

An Ethical Critique of Select Diasporic Narratives: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract—Diasporic literature has increasingly become a vital domain for examining questions of identity, ethics, and cultural negotiation in a globalised world. This article offers an ethical critique of selected diasporic narratives through a close reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. It argues that diaspora is not merely a spatial displacement but an ethical condition in which subjectivity is continuously reconstructed through competing demands of memory, belonging, and cultural recognition. The study foregrounds how ethical tensions emerge in migrant experiences when individuals are required to negotiate inherited cultural obligations alongside pressures of assimilation into dominant Western societies. In *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli's struggle with his name and identity reflects a deeper ethical conflict between filial responsibility and individual autonomy. Lahiri presents assimilation as a morally ambivalent process that often results in the erosion of cultural memory and intergenerational continuity. Conversely, *Americanah* situates its ethical concerns within the politics of race and representation, where Ifemelu's experiences in the United States expose the contradictions embedded in liberal multicultural discourse. Her narrative demonstrates how racial categorisation becomes an ethical system that shapes recognition, voice, and social legitimacy. By adopting an interpretive ethical framework informed by diaspora studies, the article contends that both novels construct diaspora as an "in-between" moral space. Within this space, identity is neither fixed nor fully autonomous but is continually negotiated through relational encounters. Ultimately, the study argues that diasporic narratives compel a rethinking of ethics as dynamic, contextual, and deeply embedded in lived cultural experience, rather than as abstract universal principles.

Index Terms—Diaspora, Ethics, Identity, Hybridity, Migration, Cultural Memory, Recognition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Diasporic literature has moved beyond its initial concern with migration and geographical displacement to emerge as a significant field of ethical inquiry. It explores how individuals reconstruct identity in unfamiliar cultural environments while simultaneously negotiating moral obligations toward their heritage, family structures, and host societies. In this sense, diaspora is not merely a spatial condition but a profoundly ethical one, shaping how individuals understand responsibility, belonging, and selfhood across cultural boundaries.

Within this ethical framework, subjectivity remains in a constant state of negotiation and transformation. Migrants are compelled to reinterpret inherited cultural values while adapting to the dominant norms of their adopted societies. These dynamic processes produce what may be described as an "ethical in-betweenness," where moral certainty is destabilised and replaced by continuous processes of reflection, adjustment, and reinterpretation. As a result, ethical identity in diasporic contexts becomes fluid, relational, and context-dependent rather than fixed or absolute.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* exemplify this condition with remarkable depth and nuance. Both novels present protagonists who exist between cultures and are repeatedly confronted with moral dilemmas arising from displacement, assimilation, and identity formation. Through their narrative strategies, these texts illuminate how diaspora functions as an ethical space where questions of memory, recognition, and belonging are persistently renegotiated, thereby offering rich material for an ethical reading of diasporic experience.

II. LAHIRI AND ADICHIE: CONTRASTING DIASPORIC SENSIBILITIES

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* both engage deeply with the experience of migration, yet they differ markedly in tone, narrative strategy, and ethical orientation. Lahiri adopts a restrained, introspective style that privileges emotional subtlety and the intricate dynamics of intergenerational relationships. Her ethical focus is grounded in memory, familial obligation, and the understated yet persistent consequences of cultural dislocation experienced within migrant families.

In contrast, Adichie's *Americanah* is overtly political, expansive, and discursive in its narrative approach. Through Ifemelu's incisive blog entries and reflective narrative voice, the novel directly critiques racial hierarchies, cultural stereotyping, and the contradictions inherent in Western liberal ideologies. Its ethical engagement extends beyond the personal sphere into broader socio-political commentary, making it more explicitly outward-facing and socially analytical in its treatment of diaspora.

Despite these stylistic and thematic differences, both texts converge on a shared ethical concern: the moral complexity of living between cultures. They demonstrate that identity is not merely a private or psychological construct but is continuously shaped by social forces, systems of recognition, and structures of exclusion. In doing so, both novels reveal diaspora as an ethical condition in which the self is constantly negotiated within overlapping cultural and moral frameworks.

III. METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This article adopts an interpretive ethical framework grounded in diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, and cultural ethics to examine the moral dimensions of diasporic narratives. It engages with key theoretical concepts such as hybridity, recognition, displacement, and moral subjectivity in order to understand how diasporic characters navigate complex ethical landscapes. Rather than treating ethics as a fixed philosophical system, the study approaches it as a lived and evolving experience shaped by migration, cultural encounter, and historical memory.

