



Exploring Relation of Relationlessness in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Prof. N. H. Kallur

Department of Studies in English, Karnatak University, Dharwad, Karnataka, India.

Email: nhkallur@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.4.527](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.4.527)



Article info

Article Received:19/11/2025

Article Accepted: 27/12/2025

Published online: 31/12/2025

Abstract

This is a conceptual paper based on a critical synthesis of the literature; it reports no empirical findings. Library and Information Science (LIS) undergraduates in Nigeria must read demanding academic texts in English, a second language for most of them, and as future information professionals they must interpret and appraise information, not merely locate it. Nigerian LIS scholarship has concentrated on information and digital literacy, while the reading processes on which these competencies depend have received less attention. Drawing on metacognition theory, cognitive load theory and research on metacognitive reading strategies, the paper proposes a framework for strengthening English academic comprehension among Nigerian LIS undergraduates. The framework groups strategies as global, problem-solving and support strategies, and links them to a cycle of planning, monitoring and repair, and support and evaluation, taught within regular LIS courses rather than as a separate skills course. It specifies inputs, an instructional process, expected outcomes and moderating conditions; provides operational definitions and measures for comprehension, strategy use, support strategies, cognitive load and transfer; and proposes an instructional dosage, lecturer training and fidelity checks. An illustrative unit shows how the framework can be applied to reading a journal article. Five propositions are derived for empirical testing. The paper concludes, tentatively, that embedding metacognitive strategy instruction in LIS courses is a promising route to critical reading, but that its effects must be established empirically.

Keywords: metacognitive reading strategies; reading comprehension; conceptual framework; library and information science education; Nigerian universities.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri is a British-born American writer of Bengali Heritage. When she was young her parents moved from London to Rhode Island where her father worked as a university librarian. She grew up between American life and strong Bengali traditions. Lahiri did her graduation from Boston University. She did her masters in English, creative writing and comparative literature and a PhD in Renaissance studies. Her literary breakthrough came with *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) a collection of short stories about Indian and Bengali- American characters negotiating migration, family, cultural identity, alienation, loneliness and belonging. The book won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000 as well as Hemingway award, establishing her as a major contemporary writer. Her best-known works are *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, *The Lowland*, *In Other Words* and *Whereabouts*. Lahiri's fiction is noted for sensitive treatment of immigration, cultural assimilation, bilingualism, memory, marriage, tensions between inherited traditions and individual identity.

The Namesake is Lahiri's debut novel published in 2003. It is the most anthologised or prescribed text on diaspora studies and its critical acclamation is on par with *Interpreter of Maladies*. Hence, several academics and research scholars have written research articles on it exploring the themes and issues of immigration, displacement, generational conflict, identity, cultural hybridity, home and belonging, loss and inheritance, language and cultural memory. It is noticed that there a lack of research work on the exploration of relation of relationlessness in this novel. Hence, this article, using Rahel Jaeggi's concept of 'relation of relationlessness' as a critical framework, attempts to explore the issue of 'relation of relationlessness' in Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Before going to examine this issue in the novel, a concise but comprehensive plot of the novel is provided as follows.

A Brief Plot of *The Namesake*

The novel begins with introduction of Ashima and Ashoke Gnagulai, a Bengali couple from Calcutta who settle in Massachusetts. Ashima is expecting a baby but she feels that her parents are not with her take care of at this point of time. Then immediately she is taken to hospital by husband. Through the flashback narrative unfolds their arranged marriage and migration to the United States significantly Ashoke's rail journey from Calcutta to Jemshedpur, his reading of the story "Overcoat" by Russian author Nicholas Gogol, train accident, near-death situation, preparation for the examination from the bed, success in the examination and arrival to America. Then novel narrates the current issue of naming the baby. Parents wish Ashima's grandmother back in India to name the child. But according to the hospital rules in America without a name to the child, the mother cannot and child cannot be discharged. So Ashoke and Ashima have requested grandmother to post a letter with formal name of the child. Until they receive the name from the grandmother, they decided to name the child temporarily with the name of Nikolai Gogol as the book authored by him had saved the life of Ashoke. Moreover, it sounds closer to Indian name Nikhil. Then Nichol grows fast and a girl child, Sonia, is born to Ashima and Ashoke. Then the novel revolves round the growth of Nichol. He grows up in suburbs. Ashoke and Ashima try to maintain Bengali traditions and with American life. On the fourteenth birth day of him, they finally give him the formal name Nikhil. But Gogol resists using it as it makes him feel a different person and it is neither American nor Indian. As a teenager, Gogol feels increasingly embarrassed by his name and maintains distance from his parents' world. Finally with the approval of his parents when he leaves for Yale, he legally changes his name to Nikhil, hoping for a fresh start and a more normal American identity. After college, he moves to New York, builds a career as an architect, begins a relationship with

