

## Ecological Dislocation: Deciphering the Fluidity of Identity in Trans-ecological Space in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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### Abstract

Migration alludes to the dislocation of an individual under certain intriguing circumstances. Dislocation is not simply related to a displacement of one in terms of one's geographical location, but it also refers to displacement in terms of one's socio-cultural-political space. The geo-socio-political dislocation can be expressed as ecological dislocation, as Felix Guattari registers 'ecology' in three forms – "the environment, social relations and human subjectivity" in *The Three Ecologies*. The ecological dislocation inevitably triggers a vulnerability in human subjectivity, as a human is always already subjected to the ever-mutating social relations. Human exists in a rhizomatic relation with his socio-cultural-linguistic space, as Gilles Deleuze explains a 'rhizome' to ceaselessly connect diverse and multiple acts, cultures, languages. A hybridized human, evolved out of cross-border mobility, provides a contact zone for trans-cultural entanglement. The deterritorialization of a human subject opens up into a 'smooth space' of possibilities, in contrast to a 'striated space', limited by boundaries. Smooth space opens in folds to delimit its constituent human subject, moulding him into a citizen of the cosmopolis, and the paper seeks to manifest the experience of trans-continental migration and hybridization of a human subject in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

**Keywords:** Cosmopolitan, Dislocation, Ecology, Fluidity, Identity

### Introduction: Ecology and the Identity in Making

Human migration, induced by several factors - political, economic, social, has been a recurrent and ongoing phenomenon for the past few decades. 'Migration', the word alludes to the dislocation of an individual from his present landscape of living. However, an individual is not solely tied to his topography, as his topographic location is also inextricably entangled with his socio-political-cultural milieu. Migration, therefore, does not refer to a geographical displacement alone, but also to a socio-cultural displacement. A human is always already subjected to his socio-cultural surroundings which are continuously mutating. With a change in one's socio-cultural location, there will also be a change in the human subject that is constituted of one's socio-political affiliations. The displacement of an individual actually results in his ecological dislocation, as Felix Guattari registers 'ecology' in three forms – "the environment, social relations and human subjectivity" in *The Three Ecologies* (28). Human subjectivity is dependent on his environment and social relations, which undergoes a transformation with the mobility of the human subject, both in terms of his physical and cultural locations.

The term 'ecology' is etymologically derived from the Greek word 'Oikos', meaning 'home', referring to one's community and familiar surroundings. So a displacement of an individual will inevitably trigger cross-ecological mobility in him. As a migrant migrates from one topological space to another, his social relations alter with the change in his socio-cultural space. So, physical dislocation brings about an alteration in social ecology that comprises of the socio-cultural factors, determining one's identity within a cultural space. Social ecology is inseparable from topographical

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ecology and an individual is continuously interacting with both to determine his existence in the ecology. A migrated subject has a ‘transversal’ existence, as natural topography cannot be perceived independent of culture. As Felix Guattari opines, “Now more than ever, nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between eco-systems, the mechanosphere and the social and individual Universe of reference, we must learn to think ‘transversally’” (43). ‘Transversal’ thinking is necessary for the articulation of one’s identity, as identity performatively evolves through an individual’s interaction with his ‘multiverse’ – physical surroundings, cultural space and the individual being subjected to his immediate topo-cultural space. Identity is always developing, ever-changing, evolving and is discursively performing in a physio-social ecology. Guattari suggests:

Process, which I oppose here to system or to structure, strives to capture existence in the very act of its constitution, definition and deterritorialization. This process of ‘fixing-into-being’ relates only to expressive subsets that have broken out of their totalizing frame and have begun to work on their own account [...].(43)

Identity is not a totalizing factor, rather it can be fragmented, constituting of plurality. The deterritorialization of an individual induces the plurality in one’s composition in terms of identity. Identity is always in the process of ‘being’, that is in a flux, is unstable and is not pre-given objectively. It gradually evolves through multi-ecological or multi-cultural engagements, denying any particular frame or structure, hence, not mutating into any particular fixed system. A migrant apparently seems to bear the imprint of ‘difference’, owing to his cross-cultural existence and his identity constitutes the multiplicity of the multitude. However, the ‘difference’ is not to be mistaken as fixed or pre-given, it emerges performatively through a nexus of culture. Homi. K. Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*:

