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Diasporic Strangers in the Mirror:
Ever-Evolving Identity and the Immigrant Experience

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts Literature, Language, and Theory, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2019

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08/28/19

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In contemporary novels that discuss the diaspora, we see an in-depth analysis of the tension between immigrant characters and their American born or raised children. Contemporary novels discussing the immigrant experience and diasporic lives of characters written by immigrants or children of immigrants, like *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Namesake*, *Americanah*, and *Everything I Never Told You*, explore the disparity between immigrant parents and their American born or raised children and show the chasm of misunderstanding between generations navigating different national and cultural contexts. In each of these texts, readers are given textual examples of children straying from the parameters of success that their parents have set, using ideas they've brought with them from different countries.

Parents in these novels repeatedly pressure their children to conform to familiar ideas, keeping them as mirror images of themselves, actions that can be interpreted as narcissistic and a way to limit their children's exploration of self in a new land, complicating their path to adulthood and the ongoing formation of their identities. Narcissism, here, is defined as the need for others to reflect you in the world, a conviction that one is right and everything else is wrong, a re-centering of things or people or children that exist outside of you, back to you. But beneath this narcissism, lies shame and selfishness. Characters in these diasporic novels repeatedly express shame in losing their idea of a first home only to never truly gain another, shame in failing to pass on to their children the same values with which they were raised, shame in having their children excel as Americans in ways they can't, shame in not mastering a language as well as their children or using their children as translators. Focusing on parents' shame in these novels places focus on the reversal of roles that has occurred

between these parent and child characters. America promises different values, language, culture, and identity from what an immigrant character can envision for their child. These parents' aversions to American values is rooted in these characters' narcissism in having their child be nothing but what they envisioned for them, mirror images of themselves, perhaps shinier and clearer, but nonetheless recognizable in their reflection. These novels of diaspora explore what happens when immigrant characters don't recognize the person looking back.

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, delves into the idea of home and its many definitions for immigrants who have called more than one place home. Ifemelu, the main character, is forced to feel like an outsider in America as well as a foreigner when she moves back to Lagos, Nigeria, suggesting that leaving one's home means losing the idea of home as a whole. *Everything I Never Told You*, by Celeste Ng, explores the idea that integration within a society, no matter how adept, does not equal acceptance from that society. Lydia, Nathan, and Hannah, children of a Chinese American man and a white woman, feel conflicted about their identity. Are they Chinese? Are they white? Does it matter? When they are caught in between, they are forced to decide for themselves who they are, usually at the cost of suppressing or losing one culture for the sake of gaining a more American or white identity. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan focuses on the mother daughter relationships of the women of the Joy Luck Club. Daughters disappointing mothers and mothers being misunderstood by daughters play a strong role in the novel. Similarly, *The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri, explores the evolution of a father and son relationship and the distance that grows like a chasm between them as Gogol, the son, grows in a different direction, away from India

and his father, Ashoke. These novels depict the emotional distance between immigrant parents and children and show that what might be read as a parent's selfish desire to keep a child away from American influences creates distance between the two parties and can be linked back to these characters' limitations on how fluid an identity ought to be. This is not to say that every immigrant parent/child relationship is identical. Rather, the emotional complexities between immigrant parents and children seem to be at the heart of these best-selling contemporary novels about identity and the immigrant experience in the United States.

As a reaction to their shame, the parents in these novels act selfishly and fearfully by mitigating their own self-perceived failure as parents by pushing their children to what is familiar and known; this may include a country of origin, roots, language, or jobs that require little risk and afford high reward/respect. This limited definition of success becomes integral to a character's understanding of their success as a parent. Here, selfishness is defined as a character's blinding and begrudging refusal to accept two truths at once, their child's and their own. Many of the characters have demonstrated that to accept a child's very different path implies they must forgo their own values, and so they hold tight to what they believe is right, unwilling to compromise for the sake of a child's acceptance.

The narcissism and shame explored in these novels is a product of an understanding of identity as static—or, as Stuart Hall puts it in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, identity as being rather than identity as becoming. Hall asserts that cultural identity is viewed as either a static with a clear origin and direction or fluid and dynamic becoming, which allows for characters to continuously evolve and adapt to their

environments, noting that by this definition, identity “belongs to the future as much as to the past” (225). By analyzing these novels, we see the dangers of viewing identity as a state of being instead of a becoming. If we consider these parents as characters wanting and reaching for an identity rooted in being instead of becoming, turning to roots and country and language and culture as the foundation on which to build a static and fixed identity, then we can begin to understand the tension in these novels as the tension between identities rooted in being versus becoming. Characters that live in the in-between of past and present, willing to continuously adapt and shift with their surroundings, are unable to be rooted in a parent’s homeland they do not know or be fully part of a country they are in. This continuous shifting allows for an ever-evolving identity that continues to become, complicating the parent-child relationship. These parents, with their insistence on fixed identity, push against these children through narcissistic, selfish actions to steer them towards relatable, fixed, and definable identities similar to their own. Immigrant parents represented in the novels under consideration approach the idea of identity as becoming as unfinished and something for their children to be saved from; consequently, they attempt to bring their children closer to their idea of home.

