



ISSN: 2395-7852



# International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts, Science, Engineering & Management (IJARASEM )

Volume 11, Issue 2, March 2024



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

**IMPACT FACTOR: 7.583**

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# Analysing Cultural and Geographical Identity: A Geo-Critical study of 'The Namesake' By Jhumpa Lahiri

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**ABSTRACT:** Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* weaves together themes of cultural identity, migration, and belonging against the background of both Indian and American landscapes. Through a geo-critical lens, this summary examines the geographical dimensions that shape the identities and experiences of the novel's characters. Acted first in Calcutta, India, and then in various parts of the United States, *The Namesake* follows a journey of the Ganguli family as they navigate the difficult stages of cultural assimilation and adaptation. Geographical settings play a key role in shaping the characters' sense of self and belonging. Calcutta represents the cultural roots and heritage of the characters, evoking nostalgia and a connection with their homeland. However, when they moved to the United States, the Ganguli faced challenges in adapting to the new geographic and cultural environment. From the bustling streets of New York to the quiet suburbs of Massachusetts, each location presents its opportunities and obstacles for the characters as they navigate their dual identities. Language also serves as a geographic marker that reflects the characters' cultural connections and experiences. The use of Bengali and English and the phenomenon of code-switching emphasize the characters' negotiation of their cultural identities in different geographical contexts. In addition, the novel explores the meaning and naming practices of names and points out how geographical locations influence the sense of belonging and self-definition of the characters. Additionally, "*The Namesake*" delves into the complexity of cultural hybridity and globalization and illustrates the demarcation of geographical boundaries. . characters navigate a blur of international identities and connections. Exploring geographic landscapes, Lahiri illuminates the intersecting layers of cultural, social, and geographic identities that shape the characters' experiences. Ultimately, "*The Namesake*" offers a rich exploration of cultural and geographic identity that highlights the characters' profound impact. position in individual and collective identity. This summary explains the complex interplay of geography, culture, and identity in Lahiri's moving story through a geocritical lens.

## I. GEO-CRITICISM AND ITS APPROACH TO LITERATURE

Geo-criticism, a relatively new technique in literary studies, provides a distinct lens through which to study literary works by emphasizing the geographical features of texts and their value. The geo-critical analysis allows scholars to investigate how landscapes, surroundings, and geographical interactions influence literary works' development, interpretation, and value. This multidisciplinary method uses geography, ecology, cultural studies, and literary theory to illuminate the complex relationships between literature and the physical environment. Geographic settings are also frequently used in literature as more than just backdrops; they can also play an active role in defining characters, plotlines, and themes. For example, in works such as Cormac McCarthy's "*The Road*," the lonely and post-apocalyptic terrain takes on a character of its own, reflecting the bleakness of the human condition and the struggle for survival. Geo-critical analysis of such literature investigates how the physical environment influences the psyches and behaviors of the characters, hence magnifying the narrative's thematic resonance.

Besides, geo-criticism investigates how authors interact with and represent real-world landscapes and locations, as well as how they create imagined geographies. Authors can create a feeling of location that resonates with readers on both emotional and intellectual levels by paying great attention to detail. In J.R.R. Tolkien's "*The Lord of the Rings*," for example, the precisely produced maps and descriptions of Middle-earth not only serve as a rich background for the epic adventure but also add to the mythological nature of the tale. Geo-critical analysis of such writings looks at the relationship between the imagined geography of fictional worlds and the real-world cultural, historical, and environmental conditions that inform them.

Readers are invited to analyze the sociopolitical consequences of literary landscapes and representation. Scholars might reveal hidden ideologies and challenge current perspectives by examining how power dynamics are inscribed on physical places within texts. For example, in colonial literature such as Joseph Conrad's "*Heart of Darkness*," the African environment serves as a location of exploitation and othering, reflecting colonialism ideas of the time. Geo-



critical research of such texts reveals how literature reflects and reinforces hierarchical interactions between humans and their environs.