Terms of cultural engagement [...] are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The articulation of difference, [...] is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in the moments of historical transformation.(02)

The concept of ‘hybridity’ refers to a complex amalgamation of plurality, in this case in terms of identity. An individual with a hybrid cultural identity inadvertently carries the multiplicity of diverse cultures. The cultural cross over creates a liminal space in the human subject, he has a borderline existence. The individual dwells on a threshold, making his identity vulnerable and volatile. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari insist upon the difference between the ‘limit’ and the ‘threshold’, by suggesting, “the limit designates the penultimate marking a necessary re-beginning, and the threshold the ultimate marking an inevitable change” (438). The volatility of identity inevitably renders it to be fluid and fragile, subject to transformation and transfiguration. The human subject then provides a contact zone for multicultural engagement, hence widening the space for interaction and garnering enormous possibilities for cross-cultural exchange. The deterritorialization of a migrant widens his space of operation, hence delimiting his space of dwelling. The individual acts and enacts in a socio-political milieu in a rhizome. “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles”, write Deleuze and Guattari (28). An individual emerges in a rhizome, connecting with multiple languages and cultures in a new ecological terrain. The individual interacting with multiple linguistic-cultural dimensions, unfolds in a ‘smooth space’ in a rhizome. The ‘smooth space’ for Deleuze is a space of possibilities that opens in multi-folds and makes an ‘event’ possible.

‘Event’ is a dynamic phenomenon and the identity of an individual evolving performatively can qualify as an ‘event’ in Deleuzian sense.

### **The fluidity of identity in *Jasmine*:**

The ongoing process of identity articulation through the rhizomatic chains of semiotics, language, culture finds exemplification in the experience of migrants from South Asia. The experiences of delocalized individuals are surfaced in diasporic writings of South Asian authors. The paper seeks to throw light on the cross-pollinating identity of migrants across continents, the borderline or threshold existence of the displaced individuals with a special reference to Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. Both the narratives highlight the plasticity of identity in an intersecting cultural space and the narratives primarily show how the individuals themselves owing to their cross-continental germination, provide a space where multiple semiotic-cultures overlap and collide. The multiplicity leads to a hybridization of the human subject who in turn evolves into an individual of delimited space. The delimitation of space facilitates fluidity of identity as the individual mixes with his/her eco-political surroundings. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist, an illegal immigrant in America, undergoes several transformations in identity as she interacts and participates in different cultural and ecological domains. The transformation of her identity takes place through a variety of experience in the course of her encounter with various people. Every time she assumes a different name, each name bearing a unique significance, attached to her personal experience and consciousness. The names define her identity according to her current ecological and topological setting and every time she dons on the new name, she embodies a different personality with a different consciousness. Sometimes willingly and sometimes unwillingly she moulds herself in every embodiment of her name, with an expectation and anticipation of assimilation in the new world. The names evolve from every person’s perception of Jasmine and their interaction with her. Every time she is endowed with a new identity through a new name, she seems to manipulate and mould herself to fit into the name or the role assigned to her by the people connected with her.

Jasmine accepts the fluidity in her identity which allows her to experiment and expand in terms of her cultural and topological locations. In the course of her journey, she encounters with numerous people, who trigger a change in her personality. The urge to defy and to alter her identity is first seeded in Jasmine by an astrologer who predicts her widowhood and her exile. She, a defiant seven years old protests, “No! You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds!” (Mukherjee 03). The astrologer chucks her hard on the head and she falls and a firewood scavenges a star marked wound on her forehead. As her star bleeds, she whispers, “I don’t believe you” (Mukherjee 04). The young girl of seven denies accepting her Fate as an overbearing power, looming large over her life. She, a woman, not “without prospects” (*Jasmine* 70) nurtures within her the spirit to challenge her framed identity, to disrupt the fixity and to mobilize her identity. Prakash, Jasmine’s husband is the one to initiate the transformation in her identity by naming Jyoti as Jasmine,

He wanted to break down Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said, “You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume.” (Mukherjee 77)