The Namesake investigates the incongruence between child and parent. Lahiri writes, “[W]hen Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust” (67). The articulation of how their children’s voices have adopted the intonations and accents of an unfamiliar and hostile environment suggests how parents equate the fear and

mistrust they have for America with their children. Of course, parents disapprove of American influences when they view America as a force to be wary of, to mistrust and oppose. Thus, Gogol and Sonia, the children in the novel, instantly become the enemy, or other, to their parents the moment they begin to utter English in an American accent or at a level higher than Ashoke and Ashima. The parents in this text live in fear of their children gaining a more American cultural identity, making them unrecognizable to them in every way that matters.

To return to *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall challenges such fixed definitions of cultural identity as they are expressed by Ashoke and Ashima and suggests that “instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact...we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process” (222). He goes on to say that one way we view cultural identity is as a “collective ‘one true self’” defined as a people that share a history, cultural codes, and “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (223). Here, Hall diagnoses a limited view of cultural identity, pointing out the strict binary driving this framework of identity in some spheres. This binary separates people with a specific shared history and stable frames of reference, from those who may still identify but don’t fill the parameters or those who believe identity is ever evolving. By creating an us/them binary, we limit the idea of identity and in the process exclude many people who don’t fall into a strictly defined type of identity or culture. Such a limited definition cannot fully account for the experiences and identity of second generation children and immigrants who lived their formative years in America. From this vantage, they do not share the

same cultural identity as their parents, a fact which Lahiri suggests strikes fear into immigrant parents.

Hall's view of cultural identity allows a more forgiving space for its subjects. Arguing that identity "belongs to the future as much as to the past," Hall presents identity as continuous, adapting and changing with time. *Americanah's* Ifemelu bears this out. When she returns to Lagos, after a long absence "to experience again the shock of the 'doubleness' of similarity and difference" (Hall 227), she is not the same as when she left and Lagos has changed in that time. This is not a return to home. Instead, Ifemelu's return is a process of relearning what once was into what it has become, recognizing the familiarity and strangeness in a relationship between her and her culture that, on the surface, seems so much like the past. Now the country's perception of her has altered. She is no longer Ifemelu but Ifemelu the *Americanah*. Her identity is in flux, changing with each new experience and so Ifemelu adapts with it.

Similar to Ifemelu's experience in returning to Nigeria, immigrants coming to America are perceived in certain ways. Perceptions are ever shifting and Southeast Asians standing in the U.S., for example, one hundred years ago is not the same today. In *Coming To America: The Making of South Asian Diaspora in the United States*, published in the online journal *The Caravan*, Namit Arora discusses the many facets of American life of South Asians through time. In the early 1900's, Indians were called "a menace...thick-headed and obtuse...illiterate, carriers of strange diseases," people who worked "too hard for too little," and, according to a supposedly "scientific" document, were "likely to deplete the vitality of our people, as the Negro had done" (Aurora). Today Indians make up the richest and most highly educated ethnic group in America. The

CEO of Google, Microsoft, and Mastercard, are all Indian Americans, “add to this their low rates of poverty, incarceration, divorce and reliance on public welfare, and one can see why Indian Americans are sometimes called a ‘model minority’ in the United States” (Aurora). But upon further analysis, one might see that the model minority myth is a trap on both sides. It perpetuates the idea that it places immigrants in a position to constantly defend their worth, punishes them when they stray from the narrative by labeling them as less than, and uses this same faulty narrative to justify this social inequality. The most significant part of this is the psychological effects on the model minority. The Model Minority myth is able to trick the model minority group in question into thinking the group has won when in reality, institutionalized power is only further entrenched in the group’s psyche. Take James in *Everything I Never Told You*, a Chinese American who was born in America to immigrant parents with low paying jobs. James listens to his parents, excels in private school, and marries Marilyn, a white woman, symbolizing his need for acceptance in America. After they meet, Ng notes that “it was as if America herself was taking him in” (39). He becomes a successful professor and “without realizing why, he studied the most quintessentially American subject he could find—cowboys” (38). He does everything he is told to do, becomes everything he is told to be. And yet, he is unhappy, lonely, and misunderstood.

In “Being (and Feeling) Gogol: Reading and Recognition in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*”, Tamara Bhalla delves into the feelings that readers have experienced and the impact *The Namesake* has had on them, discussing the repercussions of reading for recognition and the ideological implications of the text, from stereotypical yet accessible representations of women to difficult, postcolonial male voices. Bhalla discusses how

this text helped one reader “make sense of the cultural and romantic struggles she faced as a young Indian American woman” (106). She went on to say that it “asserted a powerful sense of recognition” in her. Bhalla identified *The Namesake* as a “watershed text in South Asian American experience because it stages the impasse of ethnic authenticity so completely,” making it a perfect text to analyze in relation to the other three novels (109). Bhalla places a heavy focus on Gogol’s relationships and why they failed. Similar to James equating Marilyn’s acceptance of him with America in *Everything I Never Told You*, Gogol’s relationship with Maxine, his girlfriend, can be read the same way. She is wealthy, white, successful, leading a life opposite his with parents he can’t fathom having. But the failure of their relationship is “attributed to her inability to understand Gogol’s return to his family and culture after his father dies” (Bhalla 113), further showing that the self he had portrayed to her, a whitewashed self that kept family and culture at a distance, is not accepted within Maxine’s world or the world she represents.

In *The World and the Home*, Homi K. Bhabha examines the muddled border between the world and home, the mixing of the private and the public to create new unfamiliar territory. Bhabha builds on Edward Said’s concept of the Other and Orientalism with what he calls *unhomeliness*, a feeling of homelessness or of being caught between two clashing cultures. Bhabha writes that the “unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (141). The line between the two worlds is no longer clear. Instead, a meshing of private and public becomes engrained in day-to-day life. What is your own becomes for the world and vice versa without any consent. But this idea, according to Charles Bressler, is limited to a

colonized people. Bressler calls these people “psychological refugees”; but immigrant characters experience the exact same feelings, if not stronger. Immigrants experience a version of unhomeliness in which they at least have the idea of home to fall back on, if not home itself. The novels under consideration represent children of immigrants as not having a clear sense of home in either the old or the new country. Yes, America is their home, for better or worse, but consider the recent Muslim Ban or the removal of the DACA program, or the rise of hate crimes all across the country. Immigrants are made to feel unwanted within America’s borders, including second generation immigrants who find themselves as another variation of a “psychological refugee.” But parents like Ashoke and Ashima and Lindo Jong and An-Mei Hsu do not always understand this. Instead, the texts show us that these parents make assumptions regarding the identities of their children, forcing upon them another country because that is where the parents are from, worrying that if a child rejects that country, they are rejecting them in the process.

As hard as their parents try to impose their beliefs, history, and ways, the immigrant’s child, nevertheless finds himself neither here nor there. Take *The Namesake’s* Gogol for example. As a child, Gogol is forced to watch the Apu Trilogy plays and attend the Kathakali dance performances, to take Bengali language and culture lessons even when it means missing every other week of his art class. Simultaneously, the differences he shares with his white American classmates are being made more and more apparent. He realizes the strangeness of his name, beginning to understand “that it is neither Indian nor American” but something else entirely that refuses to fit into any one thing he is repeatedly being told he is (Lahiri 76).

This in-between space is experienced in different ways by both Gogol and his parents, especially when we consider the idea of home. Whether they are driven from their homeland by choice or by force is irrelevant. To leave is, in a sense, to never come back the same. One is not the same person, nor is the country as you once knew it. It is eternally frozen in time inside a memory. We see this best in *Americanah* when Ifemelu returns to Lagos. Though America/white people look at diasporic bodies differently, depending on their origin, these novels present people who identify with the diaspora and so can never fully identify with America.

The immigrants and their American born or raised children mentioned in the novels under consideration experience missing what was once reality and have difficulty adjusting to a very new world that does not understand them, nor them it. But these contemporary novels, the connections between these characters, and their experiences prove that home is an irrelevant place on a map when all have experienced the same feelings of aimless searching for self and a lack of discovery in that quest. *The Namesake's* Gogol spends the entirety of the novel making and remaking himself, evolving and changing but continuously searching to no avail. *Americanah's* Ifemelu returns to Nigeria hoping to find what she is looking for but only finds perceptions of her changed. James in *Everything I Never Told You* builds what he was told was a perfect life. None of it is enough. Characters from all over the world still find common ground here. Unhomeliness is not the lacking or owning of home but of the understanding that the "private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorientating" (Bhabha 141). Here, the private and public are the home

and the world, respectively. Home is more of an idea than a physical space, thus forcing the divided, disorienting experience Bhabha identifies.

In the novels under consideration, the characters who are children of immigrants are diasporic, but their past and history is irrelevant to their characters. The lack of it, though, is integral to their identity as continuously becoming. They live as Americanized immigrants that just don't look the part. The part being white, with white names and families and values, those seen as the opposite of other to the people in power. Characters like *The Namesake's* Ashoke, Ashima, the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, and even Ifemelu in *Americanah*, though in a similar lost state, are able to hold on to ideas of home no matter how wrong or changed they may be. However, when decades pass, a country shifts with the times. People age, customs shift, expectations change, a country grows. But note the shock Ashoke, Lindo Jong, and Ifemelu feel when they return home. All live with the misconception that home is at a standstill.

Once in America, many immigrant characters struggle with "social and spatial mobility across generations, competence in the English language, naturalization, and intermarriage and ethnic identity" to name a few (Smith and Edmonston 36). Their search for identity and struggle to redefine themselves in a country that does not always want them is a theme found in all of the novels under consideration. For many, identity is a simple unconscious choice, even as it evolves. But for immigrants, there are certain aspects of who they are that they consciously let go of to make room for the rest, especially older immigrants who connect their identity to their original idea of home, culture, and language. This enforced connection complicates the natural evolution of identity and limits it to being instead of becoming, particularly when they find comfort in

the familiar. Though immigrants experience varying degrees of isolation and loss of identity, one group experiences these feelings differently. Older immigrant characters who move to America take with them, if nothing else, the idea of home. It unites them, this shared history. But the only tie children of immigrants have is to each other. If home is a community that understands you, that shares your beliefs and experiences, then this nonphysical space is all they share. The knowledge that there are others like them, others that come from different countries and speak different languages. They unite in their rootlessness more than they do their parents' country.