Maxine Ratliff, a wealthy American woman whose cosmopolitan lifestyle represents the life he thinks he wants. Ashoke finally tells Gogol the story of the train accident and why he was named Gogol deepening Gogol's understanding of his father but also intensifying his sense of dislocation. Ashoke's sudden death from heart attack becomes the emotional turning point of the novel. Gogol feels guilty about his detachment from his family, grows closer to mother and sister and pulls away from Maxine. There is reconnection with Moushumi Mazoomdar, a Bengali-American woman from a similar background. They eventually marry, partly to honour their parents' hopes and partly out of a desire to reclaim his heritage.

However, their marriage is strained by unresolved personal issues and infidelity on Moushumi's part, and ultimately it ends in divorce. Through this failure, Gogol realizes that neither full assimilation nor a return to an idealised Bengali identity fully resolves his inner conflict. By the end of the novel Gogol begins to make peace with his past and his name. He re-reads the collection of Nikolai Gogol's stories that his father once gave him, recognizing how his name ties him to father's history, survival, and love. The novel ends with Gogol more accepting his dual identity as both Indian and American and Ashima splits her time between the U.S and Calcutta, acknowledging that America has become as much a home as India.

The Concept of Relation of Relationlessness:

Before going to examine the issue of 'relation of relationlessness', a brief conceptual note on this critical framework is offered as follows. 'Relation of relationlessness' is not a formally established theoretical concept. The phrase contains a paradox. It denotes that individuals are connected to others, yet they experience a sense of separation within those very connections. It can also be a connection without belonging. In this situation individuals maintain relationships with family, culture, and

community but do not necessarily feel at home within them. It also indicates an intimacy without complete understanding. In such situation family members love one another but struggle to understand each other's emotional experiences and identities. It also stands for knowing identity through alienation. In other words, here characters discover who they are not only through their relationships but also through their experiences of estrangement and disconnection. The concept 'relation of relationlessness' is Rahel Jaeggi's formulation of 'alienation'. Rahel Jaeggi has defined "alienation as a relation of relationlessness... it does not indicate the absence of a relation but is itself a relation, a deficient one" (*Alienation* 1). Alienation connotes indifference, internal division, powerlessness and relationlessness with respect to oneself and to a world experienced as indifferent and alien. Jaeggi further remarks, "alienation is the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions, and thereby also to oneself" (3). An alienated world presents itself to individuals as insignificant and meaningless, a rigidified or impoverished, as a world that is not one's own, a world in which is not 'at home' and over which one can have no influence. The alienated subject becomes stranger becomes a stranger to itself. According to Rousseau "an alienated person lives in the opinions of others' than 'in oneself'. Alienation is experienced by a person when he cannot identify with his own institutions. Sometimes it is referred to rootlessness or homelessness, indifference or internal division and the loss of the 'whole human being". This concept is particularly relevant to the immigrant experience, where individuals may find themselves caught between different cultural worlds without feeling entirely at home in either. Relationlessness does not necessarily mean having no relationships. It can mean emotional distance cultural disconnection, or an inability to communicate the full significance of one's experiences to others. So the analysis of *The Namesake* using this critical framework is as

follows. This concept of relation of relationlessness is explored with reference to the major characters in the novel namely Ashima, Ashoke, Gogol, Maxine Ratliff, Moushumi and others.

Exploration of Relation of Relationlessness in *The Namesake*:

Ashima Gnaniguli, a Bengali woman, is married to Ashoke Ganguli from the same state but he is at MIT pursuing his PhD. After the marriage Ashima has come to America to live her husband. After coming to America, she has tried to belong to and assimilate American culture. She has tried to be intimate with Alan Montgomery and Judy Montgomery, American couple, who live in the same apartment in Cambridge where Gnanigulis also reside. Ashima and Ashoke are active members of the Bengali families group in America. On special occasion Ashoke and Ashima attend functions, festivals and celebrations. So also, the Bengalis attend the functions of Gangulis' family. This is how Ashima tries to develop the relationship in America but still she feels that it is a relation of relationlessness. That is why when the novel begins, we notice Ashima strongly desires for Calcutta food and presence of her parents. Ashima is carrying now and is about to deliver her first child. According to the Indian tradition, a woman's first delivery has to happen at parents' home. For the last eighteen months, ever since she has arrived in Cambridge nothing has troubled her so much than the consequence of motherhood in a foreign land. But now she has to deliver child at hospital. She thinks "it is strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or die" (*The Namesake* 4). She is terrified "to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows little, where life seems tentative and spare" (6). Another instance from the life of Ashima may also be examined here. Ashoke and Ashima though they are in America, they live like traditional Indian couple. It is common in America husband addressing his wife 'I love you, sweetheart'. But "these words Ashima has

