Forging Transnational Identities: A Postethnic Diasporic Re-imaging of "Home" in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract
Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as "an imagined political community" (6) is important in the context of the portrayal of home by diasporic writers. "Home," when re-calling or re-imaging the quest for belonging from the point of view of the diaspora, is often portrayed as an elusive metaphoric vision that is in resonance with the struggle against the attempt to pin the term down to physical dimensions.

This paper explores the concept of "home" in terms of its changing connotations in the diasporic writing of Asian American author Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri's 2003 novel, *The Namesake*, portrays the diasporic conflict between an essentialist Indian identity and assimilating into America's multicultural ethos. This conflict is more pronounced in the case of the female characters, portrayed through attempts at juxtaposing traditional expectations and complete assimilation. Home becomes a "presence in absence" for the female characters in Lahiri's novel, challenging the idea of an identity based on the nation as a fixed, geographical entity, and the culinary becomes the site for cultural negotiation. This paper seeks to delineate how conflicting identities make Vijay Mishra's concept of the diasporic "impossible mourning" (9) a ground to forge a new identity based on the concept of a postethnic transnational diasporic space.

Keywords
Diaspora, Indian-American, postethnic, transnational, home, identity

Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as "an imagined political community" (6) in his book *Imagined Communities* is important in the context of the portrayal

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of home by diasporic writers. "Home," when re-calling or re-imaging the quest for belonging from the point of view of the diaspora, is often portrayed as an elusive metaphoric vision that is in resonance with the struggle against the attempt to pin the term down to physical dimensions. A postmodern approach to identity has resulted in the linguistic entity turning into a floating signifier that belies traditional boundaries, and postethnicity has questioned the very idea of identity.

Immigration and its consequent crises have been the focus of many studies. Linda G. Basch et al. (1994) studied the social relationships that accompany immigration and focused on the ties that link migrants across national borders to both the home and the host nation. Thomas Faist talks of "transnational social spaces characterized by a high density of interstitial ties" (4) which bring the migrant in contact with the cultures of both the home and host countries. They brought into focus the migrant's struggle to identify himself/herself with a particular group and the psychological conflicts that ensue from affiliations to widely different cultures.

Jhumpa Lahiri is at the forefront of Asian diasporic writers who have explored the issues of race, ethnicity, nation, home, culture and identity affecting the Indian diaspora in America. Lahiri's personal experiences with the hyphen are reflected in works where she writes of the expatriate's experiences in America and the politics of the hyphenated self in relation to the homeland as well as the host country. This paper analyses her 2003 novel, *The Namesake,* to examine how she uses food as a metaphor to portray the reconstruction of identities by the Indian diaspora when they find themselves in situations that challenge the self sufficiency of racial and ethnic categorisation. Using culinary culture as a metaphor for a racialised encounter in a postethnic world, Lahiri portrays the psychological violence of this encounter through images of food. This paper will follow the characters in Lahiri's novel as they trace a path of postmodern identity reconstruction reflected in their dynamic relationship with food.

The diaspora has generally been characterised by an unhappy existence, in a condition of "impossible mourning" (Mishra 9) for the homeland, forever between cultures, as hyphenated as the term that denotes their ethnic identity. This unhappiness can be seen as a direct result of post-colonial binaries, of the division between "us" and "them," the "native" and the "alien." A contemporary postethnic ethos fosters a blurring of binaries, contesting the dialectic between the coloniser and the colonised that modernity engendered. Binaries such as "Asian-American," by the very nature of being hyphenated, tend to centralise "American" and relegate "Asian" to the periphery, the politics of language ensuring that the "Asian" in the term would be judged by norms defined by Americans and hence would always remain at the margins of mainstream culture. Realising the essentialist nature of the diasporic dilemma,

Lahiri endorses Tamburri's novel way of escaping the marginalising nature of binaries by replacing the hyphen with a slash, embracing the postethnic concept of "voluntary affiliations" (Hollinger 7) across ethnic boundaries. As "Indian/American," her characters redefine traditional connotations of home, nation and even identity itself.

Modernity and the idea of nation and belonging encouraged the notion of a homogeneous community defined by a shared culture. Transnationalism, as a necessary consequence of a globalised world characterised by mobility, is a concept that entails more than just the re-definition of geographical boundaries. Here, the migrant redefines the rules that govern an individual's relationship with the space he inhabits. Postethnicity further compounds the complexity of this relationship between space and identity with the concept of voluntary affiliations across ethnic boundaries. Lahiri's novel seems to suggest not just an end to the concepts of "home" and "nation" as definite geographical entities that define identity, but also states that the concept of a fixed identity has itself crossed borders in the twenty-first century.

