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Research article

Implied Cultural References in Lahiri's The Namesake: A Critical-Stylistic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the linguistic construction of implied cultural references in Jhumpa Lahiri's (2003) *The Namesake* and how they might be used to bring out cultural alienation. To do so, Jeffries' (2010) *Critical Stylistics* was applied as the analytical framework. Taking cultural content into consideration, three extracts were selected from the novel for the purpose of analysis. The aim is to figure out the implied linguistic construction of the cultural references therein. The results show that a significant number of linguistics are used to construct as noted the above mentioned reference. The combination of these references serves to instil cultural judgements and presuppositions into the language of the text, creating a feeling of cultural alienation. It is concluded that the selected novel implemented linguistic strategies in its representation of cultural alienation and that Critical Stylistics offers an appropriate methodical approach to the discovery of such ideological aspects.

الاشارات الثقافية الضمنية في رواية «الاسم للاهيري: تحليل نقدي - أسلوبي

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المُستخلص

تناقش هذه الورقة البحثية البناء اللغوي للإشارات الثقافية الضمنية في رواية "الاسم " لجومبا لاهيري (٢٠٠٣)، وكيف يمكن استخدام هذه الإشارات لإبراز الاغتراب الثقافي. حيث يهدف البحث إلى الكشف عن البناء اللغوي الضمني للإشارات الثقافية الواردة فيها. ولتحقيق ذلك، استخدمت الباحثة نموذج "الأسلوبية النقدية" لجيفريز (٢٠١٠) بوصفها أداة تحليلية، حيث تم اختيار ثلاثة مقتطفات من الرواية لغرض تحليلها. تُظهر النتائج أن عددًا ملحوظًا من الوسائل اللغوية يُستخدم في بناء تلك الإشارات. ويسهم تضافر هذه الآليات في غرس أحكام ثقافية وافتراضات مسبقة داخل لغة النص، مما يخلق شعورًا بالاغتراب الثقافي. توصل البحث الى أن الرواية المختارة وظّفت استراتيجيات لغوية في تمثيل الاغتراب الثقافي، وأن الأسلوبية النقدية توفّر منهجًا مناسبًا لاكتشاف مثل هذه الأبعاد الأيديولوجية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاغتراب، الأسلوبية النقدية، التضمين والافتراض، الاشارات الثقافية، رواية "الاسم"

1. Introduction

Contemporary diasporic fiction has become an important literary field that helps to investigate the theme of cultural displacement and the search for belonging (Said, 1978). According to Hall (1996), stories that trace the characters across cultural borders employ language in unique contexts to create tensions and contradictions, highlighting the experience of living in between cultures. Nevertheless, Jeffries (2010) demonstrates that literary texts refer to cultural differences via linguistic choices that carry the meaning implicitly.

Jhumpa Lahiri's (2003) *The Namesake* is among the most popular works written in this genre. It is the story of the Ganguli family that struggles to find a balance between their Bengali cultural heritage and their American social environment. The novel raises the issue of identity and the need to find oneself in an environment where two worlds with conflicting cultures clash (Kumar, 2013). Due to migration from India, a gap was created between the family's original culture and their new one, rendering fitting in either one a difficult mission. Hence, the language applied to describe the characters and their experiences (Marinova, 2013; Seeman, 1959).

1.1 Research Problem

Most studies that have dealt with *The Namesake* have focused on what the characters experience, such as the feeling of being caught between two cultures, the difficulty of preserving cultural identity, and the sense of not entirely belonging to either world. These studies have examined cultural alienation as a theme to be interpreted rather than as something built through language. What has received very little attention is how the language of the novel itself works to construct this experience. Specifically, the way

implied cultural references operate in the text, carrying meanings that are never directly stated, has not been dealt with in systematically. This is the gap that the present study seeks to fill.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The aims of research are to achieve the following:

1. Exploring how implied cultural references are linguistically constructed in *The Namesake*.
2. Finding out whether implied cultural references contribute to the representation of cultural alienation in the novel.

