Reimagining Transnational Identities in Lahiri’s *The Namesake*

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[Abstract: This essay demonstrates that Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* goes beyond conventional wisdom about immigrant experiences in so far as it explores how the South Asian diaspora participates in transnational connections, shaping and transforming the notion of American identity in the contemporary global era. Lahiri’s novel offers us a striking account of transnational identity in which South Asian immigrants and their American-born children import practices from their country of origin, which they adapt in the new environment and, in turn, adopt practices from the new environment, which they adapt in innovative ways to help them feel more at ease.]

Towards the second-half of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli celebrates his twenty-seventh birthday at his girlfriend Maxine’s parents’ lake house in New Hampshire, for the first time without his own parents. Maxine and her mother Lydia organize a special dinner to celebrate his birthday. At the dinner, Gogol encounters Pamela, a white woman, who persists in calling him an Indian, despite his polite reminder that he is from Boston. Pamela comments that Gogol “must never get sick” when he travels to India. When Gogol replies “we get sick all the time” in India, she asserts, “but you’re an Indian…I’d think the climate wouldn’t affect you, given your heritage” (156). Lydia corrects Pamela, saying “Pamela, Nick’s American…He was born here.” But in the end, Lydia evinces her uncertainty when she asks—despite knowing Gogol for several months—if he was really born in the United States (157).

What is striking about this passage is that Pamela insists on identifying Gogol according to his race, rather than his country of citizenship or legal residence. Gogol is an American; he was born and raised in the United States, and speaks “American-accented English” (118). But for Pamela, a brown skinned man simply does not fit the category of “American.” She confronts Gogol’s identity within what Kwame Appiah calls “the script” (79). Appiah is curious to know to what extent “we expect people of a certain race to behave a certain way not simply because they are conforming to the script for that identity, performing that role, but because they have certain antecedent properties that are consequences of the label’s properly applying to them” (79). Pamela seems to be someone who presupposes some antecedent properties ascribed to Americans of Indian ancestry, and insists upon calling Gogol an Indian. In other words, she constructs Gogol’s identity as Indian by reference to available labels and available identities derived from physical properties.

In a typical reading, the reader might view Pamela’s classification of Gogol’s identity as an example of racial profiling, in which Gogol is identified by his roots, manifested through his skin color. But *The Namesake* goes beyond the conventional wisdom about immigrant experience. Rather than merely focusing on the complexities of lifestyles, cultural dislocation, and conflicts of assimilation—and rather than merely portraying characters as torn between respecting their family traditions and an Americanized way of life—Lahiri’s novel celebrates a cultural hybridity resulting inevitably from the interconnectedness of the modern world. Here, I am not suggesting that Lahiri’s novel overlooks the existing (and familiar) problems of cultural diversity in the United States. Instead, I want to suggest that *The Namesake* explores these complexities, and the existential confusion of South Asian immigrants and their American-born children, in order to assert the necessity of recognizing and adopting a transnational identity—through constant negotiations between different aspects of their lives.

Lahiri, the first South Asian American recipient of the Pulitzer prize for her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), has gained a great deal of recognition, both within the United States and internationally. Her success results in part from her engaging, racy style, edged by gentle humor, and from her realistic subject matter: the everyday experiences of Bengali American characters, which she transforms into universal human experiences. Yet some critics and reviewers accuse Lahiri of perpetuating the exoticization and stereotyping of Indian immigrants. For instance, Tamara Bhalla, in her essay on *The Namesake*, claims that the success of the novel “stems from the stereotypes (particularly concerning
gender and ethnicity) that it perpetuates” (109). She argues that “The Namesake presents limiting, stereotypical representation of Indian women and objectifies the three main characters as materialistic consumers, victims of brown male oppression, and repositories of ethnic tradition,” which contribute to constituting “authentic South Asian female subjectivity in the West” (110).

Lahiri’s work, however, offers us more than just the typical representation of Bengali immigrant characters. Her work sheds, as Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung argue, “light on both universal dimensions of human experience and more specific Bengali, postcolonial, South Asian American, and Asian American politics” (xxi). In this same vein, Karen Cardozo importantly argues that intertextuality—“prominent references to texts or traditions ostensibly ‘outside’ Bengali, postcolonial, South Asian American, or Asian American frameworks”—functions as a vehicle in Lahiri’s work to mediate between ethnic particularities and the broader spectrum of human experience (3). Lahiri’s use of intertextuality in The Namesake, for instance, reveals how “the universal inheres in the particular: it is from specific intercultural encounters that we gain a generalizable conception of human experience” (Cardozo 3).

A number of critical essays on The Namesake focus on the complexity of second-generation South Asian American experiences from various perspectives (e.g., see Field, Shariff, Bhalla, Caesar, and Friedman). While these perspectives are fruitful to understanding the existential confusion and struggles of second-generation children, especially in negotiating the cultural borderlands, my essay broadens this discourse not only by showing how the South Asian diaspora involves participation in transnational connections, shaping and transforming the notion of American identity in the contemporary global era, but also by explaining how American identity is always, and already, transnational. I claim that the novel reimagines American identity as necessarily the heterogeneity of different cultures. This novel, I shall argue, helps us reimagine—given the specific differences of the contemporary status of South Asians in the United States—how transnational identities can function.

I began this essay with the passage about Gogol’s birthday-dinner incident for two reasons: first, the passage strikingly illustrates how South Asian Americans are still seen as foreigners and, second, this passage rehearses a nativist account of American identity, in contrast to the transnational nature of American identity that the novel offers us. Pamela fails to recognize that the United States has been intertwined with the rest of the world since its inception. Her assumption about American identity, which requires one to be white and descended from Europeans, contradicts the transnational American identity suggested
by Randolph Bourne about a hundred years ago. In his 1916 essay, Bourne noted that the notion of “Americanization” was responsible for the failure of the “melting pot” ideal of American identity. He argued that non-English immigrants were forced to melt into a pot that never existed. Bourne claimed that this process of “Americanizing” was just “Anglo-Saxonizing”—because “we are all foreign-born or the descendants of the foreign-born” (252, 249). He claimed that America was a “transplanted Europe” because even the Anglo-Saxon, the first immigrant, had never ceased to be the descendent of immigrants (255). As long as Americanism is thought in terms of the melting pot, the American cultural tradition will lie in a misty past—that is, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition (256). Since America was coming to be a transnational state, marked by back and forth movements of people of different colors and types from different parts of the world, Bourne proposed that we give up the search for a “native ‘American’ culture” and accept “cosmopolitanism” (255-262).

I summarize Bourne’s argument here because it helps to show how the United States has been a “transnational” state since its inception. The United States has never been an insular territory; it has always been a place for transnational connections of people, ideas, religions, food, and cultures. Wai Chee Dimock, in Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time (2006), argues that American literature “is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and culture” (3). Her discussion of Emerson’s indebtedness to the Bhagvad Gita and Islamic scriptures illustrates how the United States was already connected to the rest of the world through the “deep time” that predates the era of European colonial domination (3). As Dimock notes, transnationalism is not limited to any specific time period; it started long ago with networks and connections between different people and ideas, crossing national, racial, and ethnic boundaries.

But transnational cultural exchange has accelerated in the modern era along with globalization, technological advancement, and migrations of people and ideas from one place to another. It has evolved and changed over time, conjuring numerous definitions. Some scholars define transnationalism as hybridity; some define it as a dual identity; while others define it as a process by which migrants create and sustain multi-stranded social relations. Anthropologists and social scientists define transnationalism in reference to migrants’ ties across countries that link individuals or groups in one or more nation states, by crossing and opening up various national and transcultural spaces. Kandice Chuh helpfully illustrates that US nationalism has constituted “Asian American” as a transnational identity through the racialization
of Asian Americans as “others” (69). She argues that the incarceration of Japanese and of American citizens of Japanese origin, during World War II, is “a particularly visible and material instance within which the comparative, transnational dimensions of US national identity played out” (69). Chuh’s work is particularly important for understanding the fact that transnationalism not only arises from globalization, but also results from our recognition and understanding of the racialization of Asian immigrants within the US national context.

For the purpose of this essay, I draw my definition of transnationalism from The Namesake itself, which offers a striking account of transnational identity. I define transnationalism as a cultural space where immigrants and their American-born children import practices from their country of origin, which they adapt to the new environment and, in turn, adopt practices from the current environment, which they adapt in new ways that help them feel more at home. My understanding of transnationalism overlaps with Chuh’s assertion that transnationalism arises both from physical border crossing due to globalization, and, from within the nation, through the racialization of ethnic groups. Expanding on Chuh, I claim that transnationalism results from immigrants’ and their children’s voluntary adoption of cultural practices from their country of origin. In other words, transnationalism, as shown in the novel, is a cultural phenomenon in which both first-generation immigrants and their American-born children maintain their ethnic properties—even when they do not experience racial discrimination and marginalization—in adaptive ways, and make connections between their country of residence and country of origin. My definition of transnationalism challenges the traditional understanding of migration as a permanent relocation from one country to another, a process eventually culminating in full assimilation into a dominant culture. This definition has particular relevance because it reflects the contemporary global relations and interconnectedness of the United States to South Asia, redefining American identity in a broader context.