neither heard nor expects to hear from her husband; this is not how they are" (3). After the birth of Gogol, of course Ashoke also helps her in raising Gogol. Ashima struggles hard to raise Gogol in an alien land with parents far away from her. So she admits, "I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (33) and she tells Ashoke to complete his degree at the earliest. She believes that the child has to grow with care and affection of parents and relatives for the proper growth and samskara. Although she lives with her husband and children, she experiences homesickness and a persistent sense of displacement. With the passage of time she gives birth to her second child Sonali or Soni. Gogol also completes his graduation in architecture. Ashoke moves to Cleveland for a new assignment. Ashima manages all the household works herself. She is worried about Gogol's affairs with girls and his future. The sudden demise of Ashoke leads her to a sorrow state. Though she is successful in arranging the marriage of Gogol with Moushumi, a Bengali girl, the marriage ends in divorce. This doubles her sorrow. Ashima has decided, after the marriage of her daughter, to "spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States... In spring and summer, she will return to the Northeast, dividing her time among her son, her daughter and her close Bengali friends. True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (275-76). As she grows older, Ashima develops a more independent relationship with both India and America. Her final decision to divide her life between the two countries suggests that belonging need not be restricted to one place. These experiences of Ashima demonstrate that alienation is not just a physical separation, but it is cultural and psychological. In Jaeggi's formulation of the concept it is not without any relation but a deficient relation.

Another major character in the novel is Ashoke, Ashima's husband. Ashoke has come to

America on fellowship, a graduate of MIT and later working at a university yet in many ways his relationship with India and America is similar to that of Ashima. Although he develops a new life in America his identity remains connected to his Indian past. He continues his relationship with India as a cultural and emotional point of origin. He also develops relationship with America as the location of his professional and family life. His relationlessness is not an absence of social relationships but a partial disconnection from the cultural world through which he originally understood himself.

Railway accident is the defining event in the life of Ashoke. While travelling by train, he was reading a book by Nikolao Gogol when accident occurred. A page from the book attracted the attention of rescuers to locate him. His survival leads him to reconsider his life and eventually pursue opportunities abroad. The survival enables him to establish new relationships, marry Ashima, and raise a family. Yet the traumatic experience remains a private memory that his family cannot fully share. Since then, he has developed a deep respect and love for this author. In order to retain that memory and relation he has named his son after this writer. Ashoke gives his son a copy of Nikolai Gogol's stories on his fourteenth birthday with an intention to communicate something profound about his own life. The book connects the father's survival, his literary interests, and circumstances surrounding his son's name. He thinks of explaining the railway accident to his son but the boy shows little interest in the conversation. The relationship exists yet its deepest meaning remains inaccessible to Gogol. After Ashoke's sudden death, Gogol begins to understand the importance of his father's past and meaning of his own name. When Gogol opens the book gift given by his father, "the handwriting reminds him of the checks his father used to him all through college, to put down a security deposit...the name he had

detested here hidden and preserved – that was the first thing his father had given him" (289).

The major character in the novel is Gogol who experiences relationlessness not because he lacks relationships but because he struggles to establish a stable relationship with his name, cultural heritage, family, romantic partners and sense of self. His experiences demonstrate the paradox of being socially connected while remaining psychologically, culturally or emotionally disconnected. Gogol's relationlessness begins with circumstances of his naming. His grandmother in India intends to send a letter containing the name chosen for him but letter never arrives. As a result, his parents name him with a provisional name 'Gogol'. Initially Gogol was happy with the name. As he grows old it becomes a source of discomfort because it is neither a conventional Bengali name nor a name that connects him to American social environment. He decides to change his name without naming the significance of that name. Finally, his parents agree for the change of his name. When the judge asks him, in the court, why he wants to change his name, Gogol says, "I hate the name Gogol...I've always hated it" (102). But irony is that officially he has got changed his name, but everyone he knows in the world calls him Gogol. "He is aware that his parents, relatives and friends from high school will never call him anything but Gogol... Gogol will revisit him on each of his birthdays" (103). He feels alienated from the name that identifies him, yet he fears the identity that might replace it. It also demonstrates his fragmented identity.

