

Crossing Borders, Remembering Homes: Identity, Displacement and Memory in Adichie and Lahiri

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Abstract: This paper examines how fractured language and narrative silence function as ethical strategies for representing displacement and trauma in cross-cultural literature, with reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). Moving beyond overt depictions of violence, the study focuses on everyday accumulative forms of migrant trauma shaped by racialisation, linguistic alienation, cultural dissonance, and inherited memory. Drawing on trauma theory, postcolonial studies, and memory studies, the paper argues that both novels resist seamless narratives of assimilation and closure by employing linguistic restraint, narrative gaps, fragmentation, and silence. In *Americanah*, racialised speech, accent politics, and blog fragments reveal the limits of language in articulating migrant experience, while in *The Namesake*, emotional reticence, delayed revelation, and minimalism foreground silence as a mode of ethical storytelling. Through a comparative reading, the paper demonstrates that silence and linguistic fracture do not signal narrative absence but rather acknowledge the unrepresentability of trauma and resist the commodification of suffering. By privileging partiality and opacity, these texts redefine cross-cultural memory as an ongoing, ethically charged process. The study contributes to contemporary debates on migrant narratives by foregrounding form as a crucial site of moral responsibility in literary representation.

Keywords: Displacement, Trauma, Narrative Silence, Cross-Cultural Memory, Migrant Literature.

Introduction

Displacement in contemporary literature is rarely articulated through grand narratives of migration alone; instead, it is often registered through subtle linguistic fractures, narrative silences, and everyday negotiations with language and memory. In cross-cultural fiction, trauma does not always emerge from overt violence or catastrophic events but from prolonged experiences of unbelonging, cultural dissonance, racialisation, and emotional estrangement. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) exemplify how such forms of displacement are narrated through restrained language, silences, and fractured self-expression rather than dramatic spectacle.

Contemporary diasporic fiction repeatedly returns to the experience of displacement as a defining condition of modern subjectivity. Migration, whether voluntary or forced, disrupts stable notions of home, language, and identity, producing narratives shaped by loss, negotiation, and remembrance. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* are significant interventions in this literary landscape, offering nuanced representations of transnational lives shaped by movement across cultural, racial, and linguistic borders. While Adichie's novel explores the transatlantic migration of Nigerians to the United States and back, Lahiri's text focuses on the Bengali American experience of first- and second-generation immigrants in the United States. Despite their different cultural contexts, both novels foreground displacement as an ongoing psychological and affective condition rather than a singular event. Recent postcolonial scholarship has emphasized that diasporic identity is shaped less by spatial movement alone and more by affective experiences of loss, negotiation, and re-situating the self within transnational cultural circuits (Gandhi, 2010).

This paper argues that *Americanah* and *The Namesake* narrate displacement through three interrelated dimensions: language, trauma, and cross-cultural memory. Language functions as a site

of negotiation where belonging is both claimed and denied; trauma emerges not only through dramatic ruptures but also through everyday experiences of alienation, racialization, and silence; and memory operates as a transgenerational force that shapes diasporic identity. Displacement in diasporic narratives is increasingly understood as a condition of “unsettled belonging,” where identity is formed through ongoing negotiation rather than cultural resolution (Clifford, 1994; Brah, 1996). Both novels foreground linguistic hesitation, muted emotional registers, and narrative gaps to acknowledge the limits of representation. These strategies resist the commodification of migrant suffering and instead invite readers into an ethical encounter with partiality, ambiguity, and emotional restraint. By placing Adichie’s and Lahiri’s works in dialogue, the paper highlights how cross-cultural memory is shaped not only by what is spoken, but equally by what remains unsaid. Through a comparative reading, it demonstrates how Adichie and Lahiri resist assimilationist narratives and instead foreground hybrid, unstable identities that challenge monolithic notions of home and nation.