Lahiri sets her novel in the context of globalization and technological advancements that allow her characters to maintain their ethnicity and culture by permitting them easy travel to their home country of origin and ways to stay connected with their relatives. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished the national-origins quotas and provided for the admission of 170,000 immigrants from the eastern hemisphere, played a major role in this migration and the cultural exchange between South Asia and the United States (Takaki 419). This revised immigration law attracted thousands of professionals, technical workers, and graduate degree holders from South Asia. Gogol’s father Ashoke Ganguli’s migration to the United
States in the late 1960s can be seen as a part of this larger “second wave” of immigration from Asian countries, formerly a “barred zone,” to the United States. Ashoke comes to the United States to earn a doctoral degree in Electrical Engineering, at MIT. He goes back to India to bring an Indian wife and, finally, to settle down in the United States, by starting a family in the States. Since Ashoke and his wife, Ashima, come to the United States for better opportunities, “claiming America” or becoming “American” is not a top priority. Unlike the first generation of Asian immigrants in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century (mostly from China and Japan), post-1965 South Asian immigrants were much less concerned with achieving membership and acceptance into American society. These immigrants also did not experience difficulty with the English language, with anti-Asiatic laws, and with incarceration (as persons of Japanese ancestry did during WWII). These historical conditions, produced by shifting global capitalism and social and political reforms in the United States, permit Ashoke and Ashima to continue to practice Indian culture, while adopting some American practices in due course of time. In this regard, *The Namesake* offers a model of transnationalism, in which the characters maintain cultural practices from their country of origin while also adopting cultural practices from their newly adopted country. Lahiri’s characters inhabit crossroads, constantly negotiating different cultural experiences. They do not hold strong ties to ethnic roots, or protest against their status as a minority other. Their identity is a hybrid artifact resulting from the interconnectedness of the modern world. These characters challenge the conventional wisdom about the alienated postcolonial subject, and constantly form transnational identities within, to use James Clifford’s words, the “diverse array of contemporary diasporic cultural forms” (253-254).

Throughout the novel, Lahiri’s characters remain transnational agents who are routinely mobile, maintaining transnational ties with their country of origin. Their positionality de-territorializes the specific national and cultural identities of Indian immigrants and suggests that individuals cannot confine themselves within the narrow concept of national and cultural boundaries in this globalized world characterized by transculturation and migration. In this regard, Lahiri’s representation of Indian immigrants echoes Arjun Appadurai’s suggestion that the notions of nativeness and native places have become very complex as more and more people identify themselves, or are categorized, in reference to deterritorialized homelands, cultures, and origins (34). Appadurai coins the idea of “scapes” to explain the understanding of the contemporary global system and interconnectedness of the modern world. His concept of “scapes” indicates a changing social, territorial, and cultural formation of group identity, in which people regroup in
new locations and reconstruct their histories and identities far from their place of origin. Early in *The Namesake*, Lahiri shows how the circle of Bengali acquaintances in Cambridge, Massachusetts, grows. Many bachelors go to Calcutta one by one and return with wives. They start living “within walking distance of one another in Cambridge” and “there is a new home to go to, a new couple or young family to meet” every weekend (38). The husbands are “teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers.” Their “homesick” and “bewildered” wives turn to each other for recipes and advice, wondering if “it’s possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat” (38). These Bengalis frequently gather at one another’s homes and enjoy Indian meals, singing, dancing, and playing the harmonium. They argue over Bollywood movies, Indian politics, and various geographical locations in India. These immigrants, away from their birth country, unite on the basis of their shared history, ethnicity, and nationality. They adopt some specific characteristics of the new cultures over time, while preserving their own Indian cultures and inventing homes out of fragmented memories. They debate intensely “the politics of America, a country in which none of them is eligible to vote” (38). They indicate their simultaneous allegiance to both India and the United States through their activities.

*The Namesake* may be read as a test of varying accounts of transnational identity, each of which has been posed as the defining theoretical account. Dual identity, for example, is a key to Gogol’s transnational identity. However, this dual identity is not exactly what W.E.B. Du Bois calls “double consciousness,” because double consciousness is the experience of being several things and not being completely anything at once, an experience that causes the individual to understand himself through the eyes of another. The “Negro,” Du Bois wrote, can see himself only by looking through the eyes of someone else. He always feels his “two-ness as an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body” (218). While Du Bois’ account of double consciousness helps to clarify the two-ness of an American identity for some, transnational identity is not something one perceives through someone else’s eyes. In Gogol’s case, transnational identity results from his dual cultural practices. Gogol is brought up in two entirely different cultures. Although he thinks of India as a foreign country far from home, both physically and psychologically, and although he initially opposes certain Indian practices, he is acculturated as an Indian and performs Indian customs and practices at home (118). But both inside and outside the home, he practices American ways. More specifically, while Gogol is fascinated by the comparatively free life of Maxine, his white girlfriend, and attempts to live the individual life of an American, he also feels a sense of obligation towards his parents.
As Gogol matures, he notices a gap between American and Indian cultural values. He particularly contrasts his parents’ cultural practices with those of Maxine’s parents, and decides he likes American ways: he prefers American fast foods; he desires to spend vacations and celebrate festivals among his own family members, rather than among the whole Bengali community; and he wants freedom in his personal life. Gogol does not like most of the Indian practices—whether it is his parents forcing him to eat more at the dinner table or spending a vacation among a crowd of Bengali people—that compromise his individual freedom. Therefore, he distances himself from his parents to venture into Maxine’s life, spending “his nights with Maxine, sleeping under the same roof as her parents, a thing Ashima refuses to admit to her Bengali friends” (166). Maxine’s world becomes a refuge for Gogol to fulfill his desire for individual freedom and romance, which he lacks in his parents’ community. Gogol finds a sense of freedom even at the dinner table in Maxine’s parents’ house. He observes Maxine’s parents’ way of serving dinner: “A bowl of small, round, roasted red potatoes is passed around, and afterward a salad. They eat appreciatively, commenting on the tenderness of the meat, the freshness of the beans” (133). Everyone at the dinner table is free to eat whatever they want and talk about the food. Maxine’s mother does not pay attention to anybody’s plate; neither does she announce that there is more to eat. But Gogol’s own parents would insist he empty the plate or request that he eat more. When Gogol would push the remaining food to the side, his father would say “there is still some food on your plate . . . Finish it, Gogol. At your age I ate tin” (55).