The name, Jyoti is entangled with the topology of Hasnapur. The feudal village culture, enmeshed with superstitions, nostalgia, loss and poverty, builds up the identity of Jyoti. Jyoti is a free-spirited woman with an aspiration to transgress the boundary of Hasnapur, an eco-geological space, embodying the crippling orthodox Indian feudal system, which upholds love as control, respect as obedience. Prakash, in Jyoti’s life, is an escape from jaundiced Hasnapur. He is “a modern man, a city man” (Mukherjee 76) who knows English and has weaved a dream to transcend the Indian boundaries

to reach America. Prakash, for the protagonist, is endowed with expectations and promises of the new world of Jasmine, evolving out of Jyoti of the previous. However, she feels “suspended between worlds” (Mukherjee 76), as she voices her dilemma, “Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities” (Mukherjee 77). Her dual identity of Jyoti and Jasmine, each identity entwined with an eco-geological space, creates an ‘in-between’ space within herself. She is unable to transform into Jasmine completely, shedding off the skin of Jyoti. She struggles to mould herself into Jasmine while going through a process of rehearsal (in the bathroom or in the kitchen) for calling her husband by his name, by arguing with her husband, by disapprovingly complying with his modern views on motherhood, family and health care. The struggle between Jyoti and Jasmine, the ‘in-between space’ within herself, traps her in a dilemmatic array of topo-cultural chains. She undergoes a hybridization of identity in terms of geographical location as well as cultural location. She is the naïve, yet defiant girl of feudal Hasnapur who steps beyond to bloom as a city wife of ‘modern’ and ambitious engineering student, Prakash Vihh. She dwells in the ‘in-between’ space of ‘beyond’. As Homi K. Bhabha claims,

The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor leaving behind of the past [...] we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’ [...].(01)

Homi Bhabha further suggests that the “‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (01-02). The existence in the ‘beyond’ facilitates the possibilities of emergence of a human complex who posits on the borderline of past and present, a transit area of volatile identity. The protagonist of the narrative oscillates between Jyoti and Jasmine, neither complying with the past, nor assimilating with the present. The cityscape of Jalandhar is intertwined with her identity of Jasmine and her husband, Prakash is the external stimulus that triggers the plasticity in her identity. The transit between Jyoti and Jasmine creates a hiatus between the present and the past, a space of discontinuity, where the struggle to bridge the gap continues, making the act of transition eventful and dynamic. The plasticity of identity stimulates further changes in the identity that continues with the dislocation and relocation of Jasmine and her engagement with various individuals.

To Jasmine, “To want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world” (Mukherjee 68). English for her is the language to defy one’s birth, the language to transcend the given, the language of worlding and connecting, that can fulfill the ‘want’ of the world. English provides the site for socio-linguistic interstices, as it is the medium of exchanging knowledge and information across continents. Speaking English or the want to speak English for Jyoti, a village girl, is an irrepressible pursuit of transgressing the boundaries to mobilize into the greater world. English becomes the entangling factor for Jyoti and Prakash, as Prakash speaks English and aims to leave India for America. Later, death of Prakash does not suppress her pursuit to transgress and defy, rather intensifies it, as she considers her defiance as an extension of her late husband’s dream and also a validation of her assigned identity by her husband as Jasmine, “Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash. Vihh & Wife” (Mukherjee 97). Jyoti is of past, “That Jyoti is dead” (Mukherjee 96), and Jasmine projects into future from the present.

As Jasmine crosses the border to enter into the realm of America, she meets with a horrifying experience of violation of her body. She in response violently resists her molester by slitting his throat. The violence on her body makes her body volatile, as she decides to discard her violated body. It is a complete rebirth for her, shedding off her previous body, her previous identities of a feudal

village girl, a widow, an illegal immigrant, a murderer and punisher of her rapist, to make way for the coming. She is in the ‘being’ and welcomes her journey of ‘becoming’:

My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for. [...] I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, travelling light. (Mukherjee 121)