The Namesake challenges the premise that home is central to the identity of an Indian woman and that the cultural sanctity of home is inviolable. This premise is based on the unqualified acceptance of the binaries of "inside" and "outside" that symbolise modernity. While the outside world comprises a multicultural network of social associations, reflected in the variety of food that is available, the inside or the home is seen as a space that is culturally sacrosanct, an Indian space where traditional Bengali food dominates, reasserting that for the Indian diaspora, the homeland denotes a particular geographical region in India with its own distinct culture and language, rather than India as a nation. It is the word *desh* that the diaspora identifies with, *desh* being the particular region to which they trace their roots. Pablo Bose observes that "many within overseas communities identify much more strongly with regional cultures, hometown associations, neighbourhood relationships, and familial bonds than with the nation-state" (397).

Thus, the concept of the nation or *desh* must be understood as limited in Lahiri's novel to Bengal, and hence the homogenising of the Bengali ethnic community in America. The novel traces the journey of an Indian couple, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, whose initial denial of the shifting nature of identities takes them on metaphoric journeys cutting across cultural cross-winds. For the Gangulis, *desh* is Calcutta, and the cultural bounds of it their "homeland." Adhering to the inviolable nature of separate spaces, their "inside" or private, Indian home is very different from the "outside" world, or America. When their son is born, he is given two names – a *dak naam*, or pet name, Gogol, to be used by family members, and a *bhaalo naam*, or formal name, Nikhil, to be used by the outside world.

Surrounded by a culture perceived as foreign or alien, the home becomes a nostalgic expression of the lost moment for the Gangulis, a feeling reinforced by the cultural disparity made visible by American individualism. "Americans," observes Ashima upon her arrival in the country, "in spite of their public declarations of affection… prefer their privacy" (3). She reacts to this alienating individualism with an instinctive assertion of ethnic essentialism in her private space, a defense mechanism against the threatening diversity of a complex multiculturalism, cooking Bengali food, rereading Bengali novels and communicating with her family back home through letters. Vijay Mishra says, "Diasporic subjects have shown a remarkably anti-modern capacity for ethnic absolutism" (17).

However, as Anderson points out, this sense of belonging to a community back home and the ties to the nation that engender nostalgia are based on concepts that are entirely imaginary in the sense of being socio-political constructs. Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community… it is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). It is this deceptive sense of communion that makes exiles view the homeland as a homogeneous entity and the host nation as the different "Other." Presenting the delusional nature of memory in *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie says that the expatriate creates "fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (10). *The Namesake* makes Rushdie's "imaginary homelands" and Anderson's concept of the nation as an "imagined community" the basis for deconstructing the notion of the Asian-American as one forever between worlds. By deconstructing "home" as a place conjured up by memory and the need for belonging, Lahiri reduces it to an abstract concept dependent on the subject.

The first stage of the process wherein the characters in the novel move beyond socio-political abstracts to create their own definitions resonates with "impossible mourning" (Mishra 7), a diasporic malaise in which the emptiness in the ego caused by physical distancing from the homeland refuses to be filled up by a new object of love, thereby making longing for the homeland a recurring trope in the novels of diasporic writers. The impossibly nostalgic nature of this longing is suggested through a symbolic "cooking up" of Indianness at the beginning of *The Namesake*:

> On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. (1)

Food weaves itself into the text, becoming a way to express one's ethnic or national identity. Anita Mannur claims that "the culinary functions as a site for cultural negotiation," and terms the negotiation of such spaces "culinary citizenship" (20). The kitchen is a place where an Indian woman feels unfettered; it is her re-creation of home in a foreign land. The juxtaposition of the two images – a Central Square apartment and Rice Krispies and Peanuts and chopped red onion – is one that immediately places the protagonist and the novel in a frame where the inner self and external reality are in contradiction. Mishra says, "The condition of mourning is after all predicated upon a loss that the subject does not want to replace because to do so would taint the purity of the object lost" (9). The lines that follow present Ashima's dilemma of memory appropriating reality to create an inexact mixture:

> Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves. Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing. (1)

Food is a cultural connect central to ethnic and racial practices preserved through time and space. The desire to preserve an Indian kitchen in a foreign land can be considered a symbolic resistance to the perceived evils of assimilation, countered through a series of (pure) essentialist images. Salecl talks of the homeland as "[a] fantasy structure, [a] scenario, through which society perceives itself as a homogeneous entity" (15). Recognising the relevance of culinary culture as central to one's identity, Lahiri weaves the taste and smell of Indian food into her female character's ego. The smells and flavours in the opening line of the novel are unmistakably Indian, a Bengali symbol of life in Calcutta. Such culinary images serve to reinforce stereotypes of cultural purity and homogeneity, fantasising the fixed nature of the home in the spatio-temporal domain.