Although Gogol is new to American table manners—“this sort of talk at meal times, to the indulgent ritual of the lingering meal, and the pleasant aftermath of bottle and crumbs and empty glasses that clutter the table”—he learns to love the food Maxine and her parents eat, “the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper” (134, 137). Gogol’s affection for Maxine indicates not only his adoption of interracial dating and love, but also the general adoption of an “American” demeanor, because for him “to know her and love her is to know and love all of these things” (137). In fact, Gogol’s love for Maxine grows out of his lack of everything she possesses—the individual lifestyle of Maxine who has “no sense of obligation,” and “unlike his parents her parents pressure her to do nothing, and yet she lives faithfully, happily, at their side” (138).

Gogol’s fascination with American life and his dislike for Indian culture come out of his own perception of the notion of freedom. The fact that Maxine’s parents do not interfere or ask her to act according to their wishes convinces Gogol that freedom means an ability to act on one’s own choice, which does not involve an interference even from his
parents. Gogol interprets Ashoke’s insistence that he eat more, for example, as an intervention against his individual freedom. What he does not understand, though, is that Ashoke’s insistence to eat more is a cultural practice. Ashoke forces Gogol to eat more because, as an Indian father, he cares for his son, and wants to make sure Gogol eats enough and gets the good nutrition necessary for his growth. This cultural difference, which Gogol initially thinks undesirable, makes him want to avoid various Indian practices and to adopt American ways. For instance, Gogol does not like his parents’ way of spending their vacation; rather, he prefers the ways his girlfriend’s parents spend their vacation, “playing board games on rainy afternoons, watching shooting stars at night,” going hiking “up the rocky mountain trails to watch the sun set over the valley” (155). Gogol imagines that his parents would find these relaxing and enlivening activities in an invigorating setting to be boring and lonely, “ remarking that they were the only Indians” there (155). Therefore, he does not feel “nostalgia for the vacations he’s spent with his family” because he realizes now that “they were never vacations at all” (155). For him, those vacations spent with his parents were “overwhelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in places they did not belong to and intended never to see again” (155). Unlike Maxine’s parents, who spend their vacation at the lake house among family, Gogol’s parents would spend their vacation on the “road trips with one or two Bengali families, in rented vans, going to Toronto or Atlanta or Chicago, places where they had other Bengali friends” (155). The fathers would be “huddled at the front, taking turns at the wheel, consulting maps highlighted by AAA,” while the children would be in the back “with plastic tubs of aloo dum and cold flattened luchis wrapped in foil, fried the day before, which they would stop in state parks to eat on picnic tables” (155). They would all stay in a motel, “whole families in a single room” (155). For Gogol, such family vacations were merely tours to unfamiliar territories. He finds himself in the position of a tourist among his parents’ Bengali friends, struggling to navigate and negotiate their odd and unaccustomed cultural practices.

Although Gogol feels uncomfortable at having so many connections with his cultural heritage, he cannot avoid them because he feels obligated to perform these cultural practices for his parents’ sake. One of these obligations, for instance, compels him to attend a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. If Amit, one of his distant cousins, were not presenting there, Gogol would never have chosen to attend such a discussion in which the panelists keep “referring to something called ‘marginality,’ as if it were some sort of medical condition” (118). Gogol shows no interest in the discussion; rather he spends his time sketching portraits of the panelists. But the
term “ABCD,” which he had never heard before, strikes him. “Teleologically speaking,” one of the presenters announces, “ABCDs are unable to answer the question ‘where are you from?’” Gogol learns that ABCD stands for “American-born confused deshi,” and deshi refers to Indian, and desh to India. Gogol himself, thus, is an ABCD by this definition. But he does not consider himself a confused deshi because he “thinks of it [India] as Americans do, as India” (118). He avoids connecting with other ABCDs at college and declines Amit’s offer to join the Indian Association because “they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share” (119). Gogol does not see any rationale other than “hypocrisy” in joining an Indian Association that “celebrates occasions his parents forced him, throughout his childhood and adolescence, to attend” (119).