The methodological approach is primarily textual and interpretive, focusing on close reading of narrative strategies, characterisation, and thematic development in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Attention is given to how narrative form itself becomes an ethical space where questions of identity, belonging, and responsibility are articulated and contested. This allows for an exploration of how literature constructs moral meaning through storytelling techniques.

Importantly, the focus of this study is not moral judgment or evaluation of characters' actions, but the process of ethical formation itself. It investigates how individuals come to understand themselves in relation to others, institutions, and cultural histories. Through this lens, the article highlights how diasporic fiction stages ethics as a dynamic process embedded in narrative experience, thereby revealing the complex ways in which literature reflects and refracts moral consciousness in transnational contexts.

IV. GOGOL GANGULI AND THE ETHICS OF NAMING

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli's identity crisis is inaugurated through his name, which functions as a powerful symbolic site of ethical conflict. His rejection of the name "Gogol" is not merely an act of personal dissatisfaction but an assertion of autonomy that simultaneously raises profound questions about his moral responsibility toward familial history. Lahiri frames this tension as an enduring ethical dilemma between self-invention and inherited identity, where the desire for individual freedom comes into conflict with the obligations embedded in lineage and memory.

Gogol's discomfort reveals how names operate as more than arbitrary labels; they function as repositories of memory, cultural continuity, and intergenerational meaning. His attempt to adopt the name "Nikhil" represents an effort to liberate himself from the burdens of cultural expectation and diasporic ambiguity. However, this act of renaming also signifies a rupture in ethical continuity, as it distances him from the historical experiences of his parents, particularly their migration, sacrifices, and emotional labour in building a life in a foreign land.

The ethical tension at the heart of Gogol's transformation lies in the question of whether self-

definition can ethically justify the erasure or distancing of inherited identity. Lahiri does not resolve this conflict through narrative closure; instead, she carefully exposes its moral complexity. The novel thereby positions assimilation not as a neutral or purely liberatory process, but as an ethically charged negotiation that involves loss, responsibility, and the reconfiguration of belonging.

V. ASSIMILATION AS ETHICAL DISCONNECTION

Gogol's gradual assimilation into American life in *The Namesake* signifies more than a cultural transition; it represents a deeper ethical disconnection from his Bengali roots. As he increasingly adopts American norms, values, and lifestyles, his sense of belonging becomes fragmented, revealing the instability of an identity constructed through cultural detachment. His relationships, particularly his marriage to Moushumi, further expose this fragility, as emotional intimacy becomes strained by unresolved tensions between inherited tradition and adopted modernity.

This process of assimilation is not ethically neutral. Lahiri presents it as a morally significant transformation that implicates memory, responsibility, and belonging. Gogol's distancing from his cultural origins reflects a gradual weakening of intergenerational ties, suggesting that identity formation in diaspora is inseparable from ethical choices regarding what is remembered and what is abandoned. In this sense, assimilation becomes a site where moral consequences are quietly embedded within personal decisions.

Lahiri ultimately suggests that assimilation often operates through selective forgetting, where aspects of cultural memory are consciously or unconsciously erased in the pursuit of belonging. This selective amnesia can be interpreted as a form of ethical loss, as it disrupts continuity with familial history and cultural inheritance. The novel therefore critiques the assumption that complete cultural integration is a straightforward or morally uncomplicated process, instead revealing it as a deeply ambivalent ethical negotiation marked by loss, displacement, and redefinition of the self.

VI. IFEMELU'S RACIAL ALIENATION IN AMERICANAH

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Ifemelu's experience of alienation is structured primarily through the politics of racial categorisation in the United States. Unlike Gogol Ganguli's internally generated conflict in *The Namesake*, Ifemelu's alienation is externally imposed, socially visible, and institutionally reinforced. Upon arriving in America, she becomes "Black" in a newly constructed and socially loaded sense, one that is shaped by dominant American racial discourse rather than her prior self-understanding as Nigerian. This transformation highlights how diaspora can reconfigure identity through external systems of classification that override personal or cultural self-definition.

This imposed racial identity generates in Ifemelu a heightened ethical awareness of systemic inequality. Her lived experiences expose the ways in which race operates not merely as a descriptive category but as a moral and social framework that determines access, recognition, and legitimacy. Through her observations and reflections, particularly in her blog, Ifemelu articulates how identity is continuously shaped by institutionalised structures that assign differential value and meaning to bodies based on race. This awareness becomes a form of ethical consciousness that resists passive acceptance of racialised norms.