However, the second generation new diaspora cannot identify with their parents' sharp delineation of spaces. They react to the exclusivist essentialism they see at home with a complete rejection of what may be termed "identity-sharing." "But Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India" (118). As the children begin to assimilate into American culture, preferring "individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hot dogs" (65), Ashima desperately tries to reinforce her own borders: "Though no longer pregnant, she continues, at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl" (49).

Vijay Mishra talks of "the social realities of living in the here and now," what he terms "an anti-essentialist presencing" (133) that colours the multiculturalism of the American state. This is most evident in the culture wars that underline the diasporic family. Food, as a cultural marker of identity, becomes an overt symbol of affiliation. Gogol's sister Sonia refuses to eat Indian food, goes to dances, cuts her hair short, has a steady boyfriend, flashes a "confident, frequent, American smile" (107) and is, as one of her parents' friends says, "the true American" (63). As a second child and as a daughter born several years after Ashoke and Ashima's arrival in America, she escapes some of the cultural constraints that her brother had been subjected to. Unencumbered by the weight of two names, Sonia escapes the culture wars; "Shake 'n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb" (65) no longer quite denote the alien to her parents as they would have a few years ago.

Moushumi, called Mo, the daughter of a friend of the Gangulis, also takes a parallel plunge into multiculturalism. However, her attempt to assimilate does not sound quite as convincing as Sonia's. As Bharati Mukherjee says in her essay "Two Ways to Belong in America," the transformation that acculturation demands comes at a cost. Moushumi, like Gogol, carries the baggage of her parents' expectations, growing up, as he did, in the midst of expatriate Bengali families desperately trying to hold on to an abstract notion of a shared past. Unlike Sonia, Moushumi comes across as a confused individual, favouring ethnic associations over individualism.

The second stage in the reconstruction of identity occurs when the expatriate comes into close contact with the "Other" which, as a result of familiarisation, is no longer seen as alien, contaminating, threatening. During the initial years, Ashima's trysts with multiculturalism did not go beyond cooking her children an occasional American dinner, and an attempt at cross-cultural culinary experiments: "They learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne" (64), but when her husband goes off to MIT, she experiences the freedom that her children so treasure as part of American life: "At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind" (161).

Home as a sacred and fixed entity is finally undermined by the mobility and uncertainty that characterise the postmodern, and Ashima accepts the individual space that must be consequent upon such mobility. Although Sonia, the "true American," has often told her mother, "Everyone should live on their own at some point" (161), living alone is something that Ashima would never have contemplated a few years earlier, and it now has a significant impact on her appreciation of a different culture:

> Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their distance

> from her, is something she will never understand. Still, she had not argued with them. This, too, she is beginning to learn. (166)

Now, she eats in front of the television, does the laundry once a month, no longer notices dust, and even takes up a job, her first in America, working three afternoons a week and two Saturdays a month, "just as Sonia had done when she was in high school" (162).

Ashima's forsaking a formal table laden with Indian food is perhaps the greatest indicator of a psychological blurring of boundaries and a new comfort with her surroundings. Perhaps, as on her visits to India, she no longer feels the need to arm herself in the kitchen. Her job at the library brings her into contact with other women her age and for the first time since she came to America, she makes friends outside her Bengali group, having her American friends over for occasional lunches at her house and going shopping with them on weekends. The binaries of "inside" and "outside" worlds converge and space begins to exert its own dynamics in Ashima's relationship with the two cultures she inhabits.

Postethnicity, with its concept of fluidity and "voluntary affiliations" (Hollinger 7) exerts its force as the sacred links to the past are broken. Soon, the changes go deeper and Ashima even writes her husband's full name, an unthinkable violation of the Bengali code of honour. Stuart Hall recognises that the diasporic experience is characterised not "by essence and purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' that lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (396). This is the only way to survive the trauma of impossible mourning. Ashima is Hollinger's true "postethnic" subject as she forms affiliations across ethnic margins while still being rooted in Indianness.