No matter how much Gogol rejects the identity of an ABCD, his position of living in what Robin Field calls “a liminal space of cultural borderlands” between the United States and India creates temporary tension and confusion in him (166). Gogol’s confusion arises mainly from the fact that he does not understand the significance of his Indian cultural heritage, and perhaps he views Indian culture as inferior to mainstream American culture. He believes that his parents’ past memories and the Indian heritage that he follows do not belong to him. His “pet name” Gogol disturbs him more than anything else. In Bengali culture, every person is given two names: a “pet name,” which is “daknam, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments”; and a “good name,” a bhalonam, for identification in the outside world” (25-26). While pet names are a reminder of childhood known to and used only by families, relatives, and close friends, good names are official names that appear in public places (26). But Gogol does not understand why his parents had to follow Bengali tradition and “give [him] a pet name,” that was neither Bengali nor American, but Russian (100). Neither does he see any sense in why he needs to live with a pet name and a good name, a Bengali tradition, in a country where such distinctions do not exist. Gogol’s dissatisfaction and frustration with his pet name increases when he learns from Mr. Lawson’s literature class “about Nikolai Gogol’s lifelong unhappiness, his mental instability, about how he’d starved to death” (100-101). In a conversation with his parents, he complains that they “name[d] me after someone so strange” (101).

Gogol rebels against his parents’ wishes when he decides to change his name. When Gogol turns eighteen, he goes into a Cambridge courtroom and asks the judge to change his name, for he “hates the name Gogol” (102). He believes that by switching his name
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Nikhil, he will escape his cultural past. But he learns later through his father that his name is so strongly connected to his father’s unforgettable past that he cannot escape so easily. Ashoke tells him that he survived a train accident in India in October 1961 because he was reading Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat” when the accident occurred nearly two hundred and nine kilometers from Calcutta, “killing the passengers in their sleep” (17). Although Ashoke assures Gogol that his name does not remind him of that dark night’s catastrophe at all but “remind[s] me of everything that followed,” Gogol realizes that his life is interwoven between the past and present.

Because Gogol’s identity is affected by “multi-stranded social relations,” it is impossible for him to identify with a fixed American identity (Basch et al. 7). In other words, he cannot fully avoid the many connections that he is living with. However, only after his father’s death does Gogol begin to understand the social reality that, since his life has been interwoven between Indian cultures and American ways, he must adopt a hybrid identity. Until his father’s death, he had always tried to escape his roots and to practice American ways, mostly by immersing himself in Maxine’s life. But when he hears about his father’s death and goes to Cleveland to collect his father’s body and belongings, he regrets any past actions that might have upset his parents and offended their values. He remembers the Bengali rituals that his father had performed when his paternal grandfather died. Ashoke had “shave[d] off all his hair with a disposable razor” that left his scalp bleeding in numerous places (179). Gogol had “laughed at the sight of his hairless, grief-stricken father,” because he did not understand the mourning rituals of Hinduism at that time. But now “years later Gogol had learned the significance, that it was a Bengali son’s duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent’s death” (179). Gogol follows his father’s footsteps by performing the mourning ceremony for his father’s death. When Maxine visits Gogol during his mourning, she suggests that they go to New Hampshire on their planned vacation “to get away from all this” (182). Clearly, Maxine is here suggesting that Gogol escape the tiresome and difficult Bengali tradition of mourning and his duty and responsibility toward his mother. But Gogol, for the first time, tells her that he does not want to ignore his cultural practices (182). Gogol’s understanding of the importance of his cultural heritage redirects him from his search for an authentic American identity to the adoption of a hybrid and transnational identity.

The most striking account of transnationalism that *The Namesake* offers is the way immigrants import cultural practices, which they adapt to the new environment, and adopt cultural practices from the environment, which they adapt in new ways that help them feel more
familiar. Lisa Lowe describes this process of transnational identity formation as “practices that are partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented” (65). Lahiri’s characters carry with them a collective memory, a memory that helps them retain historical memories as well as the cultural heritage of their home country. They maintain their traditions of origin, but they are also gradually subject to social, cultural, and political integration into the United States. They retain ties to their country of origin by maintaining regular communications with their families and friends and traveling frequently to their country of origin. Although, at the beginning of the novel, the characters adhere to their cultural roots, they later modify their practices and behavior. Ashima, for example, undergoes a number of transformations in different stages of her life in the United States. When she first arrives in the United States, she feels completely alone in the foreign land. Ashima is shocked to find people who live detached from one another. She gives birth to Gogol, her first child, but she is “terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (6). She remembers her home country, where most of the relatives and elders gather to bless a baby upon its birth. In contrast, she finds no one surrounding her and her child in the United States, except Nandis and Dr. Gupta, who are “only substitutes for the people who really ought to be surrounding them” (24). Ashima feels sorry for her son, for “she has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived” (25).