1.3 Research Questions

The following research questions are raised:

1. How are implied cultural references linguistically constructed in *The Namesake*?

2. How do these implied cultural references contribute to the representation of cultural alienation in the novel?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Critical Stylistics and Critical Discourse Analysis

As defined by Jeffries (2014), critical stylistics (CS) is a branch of applied linguistics which studies the connection between text choice and ideology. Its major objective is to reveal the ideological roots behind the use of language, thereby improving the interpretation of the role of language in the replication of social identities and inequalities.

The rise of critical discourse analysis (CDA) led to the emergence of critical stylistics because the former analyses the expression of ideologies, identity, and inequalities in texts in a wider context of social and political processes. In her argument, Jeffries (2010) states that there is no singular relationship between linguistic form and meaning and that textual-conceptual functions are part and parcel of the stylistic methodology used in critical language analysis.

CS explores the relationship between textual decisions and ideology with a view obtaining underlying ideologies that were not seen in a text. Instead, these functions are said to be literary or expressive. However, exploring ideology in works of literature is possible. There is no single tradition of CDA and no consensus on the methods of analysis to reveal the ideology.

According to Atatfa (2024, p. 992), terms such as '*discourse*, *power* and *Ideology*' are dealt with in CDA by the pioneers therein to highlight their designated theories. Being critical, therefore, helps in the process of unveiling ideologies within discourse. This function serves the same purpose in CS.

2.1 Culture and Identity in literary works

One of the most prevalent experiences of diasporic people is cultural alienation. people experience when they move out of their native culture and attempt to establish a new life in a different country (Seeman,

1959). This experience has been associated by many scholars with questions of identity is important to mention that when individuals are alienated, they are deprived of their cultural backgrounds, frequently struggle to identify themselves and their place (Erikson, 1968; Hall, 1996). In diasporic fiction, authors are able to reflect this conflict in their characters and demonstrate how life between two cultures may influence all spheres of a person's life. The alienation of culture in such stories is not merely an individual emotion; it is also a social status that mirrors the greater truth of being in between two worlds without belonging to either (Marinova, 2013).

The manner in which characters are named, the suppositions that are made as part of the daily discourse, and the comparisons made between the realities of various cultures all combine to create the experience of cultural alienation in the very language of the text itself. It is not by chance that writers employ language to indicate cultural alienation. Since, as Fairclough (1989) suggested, each linguistic decision has a social meaning, it is through them that diasporic fiction portrays the challenge of being between two cultures.

2.2 Jumba Lahiri: *The Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri is an American-born Indian writer who was born in London in 1967 and brought up in the United States. Her work is based on the experience of Indian immigrants. In America, themes of identity, belonging, and the conflict between cultures are explored. heritage and assimilation. She is commonly known as one of the most significant voices in, modern diasporic fiction and her work has been given a lot of attention by researchers who are interested in issues of cultural identity and migration (Kumar, 2013). One of the most acclaimed works of Lahiri is *The Namesake* (2003). It narrates the tale of the Ganguli family, which emigrates to Boston, and trails Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli and their American-born son Gogol on their way through the distance between their Bengali culture and the American world in which they live. The manner in which the family has been followed by the novel has been illustrated by scholars in their effort to maintain their Bengali identity as they strive to adapt to American life (Kumar, 2013). Dalal (2023) has noted that this challenge is reflected differently across generations with parents overwhelmed by their cultural roots while children are torn in two directions simultaneously.

Other studies have investigated the emotional dimensions of this experience in the novel, exploring feelings of nostalgia, grief, and longing for the homeland, as well as an increasing sense of disconnection from the host society (Ali, 2023; Su & Chen, 2024). These works have contributed positively to the understanding of cultural alienation as a social and emotional experience in *The Namesake*.