As her journey proceeds, she encounters different people, settles at and unsettles from different locations, each locale and human relation, breaks and shapes her identity. She as an individual is always in the process of mutation without reaching an end. Her identity denies the fixity of allocated identity. She develops an identity that evolves out of an intertwined relationship between her physical location and immediate socio-economic-domestic conditions. She is Jassy with Taylor in Manhattan, a populous area in New York. Taylor enquires her about India and the narration of Jasmine about the feudal village, frightens him and he attempts to make her ‘more modern’, ““Very, very, very Indian, Jassy” – that’s what Taylor used to say, back in Manhattan. “You don’t believe that, do you? You can’t, you’re more modern than that”” (Mukherjee 59). In Iowa, she is Jane with Bud, “Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane . . . In Baden, I am Jane. Almost” (Mukherjee 26). Jasmine evolves every time with a difference in a rhizome, in relation to her locations, Hasnapur, Jalandhar, Manhattan, Iowa, assuming different identities of Jyoti, Jasmine, Jassy and Jane respectively. Her interaction with different individuals makes her evolve with a difference. The fluctuation of her identity makes her fluid, to be shaped into any eco-socio-cultural container, making her an ‘assemblage’ with heterogeneity. “Assemblages are in constant variation, are themselves constantly subject to transformations”, opine Deleuze and Guattari (82). Jasmine provides a site for converging and conflicting cultures, ideologies, histories, language, topography and emotions. Jasmine, moving between identities, liquidates her space of existence into a ‘smooth space’ of possibilities and diversity. The first person narrator confesses, “Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff’s day mummy and Taylor and Wylie’s *au pair* in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn’t *this* Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University Club today” (Mukherjee 127).

### **Problematizing the name in *The Namesake*:**

The hybridization of an individual through cross-cultural communication also finds expression in *The Namesake*. The narrative weaves around a migrated Bengali family from Calcutta to Boston. It explores the struggle of first-generation migrants to adopt and adapt to the new eco-cultural space and also highlights the conflict between first-generation migrants with that of the second generation. Ashoke and Ashima, the couple from Calcutta, settle in America for Ashoke’s academic pursuits. However, they deliberately cling to their cultural roots, not willing to give up their Bengali-ness. Their son, Gogol who is born and brought up in America, struggles to identify with the Bengali culture at home and also to assimilate with ‘American-ness’ of the world. Gogol is the conflicted subject in the narrative. As a nursery student, he is unable to comprehend the necessity of a ‘good name’, Nikhil and he fails to respond to the principal of the school when is called as Nikhil. Later in high school, he is dissatisfied and grows resentful of his name, ‘Gogol’, which he thinks is ‘strange’, neither Indian nor American. He is unaware of the reason behind such a ‘strange’ name and is unable to realize the validation of the name, donned on him on one hand, and the conflict between his home and his world. The name of Gogol carries the emotions, the memories, the nostalgia of the displaced, making the individual bearing the name, an interface. When the child is born, Ashoke looking at his son sees a miracle of perfection in him. He is instantly taken back to the night he survived the accident, the only other miracle he has known,

Again he thinks of the night he was nearly killed, the memory of those hours that have forever marked his flickering and fading in his mind. Being rescued from the shattered

train had been the first miracle of his life. But here, now, reposing in his arms, weighing next to nothing but changing everything, is the second. (Lahiri19)

At this juncture the two miracles of Ashoke's life merge, making the son a replication of the memory of his miraculous survival and diluting one event into the other. As Ashoke was reading the stories by Nikolai Gogol at the hour of the accident, he attributes the reason for his survival to the writer, Gogol. Nikolai Gogol is fixed in Ashoke's memory about the hour of survival which is reverberated and revived through his son's birth, 'changing everything', as if he experiences another rebirth through the miracle of his son's birth. Through Ashoke's memory, his son resembles the significance of Nikolai Gogol in Ashoke's life and he is attributed the name, Gogol. Gogol, the child, is the meeting site for Ashoke's Russian experience through the writer, Gogol and his traumatic experience of accident and survival in his previous ecological setting in India. Gogol, born in American eco-social terrain, is the namesake of Russian author that is associated with his father's previous 'Oikos'. The child on his birth becomes an assemblage of the myriad of heterogeneous attributes. He is the hybrid individual who shuffles between names and struggles to identify with a particular name, whether it is his *dadnaam*, Gogol or *bhalonaam*, Nikhil.