Upon returning home from the hospital, Ashima feels dislocated and lonely in her three-bedroom apartment. Unlike in Calcutta, she has no relatives surrounding her. Neither does she have servants to do the dishes, sweep the floor, wash the clothes, shop for groceries, and prepare meals on days she is tired. Ashima assumes that “the very lack of such amenities is the American way” (13). The fact that her husband brings her a cup of tea, an odd practice in her Bengali culture, frustrates her. She makes up her mind that they must go back to India as soon as Ashoke completes his degree because she believes that they have no connections with other people and their cultures of the United States. Ashima desperately urges Ashoke to “hurry up and finish your degree” so that they can go back and live in their familiar culture (33). Ashoke knows that Ashima is feeling homesick in the United States; many times, he finds Ashima “quietly crying,” but he does not have words to console her, except putting an arm around her and feeling guilty “for marrying her, for bringing her here” (33). Possibly, he could have listened to her request to return to their home country, but Ashima’s insistence on going back to India reminds him only of Mr. Gosh, the man he befriended on the train before the wreck, who confessed that he regretted listening to his wife and leaving England. Ashoke does not
want to make the same mistake that Mr. Gosh had made years ago by returning to India.

Ashoke consolidates Indian culture with American culture more easily than Ashima because of his understanding and recognition of other peoples and cultures even before coming to the United States, particularly through reading a large number of books. He is an enthusiastic reader of prominent English and Russian writers like Charles Dickens, Graham Greene, Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Leo Tolstoy (12-13). He learns from his grandfather that books are a means to travel the world without actually moving. However, this idea is replaced by inspiration from Mr. Gosh, who tells him to “pack a pillow and blanket and see as much of the world as you can” (16). Ashoke imagines the West as “another sort of future . . . walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died” (20). He integrates easily into the American culture when he arrives in the United States. For instance, he “stops wearing jackets and ties to the University,” despite being a tenured full professor, because he does not want to appear different from his American colleagues (65). Ashoke also starts using the American “ballpoint,” replacing the “fountain pen” which is traditionally considered a marker of high status for Indian intellectuals (65).

Ashima seems to be less acquainted with the world outside India before coming to the United States. She therefore resists American cultural practices in the beginning, feeling dislocated and homeless upon her arrival in the United States. The Namesake begins on a “sticky August evening” in Cambridge, with Ashima two weeks before her due date, trying to make some Bengali style snacks out of the available American ingredients in the kitchen (1). She combines “Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix” (1). This inexpensive spicy mix snack is sold in a cone made from old newspapers at sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India. Although Ashima cannot find the exact ingredients and can make only “a humble approximation of the snack,” she eats this snack throughout her pregnancy (1). Ashima makes and eats “spicy mix snack” not only because as a pregnant woman she craves it, but also because this act allows her to feel more connected to Calcutta.

This opening strategy of the novel instantly forecasts Ashima’s loneliness and psychological discomfort, resulting from both her migration to the United States and her pregnancy. She is pregnant and needs intimate care and familiar surroundings that provide her a sense of home and comfort. But in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, she finds herself alone and bewildered, even though her husband is in
the bedroom busy reading. In an attempt to ameliorate her loneliness, Ashima does things that feel familiar to her. Preparing and eating “spicy mix snack,” is one way to create an imaginary homeland in the United States and feel connected to Calcutta. Put simply, Ashima implants India into the United States by performing and maintaining Indian cultural practices at her new home in Boston. For instance, she cooks Indian food daily, wears a sari, adorns her forehead with the bindi, reads a copy of Desh magazine (printed in her mother tongue) a dozen times, and most importantly, does not utter her husband’s first name, a common practice in a traditional Indian home (2, 6).

Later on, though, Ashima starts to adopt American culture. She learns many American cultural practices from her colleagues in the city library, her first job in the United States. Although she was upset at having been “deprived of the company of her parents upon moving to America, her children’s independence, their need to keep distance from her,” she gradually learns that “it was inevitable, that eventually parents had to stop assuming that their children would return faithfully for the holidays” (166). Ashima enters into the American culture of individualism: she drives her car, buys her groceries herself, pushes her stroller like all American mothers, and lives by herself in her house when Ashoke travels to Ohio for six months. After Ashoke dies of a heart attack in Cleveland, she understands why Ashoke did not want her to join him in Cleveland. She tells people that he wanted her to stay in Boston because “he was teaching me how to live alone” (183). She realizes that one needs to learn to live independently in American society.