Consequently, Ifemelu's alienation evolves into a critical rather than purely personal experience. It enables her to interrogate the contradictions embedded within a society that professes ideals of equality and inclusivity while simultaneously perpetuating racial hierarchies and exclusions. Adichie thus uses Ifemelu's narrative to expose the ethical dissonance between liberal rhetoric and social reality, revealing how racial alienation can function as a lens for broader moral critique in diasporic experience.

VII. ETHICS OF CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

1. Fragmentation in *The Namesake*

Cultural hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is characterised by fragmentation rather than harmony. Gogol's movement between American and Bengali identities produces ethical instability, as he struggles to reconcile two conflicting value systems. His inability to fully belong to either culture reflects the

difficulty of sustaining a coherent moral self in a hybrid existence.

2. Reflexive Hybridity in Americanah

In contrast, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* presents hybridity as a more conscious and self-reflective condition. Ifemelu's return to Nigeria does not reject hybridity but re-engages with it critically. She recognises that identity must be actively negotiated in response to shifting cultural and racial contexts.

3. Hybridity as Ethical Negotiation

Both novels ultimately frame hybridity as an ethical negotiation rather than a stable or resolved identity. While Lahiri emphasises fragmentation and emotional cost, Adichie foregrounds agency and critical awareness. Together, they suggest that hybridity becomes ethically meaningful only when accompanied by reflection on memory, power, and responsibility.

VIII. RACIAL ETHICS AND RECOGNITION

1. Systemic Visibility in Americanah

In *Americanah*, race functions as a system of ethical recognition that determines social visibility and belonging. Ifemelu's experiences reveal how racial category's structure meaning and identity in American society. Her blog serves as an ethical intervention, exposing the contradictions of liberal claims to equality.

2. Silent Othering in The Namesake

In *The Namesake*, racialisation is more subtle but still significant. Gogol experiences quiet forms of othering that shape his self-perception and social interactions. Unlike Ifemelu's explicit critique, his response is internalised, making silence itself an ethical condition.

3. Ethics of Recognition and Misrecognition

Both novels highlight the importance of recognition in shaping ethical identity. Adichie foregrounds visible racial discourse, while Lahiri focuses on subtle misrecognition. Together, they show that identity is ethically formed through social perception and cultural acknowledgement.

IX. MEMORY AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

1. Cultural Memory in The Namesake

In *The Namesake*, memory acts as an ethical bridge between generations. Ashima's preservation of Bengali traditions reflects moral responsibility toward cultural continuity and familial heritage within the diaspora.

2. Reflective Memory in Americanah

In *Americanah*, memory becomes reflective and critical. Ifemelu's recollections of Nigeria allow her to reassess both her homeland and her experience abroad, leading to a more conscious understanding of identity.

3. Memory as Ethical Continuity

Both novels suggest that memory is not passive recollection but an active ethical practice. It sustains identity by connecting individuals to histories that shape responsibility, belonging, and moral awareness.

X. CONCLUSION

Diasporic narratives such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* demonstrate that migration is fundamentally an ethical experience rather than a merely geographical or cultural transition. These novels foreground the moral complexities involved in negotiating identity within shifting terrains of displacement, cultural hybridity, and racial categorisation. Through their respective narrative strategies, both writers reveal how diasporic subjects are continuously compelled to rethink their sense of self in relation to family, society, and history.

Lahiri's *The Namesake* highlights the quiet but profound ethical costs of assimilation, particularly in relation to memory, naming, and intergenerational responsibility. Gogol's journey illustrates how the pursuit of individual autonomy can simultaneously produce ethical disconnection from cultural inheritance. In contrast, Adichie's *Americanah* brings racial consciousness and systemic inequality to the forefront, exposing how identity is socially constructed through institutional frameworks that govern recognition and belonging.

Despite their stylistic and thematic differences, both texts converge on the idea that diaspora is not a resolved state but an ongoing ethical condition.

Identity in these narratives is neither fixed nor stable; rather, it is continuously reshaped through encounters with power, memory, and cultural negotiation. This reinforces the notion that diasporic subjectivity is inherently relational and dependent on context.

Ultimately, both novels invite a rethinking of ethics as dynamic, lived, and deeply embedded in transnational experiences. They challenge readers to understand moral identity not as abstract universality but as a constantly evolving process shaped by displacement, hybridity, and the demand for recognition across cultural boundaries.

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