Another episode can be examined to illustrate the relationlessness experienced by Gogol. During the family visit to Calcutta, Gogol encounters relatives, Bengali customs and cultural environment that his parents regard as familiar. But his limited connection with Bengali language and culture makes him feel like an outsider. "Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do not feel close to them as their parents do" (81). On the evening of their departure from India Gogol "watches his parents standing in

front of framed pictures of his dead grandparents on the walls, heads bowed, weeping like children" (86). At the same time, his parents' cultural practices sometimes embarrass him in America. America is the place where he is born, grows up and develops his social identity. India represents his ancestral and familial heritage but he does not experience it as entirely his own. This creates a form of double alienation. Gogol is not entirely disconnected from either culture, but neither provides him with an uncomplicated sense of belonging. Consequently, his relationlessness is cultural as well as psychological.

Gogol tries to assimilate American culture, to belong to, to feel at home and to establish as an insider through his romantic relationships with Kim, Ruth, Maxine and Bridget. Here his relationship with Maxine is examined for the purpose. Gogol becomes very intimate with Maxine and her parents, Gerald and Lydia Ratliff who are wealthy and intellectually inclined. Gogol is attracted to their domestic environment, confidence and sense of permanence associated with their family home. He loves her deeply and in fact wants to marry her. Once Gogol has brought Maxine to his home, after observation and interaction with her Ashima doesn't want her for a daughter-in-law as Maxine had addressed her as Ashima and her husband as Ashoke. So also Maxine comes to know about Gogol that "his parents' friends are Bengali, that they had an arranged marriage, that his mother cooks Indian food every day, that she wears saris and bindi" (138). Gogol seeks intimacy with another family while distancing himself from the family to which he already belongs. The relationship with Maxine provides emotional comfort but it does not resolve his underlying identity conflict.

Gogol's marriage with Moushumi also can be an example for the relation of relationlessness. After the death of Ashoke and breaking of Gogol's relationship with Maxine, Ashima decides to arrange the marriage between Moushumi and Gogol. Moushumi is

from the same Bengali cultural background. But Moushumi "by the time she was twelve she had made a pact with two other Bengali girls she knew, never to marry a Bengali man" (213). Moreover, from the girlhood days she had been determined not to allow her parents to have a hand in her marriage. She wanted to assimilate foreign culture but she had failed in her several schemes. Their relationship initially offers the possibility of reconnecting with familiar cultural environment. They not have considered it their duty to stay married as the Bengali's of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do. They (Moushumi and Gogol) are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than their ideal happiness (276).

However, novel complicates the assumption that shared heritage automatically produces emotional intimacy. Their relationship reveals the limitations of inherited social connections. They know one another through their families, but their earlier acquaintance does not provide a clearly defined emotional intimacy and bond.

Ashoke's death transforms Gogol profoundly. He begins to participate more meaningfully in family rituals and to reconsider the cultural practices he had previously rejected. His response to his father's death marks an important change his experience of relationlessness. Previously he had resisted the cultural world through which Ashoke understood his identity. Following the loss, he begins to recognise the emotional value of that world. At the end of the novel Gogol returns to the book of Nikolai Gogol's stories that his father had given him. His decision to read it suggests a new willingness to encounter the history behind his name. This is an important example for relation of relationlessness. The relationship continues to shape Gogol even when the person with whom he shared it is no longer present. Memory becomes a means of maintaining a connection across absence. Gogol's developing understanding of his father shows that relationships are not confined to

physical presence or direct communication; they also persist through inherited stories, objects, and recollections. The ending does not suggest the end of Gogol's identity conflict rather it indicates a movement from rejection to recognition.

CONCLUSION

In *The Namesake*, the concept of "relation of relationlessness" reveals the paradoxical nature of human relationships in a diasporic context. Gogol remains connected to his father even when he rejects his name; Ashima maintains a family life in America while longing for India; and the Ganguli family shares affection and history despite generational and cultural differences. Lahiri demonstrates that belonging and alienation are not always opposites: they can coexist within the same relationship. The characters' experiences of distance force them to reconsider the meanings of family, identity, home, and cultural inheritance. Ultimately, the novel suggests that identity is formed not only through the relationships that individuals embrace but also through the distances, misunderstandings, and absences that they struggle to overcome. Relationlessness does not necessarily mean the absence of relationships; it may instead describe the unresolved tensions that exist within them.

References

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2007). *Postcolonial studies: The key concepts*. Routledge.
- Barry, P. (2013). *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*. Viva Books.
- Heinze, R. (2007). A diasporic overcoat?: Naming and affection in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 43(2), 191-202.
- Jaeggi, R. (2014). *Alienation* (F. Neuhouser & A. E. Smith, Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- Lahiri, J. (2016). *The Namesake*. HarperCollins.

Nayar, P. K. (2010). *Contemporary literary and cultural theory: From structuralism to ecocriticism*. Pearson.