Displacement and the Diasporic Condition

Displacement in diasporic literature is not merely geographical but deeply psychological and cultural. Avtar Brah conceptualizes diaspora as a “homing desire” rather than a desire for a singular homeland, emphasizing the multiple, shifting attachments that characterize migrant lives (Brah, 1992). Both *Americanah* and *The Namesake* exemplify this condition by portraying characters who inhabit liminal spaces between cultures without fully belonging to either.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s migration from Nigeria to the United States exposes her to a racialized social order unfamiliar in her home country. Although she arrives with educational aspirations, her experience of displacement is marked by cultural disorientation, economic precarity, and emotional isolation. Similarly, in *The Namesake*, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli experience displacement as first-generation immigrants struggling to recreate a sense of home in an unfamiliar land, while their son Gogol embodies the second-generation conflict of belonging to neither his parents’ culture nor mainstream American society. In both novels, displacement is not resolved through assimilation or return; rather, it persists as a defining feature of identity.

The diasporic condition portrayed in these texts aligns with Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “third space,” where cultural meaning is produced through hybridity and negotiation rather than fixed origins (Bhabha, 55). However, this space is not always empowering. It is often marked by anxiety, silence, and trauma, particularly when language and memory fail to bridge cultural gaps.

Language and the Politics of Belonging

Language plays a central role in both novels as a marker of difference and a tool of self-fashioning. In *Americanah*, accent becomes a visible sign of otherness that determines social mobility and acceptance. Ifemelu’s decision to adopt an American accent in order to secure employment highlights the performative nature of linguistic belonging. Her later rejection of the accent signals a reclamation of self, a refusal to erase her Nigerian identity for the sake of assimilation. Adichie thus exposes language as a political terrain where power, race, and identity intersect. Ifemelu’s blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, functions as a counter-narrative that reclaims voice and agency. Through humor and irony, the blog articulates experiences of racialization and displacement that are often silenced in mainstream discourse. Writing becomes a means of survival and self-definition, transforming linguistic marginalization into narrative authority.

In *The Namesake*, language operates more subtly but no less powerfully. Gogol’s relationship with his name encapsulates his struggle with identity and belonging. Named after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, he grows up resenting a name that marks him as different, neither fully Indian nor conventionally American. His discomfort reflects what Stuart Hall describes as identity as a

“production” that is never complete but always in process (Hall, 222). Gogol’s eventual acceptance of his name parallels his reconciliation with his hybrid identity, suggesting that language and naming are integral to self-understanding. Silence is equally significant in Lahiri’s novel. Ashima’s emotional restraint and limited verbal expression reflect the unarticulated trauma of migration. Unlike Ifemelu’s outspoken critique, Ashima’s displacement is narrated through absence and quiet endurance, revealing gendered dimensions of linguistic agency in diasporic contexts.

Everyday Trauma and Migrant Subjectivity

Trauma in *Americanah* and *The Namesake* is not confined to spectacular events but embedded in the ordinary experiences of migrant life. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an experience that is not fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence and returns belatedly in memory (Caruth, 4). Both novels depict trauma as deferred and cumulative, arising from repeated encounters with exclusion, loss, and cultural misunderstanding. Ifemelu’s experience of depression and exploitation during her early years in America represents a critical moment of trauma that disrupts her sense of self. Her withdrawal from communication, including her silence toward Obinze, illustrates the isolating effects of displacement. Trauma here is not only personal but systemic, rooted in racial and economic inequalities that render migrant bodies vulnerable.

In *The Namesake*, trauma is more understated but equally pervasive. Ashoke’s near-death experience in a train accident, which precedes his migration to the United States, becomes a foundational trauma that shapes his worldview and his attachment to literature. This trauma is indirectly transmitted to Gogol through the story of his naming, illustrating Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory,” where the second generation inherits the emotional residue of experiences they did not directly live through (Hirsch, 22). Gogol’s emotional disconnection exemplifies what Hirsch terms “postmemory,” a structure of intergenerational transmission in which children of migrants inherit unresolved affect rather than direct experience (Hirsch, 2008). