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## Cultural Dialogue and Acculturative Identity in *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* portray cultural dialogue and identity formation within diasporic communities. Both novels highlight the immigrant struggle to balance inherited traditions with new cultural environments. Through adaptation and acculturation theory, the study explores how characters negotiate selfhood across geographical, cultural, and emotional borders. *The Namesake* follows Gogol Ganguli, an American-born son of Indian immigrants, torn between cultural dissonance and belonging, while *Brick Lane* traces Nazneen's inward journey in London from submission to self-assertion. Read together, these narratives reveal migration as more than relocation—it is a profound dialogue about identity, adaptation, and transformation.

**Keywords:** Acculturative Identity, *Brick Lane*, Cultural Dialogue, Diaspora Literature, *The Namesake*, Transnational Narratives.

### Introduction

In an increasingly globalised world, the movement of people across borders has brought cultures into closer contact than ever before. This interaction gives rise to what is often described as a “dialogue of cultures”—a process rooted not in cultural dominance or erasure, but in mutual exchange, recognition, and transformation. The notion of cultural dialogue becomes especially meaningful in the context of migration, where individuals and communities must navigate the complex space between origin and destination. These negotiations often result in a process of acculturation, through which people begin to adapt to a new cultural setting while also retaining aspects of their heritage. Though this process can be enriching, it is not without tension. It involves an ongoing struggle between continuity and change, belonging and alienation, rootedness and redefinition.



Mona Abousenna rightly points out that the shared ground created through cultural dialogue forms the basis for a deeper civilizational unity. Her view challenges the fear that engaging with other cultures might dilute one's own. Instead, it encourages an understanding that cultures can coexist without collapsing into sameness. Within literature, this idea gains particular depth. Literary texts serve as both mirrors and agents of cultural interaction. They not only reflect the lived experiences of individuals caught between different cultural spheres but also actively participate in shaping how identity, memory, and belonging are understood across generations. Migration narratives, in particular, offer fertile ground to examine how cultural dialogue takes place at the personal and collective level.

This paper focuses on two such narratives: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Both novels center on characters shaped by the diasporic experience, where the journey is not just geographical but deeply psychological. Gogol Ganguli in *The Namesake* and Nazneen in *Brick Lane* are portrayed navigating unfamiliar cultural landscapes while trying to make sense of their inherited identities. Their stories, while distinct in context and detail, echo each other in the way they highlight the challenges and possibilities of cultural negotiation. These characters live at the intersection of cultures, where the question of "who I am" is constantly reshaped by "where I am" and "where I came from."

By examining these texts through the lens of adaptation and acculturation theory, this study investigates how the protagonists' evolving identities reflect a broader dialogue between cultures. It explores how literature becomes a platform where questions of assimilation, resistance, and transformation play out. More importantly, it argues that these narratives do not simply document cultural shifts; they actively engage with the idea that identity is not fixed but formed through ongoing interaction. In doing so, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* offer not only personal stories of migration but also universal reflections on what it means to belong in a world of shifting borders and shared human experience.

### **Negotiating Identity through Cultural Dialogue and Acculturation**

The process of identity formation in diasporic literature is often marked by a constant negotiation between inherited cultural values and the norms of the host society. Stuart Hall's notion that "identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think" (Hall 392) is clearly illustrated in the lives of Gogol and Nazneen. Both protagonists must navigate spaces where cultural expectations clash and blend, shaping their evolving



sense of self. Hall's emphasis on identity as a "production" rather than a fixed essence resonates deeply in texts like *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane*, where characters are not born into but rather become their identities through experience, memory, and interaction.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri crafts Gogol's journey as one of estrangement and gradual reconciliation. From the moment he begins questioning his name, a symbol of his cultural inheritance, Gogol is caught between his Indian heritage and American upbringing. "Without a single grandparent or cousin or uncle or aunt at his birthday parties, without a proper homeland to return to," he grows up in a liminal cultural space (Lahiri 153). This sense of in-betweenness highlights the tension of acculturation—the partial acceptance of both cultural homes, yet full belonging to neither.

