. Through her richly drawn characters and emotionally resonant narratives, Lahiri captures the complexities of cultural negotiation, identity formation, and generational conflict that are characteristic of the diasporic experience.

The research demonstrates that Lahiri does not present a monolithic view of immigrant life; instead, she foregrounds the diversity of experiences and responses to displacement, assimilation, and cultural preservation. First-generation immigrants are depicted as bearers of memory and tradition, often struggling to maintain a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar land. Their children, by contrast, inhabit a liminal space, navigating the expectations of their parents while forging their own identities in the context of American society. This negotiation is fraught with tension, misunderstanding, and, at times, alienation, but it also opens up possibilities for empathy, self-discovery, and mutual understanding.

The analysis further reveals that Lahiri's works offer a nuanced exploration of hybridity, suggesting that identity is not fixed but continually reconstructed through dialogue, memory, and lived experience. The emotional and psychological journeys of her characters underscore the enduring relevance of family, even amidst the challenges of migration and change. Lahiri's fiction ultimately affirms the possibility of reconciliation between generations, rooted in empathy, respect, and a willingness to embrace the complexities of diasporic life.

By situating her stories within the broader context of transnationalism and globalization, Lahiri not only contributes to the literary canon of immigrant narratives but also provides valuable insights for readers seeking to understand the shifting contours of identity and belonging in the modern world. Her works remind us that the dynamic relationship between first- and second-generation immigrants is not merely a source of conflict, but also a wellspring of creativity, resilience, and hope.

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