In his nursery school he does not respond to his 'good name', Nikhil, but in his high school after knowing that he was named after Nikolai Gogol; on learning about Nikolai Gogol's personal unstable life in his literature classes, Gogol feels disturbed and begins to dissociate himself from the name, 'Gogol' and refuses to identify himself with the name. When his classmates complain about the difficulty to delve deep into the stories by the Russian author, he "says nothing" (Lahiri58). He himself has never read the stories and he throws the anthology deep into his locker, refusing to read it at all. He feels, "To read the story, [...] would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow. Still, listening to his classmates complain, he feels perversely responsible, as if his own work were being attacked" (Lahiri58). The very alien-ness of the stories, the difficulty of comprehension associated with his namesake's stories, the agitated personal life associated with his namesake, make Gogol increasingly detached from his name. On one plane, he perhaps feels the confusion and lack of comprehension of his own life, where he is in a tiff with his name and identity. Gogol introduces himself as Nikhil to a girl named, Kim, "I'm Nikhil," he says for the first time in his life" as he does not want to make himself stranger to a girl by introducing his strange name, "He doesn't want to endure her reaction, to watch her lovely blue eyes grow wide. He wishes there were another name he could use, just this once, to get him through the evening" (Lahiri60). Gogol fluctuates between names, not being able to identify with any of them, as it said "Somewhere along the two-and-a-half-hour journey, Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again" (Lahiri66). 'Gogol' on one hand has a 'strange' Russian origin, while 'Nikhil' on the other is "artfully connected to the old. Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning "he who is entire, encompassing all [...]" (Lahiri 37). But ironically, he is the fragmented individual, struggling to assimilate into a particular identity, failing to gain the 'entirety'. Rather he is an assemblage of the multitude – a Bengali, an American, and he has a Russian namesake. He is the complex amalgamation of multiple eco-cultures, as he grows up under the influence of his parents who want him to develop the Bengali culture. While growing up in America among other American peers, he wants to have a lifestyle as an American youngster. This dilemma of identity is intensified with his non-American and non-Indian name, 'Gogol' which made him feel stranger than the strange in an already alien culture. His oscillating identity and cross-cultural existence between his familial life and social life strain his relationship with his girlfriend, Maxine who feels excluded from Gogol's family rituals for mourning after his father's demise. Maxine's inability to comprehend the Bengali customs and to assimilate with it eventually leads to the termination of their relationship. The struggle of strained relationship continues with his marriage to Mousumi and his wife's infidelity ultimately ends up in divorce. Gogol's relationship with an American and Bengali both fail, both emerge as conflicted ones. After

going through a prolonged period of fluctuating identity, confusion between the two identities and names, strained relationships with spouse and family, Gogol Ganguli, finally fishes out the book by Gogol, his father's gift to him on his fourteenth birthday and begins to read for the first time. He gradually understands and acknowledges the significance of Gogol in his father's life and the importance of his namesake in his life. He, reading Nikoli Gogol, perhaps signifies his coming to terms with his name, Gogol. His reading the book and hoping for remarriage and children, probably also indicates a settlement in his life, after dissolving the confusions and conflicts.

### **Conclusion: Emerging as Cosmopolitans**

The deterritorialization of Jasmine and Gogol mobilize them into a cosmopolitan space where multiple cultures, languages, ethnicities, religions engage. A cosmopolitan individual is delocalized and pays less importance to the territory. Both Jasmine and Gogol are eco-culturally displaced which make them an assemblage of heterogeneous ecologies constituting landscape, culture and semiotics. They are conflicted subjects, on one hand, while seeking for cultural convergence on the other. A cosmopolitan individual has overlapping and multiple identities for their cross-cultural and cross-territorial existence. Such an individual is flexible and fluid and has the capacity to adapt to a new ecology, away from his *Oikos* or abode. Seyla Benhabib argues, "Cosmopolitanism, the concern for the world as if it were one's *polis*, is furthered by such multiple, overlapping allegiances which are sustained across communities of language, ethnicity, religion and nationality" (174-5). Jasmine and Gogol, being migrated individuals do not conform to a particular ecological space. They are mobilized into another space with a different landscape, location, locality and geography, thereby, emerging in an altered space. They have interacted with the ecological determinants to evolve as cosmopolitan individuals of a cosmopolis that is constituted of a multiplicity of cultural and linguistic chains. Both the individuals, Jasmine and Gogol flex into a society that is alien, alluring, ignoring and accepting at the same time. Jasmine through her multiple changes in identity feels calm with her situation when she is able to assimilate with the American society, despite her perpetual alien-ness. Gogol in *The Namesake* ultimately accepts his name after recognizing its alien-ness, both in Bengali culture and American culture. Through their assimilation and amalgamation, they are able to emerge as cosmopolitans who are no longer bound in any particular territory or identity but welcome to represent themselves as individuals with plurality.

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