Similarly, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* portrays Nazneen's life in London as a subtle journey from passive acceptance to self-awareness. Initially taught "not to ask questions, not to make choices," Nazneen's early years in England are marked by cultural silence (Ali 17). However, through personal losses, community encounters, and growing exposure to new ideas, she gradually asserts agency over her identity. Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space"—a hybrid cultural zone where new meanings and identities emerge—helps explain Nazneen's transformation. As Bhabha argues, "it is in this space that cultural meanings and identities are constructed" (Bhabha 56). Nazneen ultimately embraces this hybrid space, forging a self that draws from but is not confined by either tradition or modernity.

Both novels exemplify the productive tensions of cultural dialogue. Rather than treating cultural identity as static or pure, Lahiri and Ali show it as fluid, evolving, and deeply relational. Adaptation, in both personal and narrative terms, becomes a survival strategy and a source of empowerment. As Linda Hutcheon notes in *Theory of Adaptation*, the act of adapting—whether texts or identities—is "both repetition and variation" (Hutcheon 4). The characters' journeys mirror this principle: they repeat certain inherited patterns but also reshape them through lived experience.

### **Gendered Dimensions of Acculturative Identity**

The negotiation of cultural identity in diasporic contexts is not experienced uniformly—it is deeply shaped by gender. Both *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* reveal how cultural dialogue unfolds differently for male and female characters, with women often bearing the weight of tradition while navigating spaces that



expect their silence or submission. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's transformation from a quiet, compliant wife to a self-empowered woman is deeply rooted in her subtle resistance to gendered cultural expectations. As she reflects near the end of the novel, "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne" (Ali 385). This early resignation gives way to a slow assertion of agency, as she begins to make choices for herself, including the decision to stay in London and raise her daughters independently—symbolic of her reclaiming both space and voice.

Similarly, Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake* experiences acculturation as a slow reshaping of identity through emotional labor, loss, and solitude. Though her narrative is less central than Gogol's, her quiet strength speaks volumes. After Ashoke's death, Lahiri writes, "True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri 276). Ashima's identity dissolves the boundaries of the domestic and the diasporic; she becomes a figure who bridges two continents through cultural memory and emotional resilience. In both characters, acculturation is deeply gendered—shaped by the responsibilities of caregiving, motherhood, and emotional adaptation.

Feminist theorists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty emphasize that the experiences of women in postcolonial contexts must be understood through intersectional frameworks. As Mohanty argues, "the effect of colonialism and globalization is always experienced through gendered structures of power" (Mohanty 74). This is evident in how both Ashima and Nazneen face cultural expectations not only as immigrants but as women expected to uphold tradition in foreign spaces. Yet, as the novels unfold, these women subtly redefine their roles, participating in a cultural dialogue that allows them to forge new selves without entirely discarding the past. Thus, gender becomes an essential axis of cultural dialogue in these narratives. It is not merely that Ashima and Nazneen adapt to new environments—they actively contribute to a redefinition of what it means to belong. Their stories reflect the ways in which adaptation is not just about survival but about shaping identity through agency, resilience, and transformation.

### **Generational Conflict and the Fractures of Belonging**

In diaspora narratives, the tension between first-generation immigrants and their children often becomes a focal point for cultural and emotional dissonance. In both *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane*, generational conflict emerges not simply as a clash of values, but as a deeper struggle over the meaning of



belonging, identity, and cultural preservation. For Gogol, the burden of his unusual name becomes symbolic of the larger disconnection he feels from his parents' heritage. "He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian" (Lahiri 76). This rejection of his name is more than a personal dislike—it marks the start of his resistance to the cultural legacy his parents attempt to preserve.

Similarly, in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's daughters, particularly Shahana, embody the voice of a new generation that questions the authority of tradition. Shahana openly resists her mother's values, claiming, "I'm not a Bangladeshi. I was born here. I'm English" (Ali 210). Her assertion illustrates a generational shift in identity perception—while Nazneen is still in the process of reconciling her dual cultural positions, her daughter has already made a decisive claim to one. This disconnect creates friction but also opens a space for dialogue where cultural meaning is renegotiated.