Though outside perception and interpretation of characters may differ depending on their skin or country of origin, these characters are still united in their search for self, their split identities, and the constant and consistent predicament of having to choose which side of themselves to display, which to nurture, and which to hide. The difficult choice to denounce what is. Not to say that every immigrant experiences the same treatment or violence or racism from white America but their experiences are linked in fundamental and vital ways that unite them: the frustration of being torn between two cultures that don't want you, the distance between parent and child, the one-sided pull that occurs as a child resists embracing the old, forgoing it for the new, the shame An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ahima feel for turning their child into a translator. It is important to note that this applies best to immigrant characters that don't pass as white, though even those characters are constantly code switching, they just don't have the added bonus of dealing with America's constant negative perception of them. To be perceived as white in America is to be perceived as a potential person of power, or at

least a person with that capability. Though groups have become white in the past—the Irish, for example, through the further subjugation of black bodies—immigrants of color are still perceived as other in today's political climate.

Diasporic characters migrating from other places are always depicted as having fragmented identities: one outside the home and one within it. They are constantly forced to make decisions regarding which face to show. In all of these texts, we see that children of immigrants are affected by America's definition and perception of them, as well as their own perception of themselves. The children of immigrants have a difficult time calling America or their parents' country home. We see this again and again with the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* and of course in *The Namesake*, where Gogol does everything he can to better fit into a place that does not want him. He changes his name, he dates a white girl, he dates an Indian girl. None of it is enough. From a young age, these children are taught to choose sides. As a five-year-old, Moushumi is asked "if she planned to get married in a red sari or a white gown," posed with a binary choice, an us and them dichotomy (Lahiri 213). This both simplifies and complicates the conversation. It's easy to view the choice she is posed with as that between one country or another but these characters find contentment in neither. There is a meshing of both cultures, of contradicting ideas and influences as identity develops and evolves indefinitely. These contemporary novels and many more have unfailingly shown us that it is a complicated and diverging path, full of difficult obstacles that make the journey into adulthood nuanced and troubled.

Gogol's act of changing his name to Nikhil to seem less *other* is profound and complicated. Though we see the story through several other characters' eyes, Gogol is

almost always at the center. Named after a famous Russian writer's last name, Nikolai Gogol, Gogol has never found his place in the world. In fact, "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" (Lahiri 76). At one point he realizes that since the Russian writer's last name, not first, is Gogol, "no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake" (Lahiri 78). This depicts him as the lost in-between character that he is. Being one of anything leads to the vast loneliness that Gogol consistently feels from childhood through his adulthood. Gogol does not belong anywhere. It does not take him long to realize this. From a young age, he begins to understand that he is different. On a class trip to the cemetery, Gogol is described as "old enough to know that there is no Ganguli here. He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried" (Lahiri 69). Later, Lahiri writes, "As usual, Gogol...is too old to be playing hide-and-seek with eight-year-old Sonia...but not old enough to sit in the living room and discuss Reaganomics with his father and the rest of the husbands, or to sit around the dining room table, gossiping, with his mother and the wives" (73). He does not fit into any group. He literally can't understand his father and his conversations and knows he is not welcome with his younger sister. There is no denying his displacement. As he grows older, the situations change but his feeling of alienation stays with him.

This feeling of limbo is what drives many of Gogol's decisions as he ages, especially his decision to change his name to Nikhil. The family last name is Ganguli. But we learn that the original family name, Gangopadhyay, was already anglicized by the British, proof that even Gogol's Indian side is whitewashed, that his own father was

already one step removed from his country before he even left it. Gogol, thus, is too removed from what his ancestors were for the word Gangopadhyay to mean anything. Even when he changes his name, the narrator still refers to him as Gogol, showing that he cannot escape who he is with legal forms. When Gogol learns why his father named him Gogol, he starts to rethink his decision and if he had made the right one. The consequences of the name change to Nikhil follow Gogol for the rest of his life.

Long before Gogol made the conscious choice to change his name to Nikhil he made a long series of unconscious decisions to distance himself from his parents and what they stood for. For example, when his father gives him *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* as a birthday gift, a book that meant everything to his father, that literally saved his life and was the reason behind Gogol's name, Gogol tosses it aside and it remains untouched until Gogol comes home after his father has passed away decades later. Whether Gogol understands the value of the gift is irrelevant here. His willingness to discard a meaningful gift from his father, one that reminds him of his past and origin, speaks volumes.

But here we must ask, is the act of Gogol's father Ashoke, gifting his son *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* well intentioned, or can it be viewed as a narcissistic attempt, even unconsciously so, to bring his son closer to his roots, closer to his side of an internal war fought between America and India? A binary struggle that does not allow for any middle ground? To move towards America is to turn your back on, in this case, India, on his parents, and everything they stand for. And so, the fight to insure a child has knowledge, understanding, and connection to an immigrant's idea of home

becomes personal. The influences that created Gogol are so drastically different than the influences and environment that created his parents Ashima and Ashoke.