Critical Stylistics is an analytical approach developed by Jeffries (2007, 2010) that combines close reading of literary texts with a critical awareness of how language constructs ideological meanings. Unlike Critical Discourse Analysis, which focuses on contexts beyond the text, Critical Stylistics remains focused on the language of the text itself (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010). Jeffries (2010) proposes ten

analytical tools called Textual Conceptual Functions, which are flexible analytical tools that can be applied to any text, literary or non-literary, in order to reveal the ideological positions embedded within it.

2.3 Previous Studies

Ali (2023) published a research article entitled *"Alienation and Textual Inferences between Space Transformation and Semantic Generation Horizons: A Semiotic Approach in the Poem 'Blabbing Dreams' by Samer Al-Shaibani."* This study examined alienation as a semiotic phenomenon constructed through spatial transformation and semantic inference in poetic discourse, grounded in a semiotic analytical perspective. The researcher took a semiotic form to comprehend the process, in which textual signs and communicative forms create implicit meanings, in which psychological and ideological tension are displayed. Through analysing the poem *Blabbing Dreams,* Ali could prove that alienation is brought out by the symbolic signs of language and thick semantic constructions that trigger concealed interpretive horizons beyond the surface meaning. The findings showed that alienation was not merely a thematic presence but a meaning-making process built throughout semiotic strategies that shape rupture, absence, and fragmented selfhood within the text. This study is therefore relevant to the present research, as both share an interest in how linguistic structures construct cultural alienation in contemporary fiction. There is similarly a need to explain how linguistic structures and stylistics construct cultural alienation in selected contemporary fiction, and this will be done by employing a critical stylistic approach.

Fauzi, Pribadi, and Mappaita (2025), at Universitas Negeri Makassar, English Literature Study Program, published a research article entitled *"Alienation Through Language: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Identity in Japanese Literature."* This study examined how language functions as a mechanism of alienation and identity fragmentation in Dazai Osamu's *No Longer Human*, focusing on the ways linguistic behavior mirrors psychological distress and social exclusion. In this work, a qualitative approach has been used, focusing on the Critical Discourse Analysis and interactional sociolinguistics to analyse some narrative passages selected. It was meant to understand how discourse creates marginality and how the protagonist becomes socially othered. The features of irony, dissonant tone, repetition, and communicative failure were analysed, which revealed that alienation is produced by textual approaches that encode the distance to social norms and interrupt the coherent self-presentation. These findings indicate that stylistic and discourse-level patterns of the speech of the main character manifest a divided identity formed due to cultural demands and marginalisation, which proves that alienation is formed in language instead of being stated thematically. This study provides a solid sociolinguistic and discourse-based ground for the current study, which also investigates the phenomenon of cultural alienation using linguistic structures as the means to construct it in modern fiction.

While Ali (2023) and Fauzi, Pribadi, and Mappaita (2025) examine alienation through semiotic and sociolinguistic approaches, this study addresses a gap in the literature by applying Critical Stylistics to uncover how implied cultural references construct cultural alienation in The Namesake.

3. Methodology

The research employs a qualitative analysis to explore the language in depth. This is to comprehend the functions of the implied cultural references in particular textual settings. Jeffries' approach to critical stylistics provides a set of textual-conceptual tools , and this study focuses specifically on Implying and Assuming, as it is the most relevant tool for analysing implied cultural references in *The Namesake*. This tool is concerned with meanings that are suggested or presupposed rather than directly stated (Jeffries, 2010). It operates through two categories: Implying, which works through quality, quantity, relation, and manner; and Assuming, which operates through existential and logical assumptions, including a change of state verbs, factive verbs, cleft sentences, and iterative words (Jeffries, 2010; Nahajec, 2009).

The analysis is based on three extracts from Lahiri's (2003) The *Namesake*. They are selected based on the following criteria:

1. Every extract should be directly related to the theme of cultural alienation.
2. The extracts need to include the linguistic elements that could be analysed using the tool of Implying and Assuming proposed by Jeffries (2010).
3. The extracts have to be representative and diverse in order to meet saturation.