In a nutshell, geo-criticism provides an important framework for comprehending the complex relationship between literature and geography. The geo-critical analysis contributes to our understanding of literary works and their cultural, historical, and ideological settings by emphasizing the importance of landscapes, surroundings, and spatial interactions within texts. This multidisciplinary method allows scholars to unearth new levels of meaning and relevance in literature, ultimately expanding our understanding of the complex interplay between the human imagination and the physical world.

## II. INTRODUCTION

### The Namesake

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel "The Namesake" explores the complex issues of ethnic identity, immigrant experiences, and generational differences. The plot revolves around Gogol Ganguli, an Indian-American guy negotiating the intricate details of his dual heritage. The story develops in a variety of places, including Calcutta, Boston, and New York City, illustrating the hardships that immigrants and their descendants experience in the United States. The story begins with Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, a Bengali couple who settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The birth of their son, Gogol, sets the stage for a story about the collision between Bengali customs and American influences. Gogol's battle with his name, which combines his parents' ethnic backgrounds and pays homage to Nikolai Gogol, defines his journey of self-discovery. As Gogol ages, he struggles with his identity and eventually formally changes his name to Nikhil. This shift indicates his attempt to reconcile his background with his desire to fit into American society. The work deftly integrates Gogol's relationships, familial dynamics, and personal development against the backdrop of cultural expectations and societal constraints.

Throughout the story, Lahiri expertly depicts the nuances of immigrant life, emphasizing the challenges of belonging, adaptation, and the changing definition of home. "The Namesake" is praised for its moving examination of identity development, the importance of names on one's sense of self, and the never-ending desire for acceptance and understanding in a heterogeneous society.

### 2.1 Characteristics navigating through cultural differences.

Ganguli Gogol:

The narrative revolves around Gogol's struggle with reconciling his Indian roots and American upbringing. At first, he objects to his given name because he thinks it makes him different from his friends in America. He takes on the name "Nikhil" to blend in with American society.

But as he becomes older, especially after his father passes away, Gogol starts to accept his Indian identity. Through travels to India and interactions with other Indian Americans, he rediscovers his given name and delves into his cultural background.

As he travels between his American surroundings and Indian heritage, Gogol's journey illustrates the difficulties of forming a cultural identity in the face of cultural disparities. In the end, he finds a sense of belonging that includes both sides of his identity.

Ganguli Ashoke and Ashima:

As immigrants adjusting to American life, Gogol's parents Ashoke and Ashima balance their Indian roots with their American identities. They embrace the chances that America presents while yet struggling with emotions of displacement and longing for their own Calcutta.

The way that Ashoke and Ashima negotiate their identities is evident in their attempts to uphold their cultural customs and beliefs in the American setting. In addition to pushing their kids to integrate into American society, they inculcate in them a feeling of Indian identity through language, cuisine, and customs.

As they strike a balance between the necessity to adjust to their new environment and the desire to preserve their cultural heritage, their experiences serve to show the difficulties and compromises associated with negotiating cultural identities in a foreign nation.





Mazoomdar Moushumi:

Gogol's eventual bride and love interest, Moushumi, navigates her identity as a second-generation immigrant raised in a multicultural environment. Her parents are Indian, and she was raised in America. She went to school in France and wants to be an academic, so she is a multi-cultural person.

Moushumi's capacity to move fluidly and adaptably between many cultural situations is a defining characteristic of her identity negotiation. She struggles to establish a sense of belonging in any one area, thus this mobility also causes her to feel disconnected and rootless.

In the end, she and Gogol come to understand the value of honoring their cultural history while simultaneously paving their pathways, and their partnership symbolises a shared experience of cultural negotiation.

Ganguli, Sonia:

Growing up in America as a second-generation immigrant, Sonia, Gogol's sister, struggles to navigate her identity. She faces the same conflict as Gogol—that is, balancing her Indian roots with her American upbringing—but she does it uniquely.