A traumatic event in the form of Ashoke Ganguly's sudden death throws Gogol headlong into accepting his Indian side, an ironic throwback to the very essentialism in his parents' lives he had rebelled against. Ashoke dies of a heart attack while at MIT, and it is left to Gogol to collect his father's ashes while Sonia flies down to be with their mother. As Gogol returns to his mother, he suddenly feels a connection with his father that he had never felt before and can finally identify with his parents' feelings:

> He knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing left to do. (179)

The clock has turned full circle. As Gogol swings to the other extreme of the identity spectrum, shaving his head in the Indian tradition and breaking off his romance with Maxine and the American way of life, we realise that he is in fact

reclaiming the purity of the essentialist space that Ashima has understood as being unrealistic. The schism created in his personality makes him unable to reconcile the Indian Gogol with the American Nikhil. Gogol can never belong to both worlds; his discomfort with engaging across margins of ethnicity and race will ensure that he remains sealed in the diasporic void of impossible mourning. His response is in stark contrast to Sonia's – although she too moves back to her parents' home after Ashoke's death and often "does the cooking" (189), she does not sink into the immanence of mourning. While Gogol looks back at a lost moment in time, Sonia looks ahead:

> Four days a week she leaves the house at five-thirty in the morning, takes a bus to a train that takes her to downtown Boston. She works as a paralegal, is applying to law schools nearby. (189)

When Moushumi enters Gogol's life, we realise that their lives have been running on parallel tracks. Moushumi and Gogol's coming together is similar to the arranged marriages common in India, where the couple is encouraged to take things forward with the approval of the elders in the family. As the two get married, the reader has a sense of impending doom, knowing that ideology is a poor substitute for love, and that their outlining of binaries is part of a system that has become untenable: "They had both sought comfort in each other, and in their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of the fear that that world was slowly dying" (284).

The cultural connect that Moushumi and Gogol feel is traced through a culinary romance. Through an essentialist union, food sustains and reflects their relationship. But Gogol's is a splintered self, forever deferring the integration that follows an acceptance of hybridization. It is when the food they share loses its charm that Moushumi finally understands that their relationship is over:

> As they near the end of the meal, it occurs to her that she is neither very drunk nor full. In spite of two cocktails and the bottle of wine they'd shared she feels distressingly sober. She looks at the hair-thin quail bones Nikhil has discarded on his plate and is faintly repulsed. (252)

The end of the novel sees Gogol sealed in the hyphen, unable to accept himself or his life. For a person who grew up uncomfortable with his identity, "the sense of failure and shame persists, deep and abiding" (283). Mishra talks of "the migrant's '*consciousness of a permanent loss*'"(143) quoting from Adib Khan's first novel, *Seasonal Adjustments,* saying that it "becomes a defining force about one's identity for which one is no longer defensive or dismissive but indeed grateful" (195-96). Gogol chooses to live out his dilemma in the space of the hyphen, unlike Moushumi, who brings excitement back into her life with the affiliations that sustain her identity – "a salad topped with warm lambs' tongue,

a poached egg, and pecorino cheese" (264). Sonia does the same, and the "turkey and roasted sweet potatoes and cornbread stuffing" (271) symbolise the affiliations that indicate a diasporic recognition of cultural connects. This is the third and final stage of identity reconstruction in a postethnic scenario.

It is finally the women – Ashima, Sonia and Moushumi – who represent the third stage in the politics of identity reconstruction for the new Indian/American. Jolted out of the second stage by her husband's death, Ashima is suddenly given the opportunity to return to India – to reclaim the homeland whose absence she had always mourned. But Ashima understands the impossibility of reclaiming an "imaginary homeland" located in the past:

> For the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died. "Now I know why he went to Cleveland," she tells people, refusing, even in death, to utter her husband's name. "He was teaching me how to live alone." (183)

Rejecting the claims of the homeland altogether is not the answer to the dilemma either. Ashima realises that healing and psychological integration of the self cannot take place until the void in the ego is filled. If filling it is impossible, could the answer lie in a celebration of the void instead of mourning it, a "rooting in" in the past that does not stop one from forming affiliations across the ethnic divide in the present? She certainly seems to think so.

Gogol, sealed at the second stage of identity reconstruction, says, "I don't want to get away" (182). Moushumi claims a third world for herself, admitting, "It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever" (214). Sonia, born into a postethnic world, accepts reality and asserts her choices forcefully, firmly rooted in her Indian past yet freely forming voluntary affiliations across ethnic boundaries. It is Ashima who, towards the end of the novel, takes a decision that is political. She metamorphoses from the shackles of modernity through an untenable multiculturalism to a final postethnic stance characterised by postmodern fluidity and uncertainty. It is a celebration of choice and of the shifting alternation of worlds unconstrained by physical fixity.

In a postmodern world, home transcends history, memory and time. At a certain point in reconstructing her identity, Ashima becomes the Indian-that-was and the not-quite-American. T. Vijay Kumar, in his essay, "Post-Colonial or Postcolonial? Re-locating the Hyphen," quotes Tamburri's decision to substitute the slash for the hyphen as a way to "rethink the ideological historicity of punctuation marks" (196). As the hyphen rotates to form a slash, the concept of the binaries of spaces also changes. Being Indian/American also involves a blurring of here/there, inside/outside, home/society, self/other. A

transnational "affiliation" involves rejection of the permanence of home and a celebration of mobility. It believes in the construction of scapes that constantly move between borders.

Richard J.F. Day proposes multiculturism as "radical imaginary, as *différance*, de-territorialization, more-than-life" (227). Existence in the hyphen means that the individual is forever deferring the integration of the two selves necessary for a sense of unified identity. Once the hyphen has rotated to form a slash, it no longer restricts; rather, it expands borders. Characterised by the fluidity of the postmodern existence, it helps celebrate the fragmented self of which history and ethnicity form an important part but are not the complete whole.

Moving beyond multiculturalism, firmly "rooted in but not restricted by" (Touré 12) race, nation and ethnicity, a postethnic transnational outlook celebrates the lack of permanence as a double-belonging and a freedom from subjecting loyalties based on nation and ethnicity. It is also a liberation from the monotony of fixedness. As Ashima decides to spend six months of the year in Calcutta and the other six in America, she becomes the new "Indian/American," knowing that, true to the meaning of her name, "she will be without borders, without a home of her own" (276), a resident everywhere and nowhere. This is a consciousness of the fact that the connotations of "home" have changed and the security and permanence associated with it no longer exist. Ashima realises the importance of embracing the new postmodern fluidity of existence, saying of the past, "I didn't know a thing back then" (285). Vijay Mishra is insightful when he says of Ashima:

> Ambivalence rather than certainty grips her, for she will return only part-Indian on an American passport and with an American social security card. She'll miss her job in the library; and Calcutta, the city to which she will move for half the year, 'once home… is now in its own way foreign.' (195)

Thus, *The Namesake* posits a rethinking of the conceptual networks traditionally used to theorise the Asian-American diaspora. It is a text where food, memory, race, ethnicity and the human dilemma converge. By choosing to identify herself as "Indian/American" rather than "Indian-American," Ashima comes across strongly as the harbinger of Lahiri's concept of the politics of identity-reconstruction in a postethnic world. She proposes a new theory of healing by accepting, as does Tamburri, the condition of having ties with both Indian and American culture as celebratory instead of cause for melancholia.

The novel ends with Ashima dismantling the home where she had once attempted to recreate the homeland. It is fitting that she bids farewell to her friends by cooking one last meal for them. She has progressed from mixing Rice Krispies and peanuts and onion at the beginning of the novel to fried croquettes

served to celebrate Christmas Eve. This time she is not alone in the kitchen; she is part of a new microcosmic world that symbolises the postethnic diaspora. Culinary rituals which constitute sites of memory point to a new transnational culinary space being created. Finally, it is the kitchen itself that needs to be dismantled to make space for the new:

> She roots through her kitchen drawer for a packet of incense. She lights a stick by the flame of the stove and walks from room to room…. For the past month, she has been dismantling her household piece by piece. Each evening she has tackled a drawer, a closet, a set of shelves. (277)

Step by step, the hyphen has been dismantled. The resultant fragmented self is a celebratory liberation from the shackles of the past. Tracing the change in hierarchical structures, *The Namesake* posits an intertwining of culinary culture and social belonging, and a rethinking of the past and the present. Ultimately, it is as Ashima dismantles her kitchen that we can finally accept the hyphen to have given way to the formation of the new transnational home that will live in a new world encompassing alternate worlds.

In *The Namesake,* Lahiri has attempted to question the politics of the hyphen, arguing that it ensures that the immigrant will always remain at the margins of what is essentially an American narrative. Although the issue of colour has not been raised in the text, the idea of America as "white" is implicit in the food that Gogol and Sonia accept as intrinsically "American." Lahiri uses the non-political trope of food to weave her way through a politically charged discourse of race, ethnicity and identity. By proposing "Indian/American" as an alternative to survive the constricting effects of being "Indian-American," she starts a dialogue with postmodern transnationalism that would be interesting to follow. It posits a theory that aims to influence the discourse on power structures in the United States. The end of the novel proposes a new dimension in the theory of spaces as symbols of alterity with very real repercussions for the diasporic community.

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