Having met the abovementioned rules, the selected data are read thoroughly to detect any implied cultural references therein. Then, the precise linguistic characteristics that bear such implied meanings are identified and characterised. After that, they are analysed according to the corresponding sub-category of *Implying and Assuming* adopted Jeffries' (2010) framework. Eventually, the relationship between the implied cultural reference and the overall theme of cultural alienation in the novel is uncovered. Using Jeffries' (2010) words, taking such steps in the analysis of a selected linguistic sample guarantees the reveal of any ideological aspects which may be hidden within the text.

4. Data Analysis

This section includes the analysis of the selected data based on Jeffries' (2010) *Critical Stylistics.*

4.1 Implying

Extract 1

"Each day Ashoke is pained by the half-eaten sandwiches people toss into garbage cans on campus. " At your age I ate tin*" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 55).*

The repetitive adverbial construction "each day" makes the culture of Ashoke uncomfortable a permanent and constant state and not an isolated response, which suggests that his rejection of the American values is not a one-time experience. A transformation of the state verb "pained" is based on the assumption that the state of cultural comfort was shifted to a state of cultural distress, as it is assumed that Ashoke used to live in a world where food did not go to waste. The line "At your age I ate tin" suggests a direct correlation between Ashoke's previous life of poor living in India and Gogol's current life of rich living in America, creating a cultural and generational divide that cannot be entirely overcome by both of the characters.

Extract 2

Gogol is old enough to know that there is no Ganguli here. He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life (Lahiri, 2003, p. 69).

The repetition of "old enough to know" creates an awareness of the cultural inexistence in Gogol, and the manner in which it is done creates the impression that this realisation has been slowly and agonisingly formed throughout a period of time. The implication in the phrase "old enough to know" is a logical one; the pain of being aware of Gogol's cultural displacement is an idea that has already been established as the truth of his family and taken for granted in his mind, something which cannot be helped, currently undone or questioned. The existential construction “there is no Ganguli here” presupposes that cultural belonging exists in the ground with your own grave (an assumption, determined by circumstances), and you cannot have a cultural existence in a place if you also don’t exist there on the physical plane. The contrast between "burned, not buried" really gets across that the two practices say a lot about the cultural values they represent; implying that Gogol's adopted country leaves no lasting impression on the landscape. The way "no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life" is phrased, though, with its cleft-like structure, suggests an almost direct link between not having a name on the gravestone and being completely forgotten culturally. And then there is the one that will bear his name beyond life that has one of those change-of-state verbs in it, and sends a clear signal of how the existence of Gogol in America is not likely to leave any real lasting impression on the local culture.

Extract 3

"My parents don't own a corkscrew" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 146).

The statement "My parents don't own a corkscrew" implies, through a quality of a cultural value system in which alcohol has no place, encoding a religious and cultural identity without stating it directly. The phrase implies, through relation, a connection between the absence of this simple household object and a

complete cultural distance from American social habits, suggesting that his parents' world operates by entirely different rules. The implication of the manner in which Gogol makes this statement as a mere fact that does not need any explanation is that this cultural distance is so firmly rooted that it does not need an explanation. The quantitative implication comes out in the difference between the offer of "plenty of wine" by Maxine, which suggests that the difference between the two cultures cannot be solved through availability.

The fictive verb "know", used in the context above, when Gogol tells Maxine that "Things he figures she should know," assumes that these cultural limitations are real and material facts and not mere preferences; it views the world of his parents as a given reality that Maxine needs to accept. The existential assumption assumes that there is a world where a corkscrew is not required, and the cultural identity of his parents is regarded as a full-fledged and self-sufficing reality. The change of state reading in the transition between Maxine anticipating that she can bring wine into the scene, and Gogol silently disagreeing, assumes a shift of one cultural assumption to another, creating cultural alienation as something that cannot be negotiated away. The cleft-like structure connoted in "It doesn't matter" assumes that the thing is not the wine but the insurmountable cultural rift between the world of his parents and the one of Maxine. The iterative construction "don't own" assumes that it has been and will continue to be so, on the assumption of the permanence of the cultural division of his parents out of their American setting.