Sonia's subdued defiance of her parents' norms and expectations is a defining feature of her identity negotiation. She decides to wed an American and follow her professional path, demonstrating her independence but also keeping her connections to her Indian family and culture.

Her experiences demonstrate the variety of ways people respond to cultural differences by negotiating their identities, underscoring the significance of self-expression and agency in the identity-formation process.

## **2.2 Namesake through the geocritical lens**

When viewed through a geocritical lens, Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" shows a profound investigation of the relationship between geographical locales and the characters' identities and experiences. The novel takes place in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City, each representing a distinct cultural backdrop that shapes the Ganguli family's lives.

The story opens in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with Ashima and Ashoka's immigrant experience, which highlights the difficulties of adapting to a new environment while keeping their cultural heritage. The relocation to a Boston suburb represents a trend towards assimilation and the challenges of balancing numerous cultural identities. Gogol's transition from loving to rejecting his pet name exemplifies the effort to reconcile his Indian roots with his American culture.

As the story moves to New York City, Gogol's examination of love, loss, and self-discovery against the structure of a cosmopolitan environment emphasizes the importance of urban places in personal development and relationships. Lahiri deftly intertwines the characters' emotional landscapes with the actual areas they occupy, demonstrating how geography shapes their feeling of belonging and cultural identity.

Through the geocritical lens, "The Namesake" emerges as a moving reflection on the complex interaction between people, culture, and the areas they inhabit. Lahiri's depiction of Calcutta, Boston, and New York City as dynamic locations that alter the characters' experiences emphasizes the novel's investigation of cultural displacement, belonging, and the changing nature of identity in a heterogeneous society.

## **III. THEMES OF THE NAMESAKE**

Geocriticism is a literary theory investigating the relationship between literature and space, concentrating on how geographical settings impact and communicate with literary works and characters. In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel "The Namesake," the characters are profoundly interwoven with their geographic settings, which affect their identities, experiences, and relationships.

Immigrant Experiences and Cultural Identity:

Gogol Ganguli: The lead character, who was born to Indian immigrant parents in America, has a complicated



relationship with his cultural identity. He struggles with his name, which signifies both his Indian origin and his identity dilemma as an immigrant caught between two civilizations. His experience is heavily impacted by the opposing landscapes of Calcutta and America, which depict the clash of civilizations and the search for identity. Gogol's parents, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli exemplify the immigrant experience, negotiating the hurdles of adjusting to a new country while maintaining their cultural origins. Their connection to their homeland of Calcutta moulds their perspective and influences their parenting approach, as they strive to instill a sense of tradition and legacy in their children despite the distance.

Sense of belonging and displacement:

Gogol: Throughout the work, Gogol struggles with sentiments of displacement and a need for a sense of belonging. He feels distant from both his Indian background and his American upbringing, and he is striving to reconcile his two identities. His physical excursions between various geographic locales heighten his sense of dislocation, mirroring the ephemeral nature of immigrant experiences. Ashoke & Ashima: Despite spending years in America, Gogol's parents still feel displaced and nostalgic for Calcutta. They keep strong ties to their country through customs, language, and relationships, while also attempting to adapt to their new surroundings, resulting in a hybrid feeling of belonging that spans two worlds.

Cultural Hybridity and Negotiations:

Gogol and Moushumi's relationship exemplifies the intricacies of cultural hybridity as well as the negotiation of different identities. Both characters are of Indian heritage but were raised in America, resulting in a combination of Indian and American cultural influences in their personalities and actions. Their partnership exemplifies the merging of distinct cultural backgrounds and the difficulties of negotiating several identities.

Urban Spaces and Cultural Encounters:

New York City: The urban landscape of New York City provides a backdrop for the protagonists' cultural interactions and adaptations. The city's numerous neighborhoods and thriving immigrant communities form a rich tapestry for examining topics of identity, integration, and multiculturalism. For Gogol and his family, New York provides both opportunity and difficulty as they navigate the complications of immigrant life in the city.