Theoretical perspectives from postcolonial and diaspora studies support these narrative tensions. Stuart Hall describes identity as "a matter of becoming as well as of being" (Hall 394), suggesting that identity is shaped by both history and change, tradition and transformation. This duality is central to generational conflict: first-generation parents often attempt to preserve cultural memory, while their children, shaped by the cultural codes of the host country, may feel alienated from inherited practices. Paul Gilroy's concept of the "diasporic double consciousness" further explains this tension, where identity is "shaped by the politics of dislocation and cultural recombination" (Gilroy 123). The children of immigrants must balance two competing cultural worlds, often without fully belonging to either.

In both novels, generational conflict becomes a site of cultural dialogue—one marked by tension, but also by potential understanding. These intergenerational exchanges reflect how diasporic identity is never fixed, but always negotiated in response to shifting cultural landscapes, familial expectations, and the inner need for coherence.

### **Cinematic Adaptation and the Visual Language of Acculturation**

Both *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* undergo transformative shifts in their film adaptations, highlighting how cinema can serve as a powerful medium for conveying the emotional and cultural complexities of diasporic life. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, adaptations are "palimpsestic," always layered



with traces of the original text while also shaped by the context of retelling (Hutcheon 6). Mira Nair's *The Namesake* and Sarah Gavron's *Brick Lane* exemplify this layering. Each film visually interprets the protagonists' evolving identities, not by replicating the novels, but by reimagining them through sound, space, gesture, and visual contrast.

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's silent defiance and interior growth are captured through framing and mise-en-scène. Her constrained life in the flat is visually contrasted with her rare moments outdoors, such as when she cycles alone at the end—an image absent in the novel but deeply symbolic of her newfound agency. As Stam observes, adaptations “translate the codes of one medium into the codes of another,” often enriching emotional undertones (Stam 15). Gavron's decision to focus on Nazneen's quiet rebellion through wordless scenes underscores how acculturative identity can be communicated visually when words fall short.

Similarly, *The Namesake* uses visual transitions—such as the shift from Ashoke's death to a shot of Gogol standing alone on a snowy street—to externalize internal grief and dislocation. Thomas Leitch notes that adaptations often “fill in gaps, foreground silences, and update concerns” (Leitch 9). Both films expand on such silences, especially those of female characters, offering new dimensions of emotional expression. Ashima's gradual independence and Nazneen's refusal to return to Bangladesh resonate more powerfully in the cinematic space, where their bodily presence and quiet decisions speak volumes.

Importantly, both films reframe their protagonists' journeys not just as stories of survival, but of agency and redefinition. The adaptations bring diasporic identity into visual focus, presenting the act of crossing borders—geographical, generational, and emotional—as a lived, evolving experience. In doing so, these films become cultural texts in their own right, extending the dialogue initiated by the novels and inviting viewers to witness the intricate process of belonging, loss, and transformation.

### **Literature and Film as Dialogic Spaces of Cultural Identity**

Literature and cinema, particularly in diasporic contexts, become powerful platforms where identities are not only represented but also reimagined. Both *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane*, in their textual and cinematic forms, open up dialogic spaces where cultural memory, displacement, and selfhood intersect. As Edward Said contends, exile and migration produce “a contrapuntal perspective”—a way of seeing that allows individuals to interpret identity across multiple cultural locations (Said 186). In both narratives, the



protagonists embody this layered consciousness. Gogol and Nazneen are not merely situated between cultures; they actively reinterpret their place within them, creating hybrid identities that challenge rigid binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity.

The very structure of these stories—marked by dislocation, silence, and personal growth—mirrors what Homi Bhabha terms the “in-between” or “liminal” space, where new identities are negotiated (Bhabha 4). This is especially evident in the quiet but pivotal moments of choice: when Gogol finally accepts his name by reading *The Overcoat* after his father’s death, or when Nazneen chooses to remain in London instead of returning to Bangladesh. These acts of self-definition are not loud declarations but nuanced negotiations that reflect how belonging is constructed through small but meaningful decisions.