Ashima’s growing understanding and acceptance of American culture replaces her initial feelings of homelessness in the United States. One winter evening, Ashima goes shopping to downtown Boston for her first trip back to Calcutta. She spends hours buying gifts for all her family members and relatives in Calcutta. “Exhilarated, exhausted, and nervous with anticipation of the trip,” Ashima forgets her shopping items on the subway train (42). As a result, she is “furious with herself, humiliated at the prospect of arriving in Calcutta empty-handed apart from sweaters and the paintbrushes” (42). Ashoke calls the MBTA lost-and-found to locate the items. When they retrieve all her items the next day, “not a teaspoon missing,” Ashima begins to trust the American system, and feels “connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible” (43). She feels affiliated to the exceptions and rules of America—things that would be impossible in her hometown of Calcutta. Ashima starts inviting non-Indian friends to her house for dinner and other celebrations. She is now not surprised to learn about American women living alone because they are divorced, and “dating in middle age” (163). At the end of the novel, Ashima
decides to divide her time between the United States and India: “She will spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States” (275). She announces that her real home is in Boston, “though his [Ashoke’s] ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town that he will continue to dwell in her mind” (279). Ashima’s home is no longer considered to be a single geographical location, but belongs to different geographical locations, based on her travels and migration. Ashima’s decision to divide her time between India and the United States shows, as Natalie Friedman states, “America not as a newly adopted homeland, but as an option—Ashima does not feel bound to stay in America, nor does she feels nostalgically driven to return to India” (113). In fact, as the name Ashima means “limitless, without borders,” for her, home becomes a psychological state rather than a fixed physical location (Lahiri 26). Ashima’s identity, therefore, can be defined less by national identities than by “cultural hybridity,” to borrow Bhabha’s words (The Location of Culture 37); less by “roots” than by “routes” and migration, to echo Clifford (302).

In the initial stages of her life in the United States, Ashima is very suspicious and fearful of American culture because she finds it very isolating and strange. She always fears that Gogol will forget his Indian cultural heritage. She seeks to maintain and preserve Indian traditions in America because, at that point, she still thinks that India is her home. “After twenty-seven years in America,” Ashima confesses, “she still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home” (108). The fact that Gogol claims New Haven as his home, after living there for only three months, frustrates Ashima. She initially protests against Gogol’s love affair with Maxine, and does not like his spending nights with her. She had always wanted Gogol to follow Hindu culture and marry a Hindu girl. But later, after Gogol’s break-up with Maxine, she asks Gogol if he could patch up with Maxine again. She recognizes that marriage in America is not something their parents arrange, but individuals’ choice. Therefore, Ashima happily accepts Ben, who is half Chinese and half white, as her son-in-law. She believes that her daughter Sonia is old enough to make her own decisions. Many of her friends’ children “had married Americans, had produced pale, dark skinned, half-American grandchildren, and none of it was as terrible as they had feared” (216). So, as long as her children are old enough to make their decision, it finally does not matter to her whether Gogol marries Maxine, or Sonia marries Ben.

The Ganguli family house itself functions as a social space for intercultural conversations and celebrations. As the Bengali community in Cambridge grows, Bengalis gather at the Gangulis’ house not only to celebrate Indian festivities and maintain cultural practices, but also to
celebrate Christian festivals and American national holidays, if in somewhat modified ways. For instance, they “learn to roast turkeys . . . at Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around the snowmen, to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter” (64). They practice these celebrations just as they prepare for festivities associated with the Goddesses Durga and Saraswati (64). Though turkey at Thanksgiving is an American cultural tradition, they prepare turkey in the way they used to roast chicken back in India, “rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne” (64). In other words, they make turkey Indian-style. These Bengalis celebrate Christmas and other American festivals as a community—just as Durga Pooja, one of the greatest festivals in Hinduism, is celebrated among people of the same community. Even though these immigrants are not Christians, they have made these holidays part of their own cultural tradition. In this regard, they construct an imaginary landscape between the United States and India, where they must negotiate between different cultural practices and relocate themselves between newly acquired American territory and an imaginary Indian nation.

Lahiri’s characters’ transformation through intercultural interaction is a necessary and inevitable condition for them. As long as they adhere only to their native culture and resist adopting a multiplicity of identities, they risk marginalization and alienation. For instance, Ashima suffers from cultural dislocation at the beginning of her life in the United States, mainly because of her inability to negotiate different cultures. As long as Ashima thinks of the United States as a foreign country, she feels a sense of exile. When she suffers from the conflict between rootedness, constituting a tie to her past, and uprootedness, living in the present, and is unable to feel at home in the new land of settlement, she develops a sense of inhabiting what Salman Rushdie calls “imaginary homelands” (14). When Ashima is displaced due to her migration, however, she learns to invent home and homeland (in the absence of her native land) through familiar cultural practices. But she cannot confine herself to a single indigenous principle of national and cultural identity while living in a country that is heterogeneously constructed. Although her tenacity in clinging to the past is obvious, she constantly negotiates different identities even though she does not realize her practice. While she lives in the present experience of American culture, she also inherits and practices her culture of origin. In this sense, she lives in two countries and has two homes—one corporeal, that is in the United States, and another an “imaginary homeland”—and, thus, she becomes a “transmigrant.”