Gogol's parents' demand that their children be doctors, lawyers, or engineers is partly due to the security found in these jobs, but also in the ability to live through their child's life in the ways they were unable to as well as being the classic indicators of success back home. This narcissism can be traced back to the shame parents feel at failing to do things their children accomplish with ease. Speaking the language but more importantly speaking the language with an American accent, thus forcing their child to act as translator from a very young age. All can be seen as a failure in their own ability and so pushing a child to their country of origin, a place these characters know and understand well, becomes integral to their definition of success as a parent.

Gogol never saw this. Instead he felt the chasm that existed between himself and his father but lived in this lost space instead of exploring why his father felt the way he did. Ultimately, his father was a stranger to Gogol. As he grew up, Gogol continued to make decisions that removed him from his parents' identity; choosing to eat American food over Indian food, dating a white girl, moving to New York, even preferring it because it was "a place which his parents do not know well, whose beauty they are blind to, which they fear" (Lahiri 126). This need to resist his parents' wishes and desires for him shows itself throughout his life, in small moments of discarding a gift his father gave him to larger moments like moving to New York or changing his name, thus creating a radically new and different person yet more unfamiliar to his parents: an Americanized Nikhil to take the place of his parents' Gogol. Almost every moment of his life is decided not necessarily by his parents, but by their existence and desires, formed

in response to them. From a young age, Gogol would be able to understand the idea of having to be one thing inside the home and another outside of it, of being torn apart by different forces and identities until he was fragmented.

Gogol's parents, Ashima and Ashoke also struggled in America. Regarding Ashima, Lahiri writes:

Though no longer pregnant, she continues, at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl. For being a foreigner Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been an ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49-50)

This mix of Rice Krispies, peanuts, and onions is the closest that Ashima will come to chaat, an Indian snack, here in America. Using pregnancy as a metaphor for being a foreigner is a fitting comparison for the displacement Ashima constantly feels. Ashoke's job gives him purpose. He may struggle with the many facets of being an immigrant, but this sort of rootlessness, a "continuous feeling out of sorts," belongs solely to Ashima. Food "provides a connection to the homeland of India and a way to both temper and underscore her displacement in the west" (Bhalla 119). The pregnancy metaphor and Ashima recreating chaat with her limited ingredients allows us to understand her better but more importantly, understand her isolation not only from her country, but also from

general human contact. Bhalla denies Ashima the metaphor of equating pregnancy to being a foreigner, calling it a “gendered spectacle” when it is motherhood that “enables her adjustment to American self-sufficiency and independence” (Bhalla 120). By contrast, I would argue that the birth of Gogol wasn’t *the* answer but *an* answer. The metaphor still stands as a fair and apt representation of immigration, even if Ashima was able to find some sense of purpose within motherhood. Even with that same sense of purpose, she still questions her place in America, still views herself as a lost other. Her life revolves around her husband and eventually, her small child. Her schedule is dictated by them and it takes years to build up any sort of relationships outside of that. Gogol’s birth does not necessarily grant her independence but, rather, limits her freedom in a different way.

Eventually, Ashima adjusts. She cooks American food for her children, spends years away from her country, becomes more Americanized. She even eventually accepts Maxine, Gogol’s white girlfriend, and befriends a group of white women at the library. All indications that she is now removed, to some degree, from India. And yet, we (and Ashima) are all too aware she will never be American. These characters move forward and progress in a way that they can never take back. When they visit India, they realize they are accustomed to certain things, that their habits are different, their tongue heavier. People are able to identify them as different. Sometimes they aren’t able to nail down the difference, but they are aware of its existence.

It’s possible that this change, this becoming a stranger to themselves, is the very thing they feared. They are shocked by other South Asians’ interpretation of them, that they don’t belong. They continue to eat the food, speak the language, and maintain

Indian friends, for the most part, but it wasn't enough. And if that wasn't enough for them, what hope is there for their children? Ashima and Ashoke push their history on their children not necessarily because they value it but mostly out of fear of what will happen if they are to disconnect from it. How would their own children experience being untethered if they let go of their past? Aside from fear, selfishness and narcissism come into play. When children act as mirrors for their parents, what happens when immigrants don't recognize what looks back? There's a sense of fear that comes along with strangers as children, a feeling of having failed somewhere along the way. Ashima's constant feeling of displacement and otherness creates narcissistic tendencies. If her children are like her, she thinks, if they follow what she deems safe and successful paths, then they themselves will be safe and successful.

But Gogol's definition of success goes against Ashima's. His connection to America, his relationships with white people, his ideas of otherness, all shape the way he approaches his life and those he interacts with. His relationship with Maxine for example, though flawed, is never about Maxine, but, rather, what she stands for: her home, her parents, her money, certain ideas of white wealth, success, and privilege that Gogol is able to convince himself, for a brief moment, could be his. Before her, Ruth embodies the goals that are just out of his reach: approval by a white woman, admittance into Yale, acceptance of a new name and thus a new identity by white classmates, but now that he's found that level of success, Maxine represents a new level of success to attain. However, there comes a point in Gogol's relationship at which he realizes that certain things are impossible, that her family will always see him as other, that he will never be white. More accurately, he realizes that he will never be

treated as white. Marrying Moushumi, represents his acceptance of this and is also, in part, giving in to certain ideas his parents pushed on him for a lifetime. However, when she cheats on him, Gogol begins to question if there is any happiness to be found, whether he leans towards America's influence and chooses the Maxines of the world or if he leans towards his parents' influences and ends up divorced. Choosing one side over the other paradoxically means losing both. There is no one answer. If both women symbolize sides of the diasporic struggle of identity, maybe Gogol can't win if the rules don't change, if both sides continue to paint the world he exists in as binary.