Moreover, as Julie Sanders argues, adaptations are not just about fidelity to source material but about “cultural commentary and creative re-interpretation” (Sanders 19). Both film versions of *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* offer such commentary, not only retelling the stories but also reshaping them in ways that emphasize emotional realities often muted in written form. Through gesture, silence, and visual metaphor, the films expand the cultural conversation, allowing new layers of meaning to emerge and inviting diverse audiences to engage with themes of migration, identity, and home.

By placing literature and film in conversation with one another, these narratives underscore the role of storytelling- whether on page or screen- as a vital mechanism through which diasporic subjects make sense of their fragmented realities. They remind us that adaptation is not merely a shift in form but a continuation of the cultural dialogue itself- one that is as ongoing and evolving as identity itself.

### **Hybridity as Resistance: Reimagining Belonging through Cultural Dialogue**

At the heart of both *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* lies the idea that identity in the diaspora is not a fixed inheritance but an ongoing, active construction shaped by displacement, memory, and resistance. These narratives challenge essentialist views of culture by presenting protagonists who do not conform to singular, static identities. Instead, they inhabit what Bhabha calls the “Third Space,” a site of hybridity where “the negotiation of cultural identity” becomes a process of creation rather than preservation (Bhabha 36). Gogol and Nazneen are emblematic of this space—both shaped by the expectations of their families and



communities, yet constantly negotiating new cultural affiliations in unfamiliar environments. Their hybrid identities are not signs of loss but of adaptability and strength.

This hybridity, however, is not without friction. As Stuart Hall notes, “cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’” (Hall 394). The pressure to remain loyal to ancestral traditions often clashes with the desire to participate fully in the culture of the host nation. Gogol’s discomfort with his name and Nazneen’s struggle with obedience are not merely personal dilemmas—they reflect broader tensions in the postcolonial condition. Both characters ultimately resist being reduced to cultural stereotypes. In the novel’s closing pages, Gogol finds solace in his father’s gift, *The Overcoat*, symbolically reclaiming a piece of his fragmented identity. Similarly, Nazneen’s decision to stay in London marks a shift from passive endurance to self-determined belonging.

Adaptation theory further enriches this discourse. Linda Hutcheon argues that adaptations are “not derivative but creative acts of reinterpretation” (Hutcheon 9). The film versions of both texts extend their themes by visually articulating what is often internalized in prose—the silence of women, the dislocation of language, the burden of tradition. Ashima’s wordless solitude after her husband’s death or Nazneen’s silent bike ride through Brick Lane are cinematic moments that speak volumes about inner transformation. These adaptations contribute to the cultural dialogue by reframing the diasporic experience not only through language but through sound, image, and emotion.

In this way, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane*, across both page and screen, serve as cultural texts that resist simplistic binaries and embrace the complexities of belonging. Their narratives illuminate how hybridity functions not as a loss of identity but as a mode of survival and empowerment—an act of cultural resilience that bridges the spaces between home and exile, memory and modernity.

## Conclusion

The *Namesake* and *Brick Lane* powerfully demonstrate that identity within the diaspora is neither inherited intact nor easily abandoned. It is a lived, evolving negotiation between cultures, shaped by memory, conflict, silence, and small acts of self-determination. Through their characters' journeys, both Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali illuminate the quiet strength required to navigate cultural expectations while forging a sense of self in unfamiliar terrain. Whether through Gogol’s painful reconciliation with his name or Nazneen’s



choice to stay and raise her daughters in London, these narratives emphasize that belonging is not a destination—it is a process of becoming. Rather than offering neat resolutions, both texts embrace the ambiguity and richness of hybrid identity. They reveal that cultural dialogue is not about choosing one identity over another but about living in the spaces between—where contradiction, compromise, and transformation coexist. In doing so, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* give voice to the emotional and cultural complexity of migration, reminding us that the most enduring forms of identity are those shaped not by purity, but by the courage to belong on one's own terms.

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