By examining these geocritical themes and their connections to the characters in "The Namesake," readers can acquire a better understanding of how geographical settings impact people's identities, experiences in culture, and interpersonal relationships in the story.

#### **IV. NOVEL'S DEVELOPING CULTURAL AND IDENTICAL SHIFT**

Highlighting the cultural and identity transitions that the characters, particularly Gogol Ganguli, go through as they traverse the intersections between their Indian background and American upbringing. The story spans several decades, allowing for a more nuanced examination of how these changes emerge and evolve. Here are some crucial points that emphasize the cultural and identity transformations in the novel.

Generational Division:

The tale begins with Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, immigrants from India, adjusting to life in America. Their experiences are characterized by a deep connection to their Indian cultural background and a sense of dislocation in the United States. They work hard to preserve their cultural traditions and pass them on to their offspring, but their attempts are sometimes met with opposition or apathy by their American-born children.

Gogol, representing the second generation of immigrants, goes through a profound cultural upheaval compared to his parents. Growing up in America, he is immersed in American culture while simultaneously discovering his Indian heritage. This dichotomy causes uncertainty and an identity crisis as he attempts to reconcile his two realities.

Name and identity:

Gogol's conflict with his name represents a larger struggle with identity. Initially, he rejects his birth name, believing that it connects him too strongly to his Indian ancestry and distinguishes him from his American colleagues. To adapt and discard his ethnic baggage, he takes on the name "Nikhil".



However, as the narrative unfolds, Gogol begins to accept his given name and rediscover his Indian identity. This transition indicates his growing acceptance of his cultural heritage, as well as his recognition that his identity is influenced by both his Indian ancestry and his American upbringing.

Cultural assimilation compared to cultural preservation:

Gogol's trip is characterized by a struggle between assimilation into American culture and keeping his Indian ancestry. He struggles with the urge to fit in with his American peers while also upholding his parents' customs and beliefs. This tension is further addressed in Gogol's love relationships, particularly with Moushumi, who, like him, is caught between two cultures. Their disastrous marriage exemplifies the intricacies of cultural integration and the difficulties of preserving cultural authenticity in a heterogeneous culture.

Geographical Influence on Identity:

The novel's various geographic settings, from Calcutta to America and back again, have a huge impact on the protagonists' identity and cultural experiences. Each region provides a unique cultural environment that shapes the characters' sense of self and belonging.

Gogol's visits to Calcutta introduce him to his Indian ancestry and help him better grasp his cultural heritage. In contrast, his experiences in America helped him become more American while still reinforcing his connection to his Indian family and culture.

#### **4.1 The identities of the characters are shaped by their geographical environment.**

Jhumpa Lahiri skilfully incorporates geographical locales into the story, emphasizing how these locations shape the characters' personalities. The novel focuses on the influence of two major settings: Calcutta, India, and different cities in the United States, particularly New York City and Boston. Here's how geographical settings influence the characters' identities:

Calcutta (India)

Calcutta depicts Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli's motherland, in which they grew up absorbed in Indian culture, traditions, and beliefs. Their identities are strongly rooted in their experiences in Calcutta, and these impacts follow them even after they immigrate to America.

Calcutta offers a sentimental backdrop for the Ganguli family, bringing back memories of their past and a sense of connection to a place and community. The city's sights, sounds, and smells are eloquently depicted throughout the narrative, emphasizing their importance in molding the characters' personalities.

Gogol's visits to Calcutta introduce him to his Indian origins and give him a better grasp of his cultural roots. These experiences contribute to his developing sense of identity and aid him.

United States (New York City and Boston):

The protagonists' immigrant journey and cultural assimilation take place mostly in the United States, namely in New York City and Boston. For Gogol and his sister Sonia, America is their place of origin and sole home, but it is also a land of cultural diversity and perpetual change. New York City, with its bustling streets and different neighborhoods, represents possibility and freedom to the Ganguli family. However, it is also a source of difficulty and cultural conflict as they navigate the nuances of American society.