Though Gogol's parents struggle with moving to America just as much, their struggle is different, inherently connected to what they think is the country they've left behind when in reality they are only nostalgic for a place frozen in time. Lahiri represents them as no longer wholly Indian, now stained by American ideals. And yet once in America, even after having spent decades there, they are not seen as American. Instead they are frozen in limbo with no way out. Bhabha's idea of unhomeliness or psychological refugee applies here but it's important to note that immigrant parents have the idea of home to fall back on. An idea can sometimes be enough. Their children have stories, but they hold no ties to a distant land they cannot wholly call theirs. Their parents' inability to understand this is frustrating for all involved. These parent characters continue to push their own ideas onto their children and are offended when the children don't take to them as quickly or as successfully.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, for example, Ying-Ying St. Claire "learned the western ways." She narrates, "I tried to speak with a thick tongue. I raised a daughter, watching her from another shore. I accepted her American ways" (Tan 287). And yet, even when

a character encourages the shift to American ideals for their child, there is still a sense of personal betrayal. Forming an American identity is discouraged when it means turning their backs on what was intended or expected of them by the parents. Ying-Ying's Americanized daughter lacked a part of herself: "She has no chi. This is my greatest shame" she says (Tan 286). Instead, Ying-Ying internalizes her disgrace. To accept her daughter as she is, no chi and all, is to let go of a part of herself, of the value of her own chi. But selfishness drives this refusal of acceptance. We must be the same. Value what I value, the mother thinks, become a recognizable mirror image of myself, or else I can't recognize you as my own. And so, the chasm between them becomes unsurmountable.

Lindo Jong feels no different. Her daughter's "skin and hair are Chinese. Inside- she is all American-made" (Tan 288). There is a clear sense of otherness between the mother and daughter. Their relationship is fractured and un-mendable. Again, Lindo Jong blames herself, saying "it's my fault she is this way. I wanted children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?" (Tan 288). One culture's ideas and values contradict another's, forever at odds. Lindo Jong's attempt to have her daughter have certain parts of one with certain parts of the other are unsuccessful. While the values and circumstance can coexist, they don't mix in the ways the parents would like them to; specifically, they don't mix in a way that makes them feel they have succeeded as parents because their children are like them. Instead of allowing them to create their identity and decide for themselves what they want from their parents, in the texts under consideration, parents offer ultimatums: fit into a mold modeled after me or don't bother.

America was where Jing-Mei Woo's mother's hopes lay. However, every mother in the Joy Luck Club was inevitably disappointed by their daughters in some way. Their daughters rejected their ways, and along with that, it seemed they rejected them. Most of their disappointment was translated by the mothers into blame. If only they had done more, pushed harder, instilled the values they held so dearly, then maybe they could understand their daughters a little more, maybe their daughters could understand them in turn. But America's influence was strong and both daughter and mother became strangers to each other.

In a chapter titled "Double Face," Lindo Jong thinks about her "two-faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other" (303). This, at its core, is what all of these characters struggle with. This choice between one or the other, as well as the realization that there is no winning when you must sacrifice a part of yourself. Choices like these change you. America changes you. When Lindo Jong visits China after leaving forty years ago, she is different, no matter how much she wants to deny it. She removes her jewelry and her loud colors. She speaks their language and used their money "but still, they knew. They knew my face was not one hundred percent Chinese. They still charged me high foreign prices" (Tan 303). Now she must reflect on "what did I lose? What did I get back in return?" (Tan 303). Was this trade worth it? These are the questions that the mothers in the Joy Luck Club want their children to avoid. They want them to never have to feel that sense of loss; however, these questions are unavoidable in a diasporic context. Growing up away from the parents' home country leads to children asking themselves questions of nationality, identity, and belonging. But all of

these parent characters are blind to this truth. Instead, they push their ideas of success on their children, hoping that all the plans they never accomplished themselves will come to completion through another generation.

Only as adults do the daughters in Tan's novel begin to embrace their Chinese side. When Waverly, Lindo Jong's daughter, plans to visit China for the first time, her mother says "even if you put on their clothes, even if you take off your makeup and hide your fancy jewelry, they know. They know just watching the way you walk, the way you carry your face. They know you do not belong" (Tan 287). Waverly is offended by her mother's implication that Her twoness is engrained in her soul. She carries it wherever she goes and so she cannot escape it. After all this time, her mother continues to be disappointed in things outside of Waverly's control, but Lindo Jong is offended that her daughter is offended. For years, she tried to teach Waverly her Chinese ways, to instill in her the very things that people in China would instantly know were missing. But now it is too late and Lindo Jong is convinced that she has failed her daughter by not instilling in her the things it took her daughter decades to appreciate and come to terms with.