Taken together, the three extracts confirm both research questions: implied cultural references are linguistically constructed through repetition, factive verbs, existential assumptions, and cleft structures, and these devices consistently construct cultural alienation across the novel.

With more elaborated interpretation and explanation, the analyses of the three extracts should be based on restating the two research questions raised above, alongside the main arguement, in order to test and evaluate language use and structure. This will create a rigid and valid discussion, showing whether the analysis has verified or refuted the hypotheses.

5. Discussion

The analysis reveals that implied cultural references in *The Namesake* are systematically built by means of certain linguistic mechanisms instead of being made by direct statement. All these mechanisms combine to ensure that cultural alienation seems a natural and unchanging state of affairs instead of an openly debated issue in the text.It further elaborates how implied cultural references help in the construction of identity. It also explains that implied cultural references contribute to the construction of identity. The sense of being in between two worlds is linguistically coded by repetitive structures, factive verbs and existential presumptions which introduce cultural difference as a permanent and unquestioned state.

Moreover, it discloses that implied cultural references elicit cultural conflict in the novel. The clash between cultural values of Ashoke and the American world in Extract 1, the cultural invisibility in Extract 2, and the insurmountable cultural distance in Extract 3 are all manifestations of the life between two worlds without being a complete part of one or another world. Combined, these three extracts demonstrate that cultural alienation in *The Namesake* is not limited to dramatic scenes but can be found in the most mundane aspects of daily life.

6. Conclusion

In essence, this study confirms that cultural alienation in The Namesake is not simply narrated but linguistically constructed through implied cultural references embedded in ordinary language. The discussion of the three chosen passages of The Namesake reveals that implied cultural references are linguistically produced with the help of factive verbs, iterative constructions, existential assumptions, cleft sentences, and change of state verbs. The mechanisms do not merely explain cultural difference; they entrench it into the language of ordinary situations in a manner that makes cultural alienation seem like a natural and inevitable state of affairs as opposed to something that is explicitly talked about or even argued about in the text. The examination also establishes that implied cultural references are directly related to the representation of cultural alienation in the novel.In Extract 1, they appear in the language of family interaction and the generational divide, where the gap between Ashoke's cultural values and the American environment around him is encoded through iterative expressions and change of state verbs rather than through direct statement. In Extract 2, cultural alienation is built through the sense of cultural invisibility and the absence of belonging, where factive verbs and existential assumptions work together to present Gogol's cultural displacement as an established and permanent condition. In Extract 3, implied cultural references are encoded in the language of social behaviour and cultural incompatibility, where a single simple statement carries the weight as a deep and unbridgeable cultural distance. A further finding that emerges from the analysis is that cultural alienation in The Namesake is not confined to dramatic moments of conflict or crisis. It is present in the smallest and most ordinary details of everyday life, from a family meal to a cemetery visit to an afternoon with a girlfriend. This implies that the cultural displacement experience in the novel is ongoing and entrenched even in the manner in which the characters converse, consider and associate with the surrounding world. The analysis thus shows that putting particular attention to the language of a piece of literature and particularly to what is implied and assumed and not directly stated in a work of literature can help one see aspects of cultural alienation, which thematic analyses are not capable of capturing.

From these findings, it is seen that although language is a theme in the Namesake, it is not the only way cultural alienation is created. This alienation is created by a variety of devices: Implying and Assuming: repeated expressions, factive verbs, existential assumptions, cleft structures, and change-of-state verbs all contribute to making cultural division seem like a given rather than a subject of speculation and debate

among the characters. This validates the purpose of the study, which was to demonstrate that the cultural references of the novel were implied and linguistically constructed and that it helps to portray cultural alienation. The overall conclusion of this study is that Critical Stylistics can provide an insight into the meanings implied or assumed within a literary text which would not be evident in a strict thematic reading because things that are implied or assumed rather than stated are important.

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