Lahiri’s characters do not assimilate into American culture, but they negotiate it. Assimilation, after all, involves forgetting the past and immersing completely into a dominant culture, willing to disregard
previous cultural practices. It involves the idea of purity and what Bhabha calls “originary”\textsuperscript{12} culture. The characters in Lahiri’s novel maintain and preserve their cultures in different forms, while also locating themselves in the new territories and creating their transnational and fluid identities. Ashima, Ashoke, and other Indian immigrants in the novel are at once the carriers of Indian cultural and national identities, as well as transnational agents who consolidate two different worlds and construct transnational identities in the United States. Transnationalism, here, is not the negation of nationalism and histories, but at once the practice of both Indian and American cultural values, in adaptive ways, on American soil. Since Lahiri’s characters live between different worlds and practice both Indian and American cultural values in modified forms, their identities are not limited by location. Instead, their identities become fluid. These immigrant characters still carry with them the expectations for their children that they should marry Indian girls, achieve university degrees from Yale, MIT, or Brown, have prestigious jobs, and earn big paychecks. For instance, when Gogol turns eighteen, “like the rest of their Bengali friends, his parents expect him to be, if not an engineer, then a doctor, a lawyer, an economist at the least” because these are the most highly respected fields among Indian communities (105). Ashoke reminds Gogol repeatedly that these were “the fields that brought them to America, and earned them security and respect” (105). But with time these inherited legacies are modified, and sometimes reinvented. The Gangulis and other immigrant characters not only move beyond their preferred fields of study and professions, but they also redefine their cultural concept of marriage by allowing their children to make individual decisions and by accepting interracial marriages.

While *The Namesake* explores the challenges the first-generation immigrants and their American-born children encounter, it also focuses on the unavoidability of cultural transformation resulting from the mobility and connectivity of peoples, cultures, and ideas. The immigrant characters in the novel not only leave somewhere called home to make a new home in the United States, but they continue the endless process of traveling back and forth between India and the United States, creating familial, cultural, linguistic and economic ties across national borders. These back and forth travels, made easier by new means of transportation and communication technologies, facilitate the maintenance of Indian cultural values while interweaving the United States with India.\textsuperscript{13} The novel’s focus on transnational connections broadens the boundaries of the United States beyond national borders. It redisCOVERS the United States as a place of heterogeneity and multiplicity of identities, in which immigrants practice both: the cultures of their present country of residence and the
country of their origin, and in adaptive and familiar ways that help
them feel at home. By extension, the novel helps readers grasp a
diasporic and transnational vision of American identity—rather than
Pamela’s version of a reified and exclusionary nativist American
identity—and they do so by understanding the complex transnational
networks and dynamics at work.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Vincent Cheng and Howard Horwitz for their
constructive comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay. A
version of this paper was presented at the American Literature Association’s
annual conference in Boston in May 2011.

2. See Lee (176), Dhingra and Cheung (xvi), and Mani (34).

3. Bhabha, in The Location of Culture, suggests transnationalism as
hybridity (p. 38); Basch et al in Nations Unbound define transnationalism as a
process by which migrants create, through their daily activities, multi-stranded
social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement (p. 7).

4. See Clifford’s Routes (p. 302-303); Thomas Faist’s “Diaspora and
Transnationalism” (p. 9-11).

5. See Prema Kurien’s “Place at the Multicultural table: The Development
of an American Hinduism” (p.5)

6. Since this reformed immigration law occurred when postcolonial India,
under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, had produced a high number of
technological professionals and scientists and employment opportunities were
very slim, thousands of professionals and scientists, as well as post-graduate
students, started emigrating to the United States through a selective
immigration policy. The United States particularly welcomed these highly
skilled immigrants from South Asia and other Asian countries as the United
States was trying to keep up with the USSR, especially after the USSR
launched Sputnik I and II into orbit. See Prashad’s The Karma of Brown Folk
(p. 74-76); Hing’s Making and Remaking Asian America Through Immigration

7. See Takaki’s Strangers From a Different Shore (page 420).

8. According to Appadurai, there is a global cultural economy which can
be best understood in terms of the interconnectedness and interaction of five
dimensions of global cultural flows: Ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes,
financescapes, and ideoscapes (see Appadurai 33-36).

9. For instance, Liisa H. Malkki, an anthropologist, argues that “there has
emerged a new awareness of the global social fact that, now more than perhaps
ever before, people are chronically mobile and routinely displaced, and invent
homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases” (52).

10. In his interview with Rutherford, Bhabha argues that we negotiate all
the time. He states, “we are always negotiating in any situation of political
opposition or antagonism” (216).

11. Basch et al. define the term transmigrant to refer to immigrants who
develop and maintain multiple relationships—familial, economic, social,
organizational, religious, and political—between two countries or more.

12. See Bhabha’s Location of Culture (p. 38).
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13. Again, see Prema Kurien’s “Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism” (p. 5).

Works Cited


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