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng takes us through multiple perspectives, allowing us to come full circle. James has so successfully separated himself from his Chinese roots, that he doesn't speak a single word of Chinese in decades: "He has not said a word in Chinese in forty years, but he is amazed at how his tongue still curls around their familiar shape" (Ng 204). Here we see that there is no escaping the past. James's roots and culture and origin are carried inside of him whether he wants them to be or not. Though he tries to bury his Chinese-ness deep down, it finds its way to the surface. Though he doesn't discuss these feelings with his

children—how can he when he's suppressed them for decades—he loses the opportunity to connect with them in a way that only he can, especially as one of the only thorough and developed examples of a child of immigrants who has grown up in America and raised children of his own. At one point, his daughter Lydia says “Sometimes you almost forgot: that you didn't look like everyone else...And then sometimes you noticed the girl across the aisle watching... and you saw yourself reflected in their stares: incongruous. Catching the eye like a hook” and just as quickly, Lydia remembers all over again (Ng 148). Ng's use of “catching the eye like a hook” is violent and forceful, accurately depicting the jarring and alienating experience of being seen as other or less than. It portrays the instant shock Lydia feels all over again each time she remembers or is reminded what she is. If anyone can understand this awareness of being other, it is James. He has lived this truth every single day in America. He differs from other parents in the novels previously discussed because he himself is a child of immigrants who grew up in America; consequently, he understands the struggles that his children feel, even, to some degree, the twoness they feel in their biracial skin. He spent twelve years of his adolescence at Lloyd Private School where his father worked. From the beginning, he was made aware of his difference. On the first day, his father reminds him “you're the first Oriental boy to attend Lloyd...set a good example” (Ng 37). His expectations are already different, his difference apparent. The children immediately make fun of his eyes, bullying which sets the tone for the next twelve years of his life.

And yet, James's experience is never a topic that is broached or acknowledged with his children. Perhaps, to discuss diaspora and all that comes with it, is to

acknowledge the pull from both directions, to permit the pull and give way to American forces. To say *this is real* is to say I understand if you lean away from your history, your country, your people, that maybe *what is mine is not yours*. And so parents, at least in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Namesake*, hold tight to customs, traditions, and beliefs, trying their best to pass them down, creating a deep sense of twoness in their children in the process because they are unable to remove themselves and their narcissism from the equation.

The distance created between parents and their children is due to a variety of factors. Yes, the different experiences, values, lack of belonging in one culture, nostalgia for another, tensions around language, all come together to create two opposing forces but if either parents or children were able to verbalize these feelings of conflicted identity within diaspora, both would, perhaps, be able to finally understand the other. Even though Lydia's mother Marilyn is white, she is still capable of understanding these feelings, at least to some degree and especially after Lydia is found dead, saying "she understands. There is nowhere to go but on. Still, part of her longs to go back" to a different time (Ng 285). Though the situation is different, it shows that she's capable of understanding her children's diasporic experience, mirroring what immigrants experience in this desire to return to a home that cannot be, even more so when we know that James and Marilyn came together because neither belongs. Marilyn and James find unity in their stark differences.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu lives in aloneness and otherness for years, and still a return to the supposed home country proves difficult for her. When a young Nigerian woman moves to America, she finds herself having to understand her blackness for the

first time. In fact, she “didn’t know I was even supposed to HAVE issues until I came to America” (Adichie 160). Her existence was untroubled by her skin when she was living in Lagos. Only in America did she have to redefine what that meant. She writes, “the only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie. I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (Adichie 369). She goes on to say, “In America, you don’t get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you” (Adichie 428). Here she describes blackness as a thing to gain, a fascinating perspective that tears down certain internalized ideas about what blackness is. In this moment, she confirms that blackness does not exist in Nigeria. How can it without the painful history found in America?

America’s complicated and mostly toxic relationship with African Americans forces Ifemelu to analyze three things: her place in this country; the difference between African Americans and herself, or what she calls American Africans or Non-American Blacks; and what it means to return home or if that’s an impossible idea. Ifemelu is a different person. Nigeria has changed. It’s people view her as American, different than Nigerians, a foreigner, Americanah. Yet in America, she is viewed as the African by African Americans. One body lost between both countries. Home becomes an idea as foreign as she is in both places.

In regards to the loss of home, Ifemelu's cousin Dike from *Americanah* is a perfect character to analyze. Son of Aunty Uju and the General, Dike lives separated from his past in Nigeria and restricted from participating in black culture in America. Here we see the harmful effects of a parent disapproving of American culture because

of how Nigerians are seen as other or less than, an elitist viewpoint. Born in Nigeria but raised in white America, this character struggles with what it means to be black, Nigerian, American, and other hyphenates. His identity continuously falters as he gets older. Separated from Igbo (his mother's language), Nigeria, and any knowledge of his father, Dike does not understand how to be, a situation that is exacerbated when his mother disapproves of him taking part in African American culture. The lack of language and information about where he comes from paired with a disapproval of participating in African American culture, and thus being black in America, is jarring for Dike. He is essentially walking a tightrope with no end in sight. When he attempts suicide and lives, it becomes even more apparent how important his lack of identity is. When there is nothing to connect to, in America or Nigeria, what is left? Though we see that being rootless leads to this missing identity, we also see that when Ifemelu is deemed accomplished, she still isn't happy.