Boston, within which Gogol attends college and eventually creates his adult life, provides a unique view of American culture. The city's academic setting and scholarly community influence Gogol's growth both professionally and personally, as well as his identity and worldview. Throughout their time in America, their identities are molded by their encounters with the cityscape, the people they meet, and the customs that they acquire. The juxtaposing of Indian and American traditions in these locales emphasizes the characters' continual search for identification and belonging.



Lahiri brilliantly shows how the physical and cultural landscapes form the characters' identities, demonstrating the complex interplay of place, culture, and human identity. "The Namesake" serves as more than just backdrops; they are essential to the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery, cultural assimilation, and identity.

#### **4.2 Contribution of language to Characters' identity**

**Bilingualism and Cultural Hybridization:**

Because of their bilingual upbringing, the characters in "The Namesake" must deal with several linguistic and cultural identities. Growing up in immigrant households exposes them to both English and their native language, which is typically Bengali.

Bilingualism represents the characters' cultural hybridity, as they balance their Indian background with their American upbringing. Their bilingualism enables individuals to straddle two cultures, expressing different aspects of their identities according to the linguistic situation.

For example, Gogol and his sister Sonia are proficient in both English and Bengali, allowing them to interact with their parents and stay connected to their Indian roots while fully participating in American society.

**Code Switching and Identity Negotiation:**

Code-switching, the habit of switching between two or more languages or dialects within a single discussion, is frequent among bilingual people. In "The Namesake," characters regularly switch between English and Bengali based on the social situation and the individuals they are talking with.

Code-switching is a tool for identity negotiation, allowing characters to move between their many cultural identities and adjust their language utterances accordingly. For example, the Ganguli family may flip between English and Bengali at home yet predominantly speak English in public.

Gogol's name represents a type of code-switching, as it is drawn from a Russian novelist and reflects his parents' wish to assimilate into American culture while yet maintaining a link to their roots

**Cultural Symbols and Generational Relationships:**

Within the immigrant community, language acts as a cultural marker to identify several generations from one another. While the younger generation, as represented by Gogol and Sonia, may prioritize English and American culture, the older generation, as represented by Ashoke and Ashima, usually maintains greater ties to their home language and traditions.

The interactions between generations over language are a reflection of larger conflicts between assimilation and cultural preservation in immigrant families. For instance, Gogol and Sonia might consider English to be their main language of communication and identity expression, whereas Ashoke and Ashima might bemoan their children's poor Bengali language skills as a loss of cultural legacy.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Finally, "The Namesake" by Jhumpa Lahiri provides a thorough examination of identity, belonging, and cultural dynamics via a geocritical perspective. The novel explores how the characters' experiences and identities are shaped by their geographical settings, with a backdrop of both India and the US. Lahiri explores the difficulties of moving between two cultures and the relationship between location, culture, and personal identity via the journey of the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli.

The characters in "The Namesake" respond to generational divides, cultural disparities, and the effects of globalisation by negotiating their identities. Lahiri illustrates the complex process of identity development in immigrant communities, from Gogol's battle with his given name to his parent's attempts to maintain their cultural legacy in a foreign land. Readers are encouraged to consider how important geographic settings are in forming personal identities and a sense of cultural belonging via their own experiences.



As a writer, Jhumpa Lahiri exhibits a deep comprehension of the geocritical elements of narrative, utilising places to enhance character growth and thematic investigation. Through the interlacing of the American and Indian cultural landscapes, Lahiri crafts a complex story that appeals to readers everywhere. The universal themes of desire, dislocation, and the search for connection are highlighted by her ability to depict the complexity of cultural identity and the influence of geographic contexts.

"The Namesake" essentially serves as a testament to the significant impact that geographical contexts have on both individual and collective identities. Readers are encouraged to consider the ways that place influences who we are and how we traverse the world through Lahiri's skillful storytelling, which eventually deepens our understanding of the human experience in a fast globalising society.

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