Ifemelu felt like she had everything she needed, (success, love, Princeton!) and yet did not feel whole. Ifemelu described the yearning for home as "cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months meddled into a piercing homesickness" (Adichie 14). Being under the impression that success leads to happiness and self-fulfillment, it takes Ifemelu a long time to realize that she does not feel whole. This pull towards home tears at who Ifemelu believes she is. She made it to America, was successful on "American" terms. Consequently, when others learn that she is moving back, they largely don't understand. They "seemed surprised, expecting an explanation, and when she said she was doing it because she wanted to,

puzzled lines would appear on foreheads” (Adichie 16). Aunty Uju hoped that “Ifemelu would see the gravity of her own foolishness” but it was only Ranyinudo, a friend from Lagos that made her feel like she wasn’t crazy (Adichie 24), presumably because she is removed from the intoxication of what it is to be American, to have one’s perspective realigned so that it points only to America. Ranyinudo is able to offer Ifemelu a removed perspective that, for once, centers something aside from America as the only option.

But when she is in Nigeria, Ifemelu isn’t viewed as the Nigerian she thought she was. Who she is isn’t the Ifemelu that left Nigeria all those years ago. Obinze, a longtime friend and lover, says that though she’s more guarded and self-aware, she’s “gone, she’s learned, and she’s conquered”; but with that comes snobbery, almost as if she knows better than what Nigeria has to offer her (Adichie 534). This, in part, is the very thing immigrant parents fear for themselves and their children. This experience of being apart from everything they’ve known instead of a part of it is a difficult and sometimes impossible to navigate. Ifemelu is an amalgamation of identities. She is Ifemelu from Lagos. She is Ifemelu from America. She is Ifemelu. She becomes a mixing pot of cultures that challenges the way we view each of them. Though Nigerians no longer see her as wholly Nigerian, she exists within their space, pushing the boundaries of what they thought or expected her to be. America’s culture is difficult to pin down, but she takes what she wants from it and leaves the rest behind. She has no interest in an American accent, for example. However, that doesn’t mean that the way she speaks, or thinks hasn’t changed. Even a perfect Nigerian accent can’t hide that.

Americanah is a term best used for Nigerians who have left the country for America, only to come back and speak, think, and hold themselves differently than

before, with an air of Americaness about them, a perfect epithet to depict the in-between space of not American, not Nigerian. Although Nigerians use this word negatively, to show the lack of nationality when one leaves, an almost white washing of black bodies, Ifemelu comes to see it as praise as well. She is American. She is Nigerian. She lives in the in-between, not necessarily jumping from one identity to the next, but creating a new whole one. We see this when she decides to no longer fake an American accent or when she unabashedly criticizes American culture on her blog, or even when she decides to move back to Nigeria. She is changed. She is Americanah. And she is better for it, able to see both sides, able to allow her perspective to grow and be changed. To understand that things were never black and they were never white. Like her, they are a mess of contradictions and ideas. In *Americanah*, we see that Ifemelu is able to hold both truths at once.

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Today, we see the discussion of diaspora and twoness a little more front and center. Contemporary books can now focus on it and find success in the marketplace. Books that focus on the immigrant experience and people of color seeking identity regularly hit the *New York Times* bestseller list. Publishing is in a new, more open, more inclusive space where writers of color are a little more welcome, where new voices and perspectives are almost expected. Though publishing is still a primarily white industry, these voices, for the most part, are heard, analyzed, and rewarded.

I chose this topic, I admit, in part because of my own personal experiences. There is no denying that we all “write and speak from a particular place and time, from a

history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', *positioned*" (Hall 222). As an immigrant, I've seen myself most clearly reflected in the works of other marginalized authors, of tales following characters stuck in the limbo of identity, belonging neither here nor there. I saw my mother in Ashima's struggle to define America as home, my siblings in the lost daughters of *The Joy Luck Club* and Lydia's search for self, my father in Ifemelu's return home. I saw a bit of myself fragmented in every one of these characters. This was the perfect space and opportunity to try and understand this limbo and how its residents interact with those in it and those outside of it, whether that be their parents and parent's country on one side of the spectrum or America on the other. Once we are able to understand the narcissistic tendencies that produce shame and fear immigrant parents feel for not being enough, for seeing their children do things that they cannot, we can begin to understand their motivations and actions at a deeper, multi-dimensional level.

These four novels allow us to analyze and understand identity in a new and more complete way. Novels allow us to see a character's pain and struggle framed, explained, and humanized; we see Bhabha's terms of being and becoming in conversation with one another. Ultimately, the characters examined here are better for it. Strengthened by their experiences and new-found intricate identities, they come out the other end whole. Their stories are being told and, most importantly, heard. For example, books like *American Like Me*, an anthology of essays on life between cultures sold over seventeen thousand copies since coming out in September of 2018. There has been an upswing, a shift in how we talk about culture and the gray area that comes along with it. It may be that those who identify as two or more things and nothing all at

once don't belong with either group. Instead, there is a new group to be formed, one where this ever-adapting identity fits best, among those that feel the same, made up of people from India and China and Africa and everyone else that made their way to America from a young age without choosing to do so, those that spent their formative years here. Their questions of identity and their lack of a solid answer unify them in ways they have never been able to find with their own parents and culture or America. This lack of home creates home. Instead, they are solely each other's.

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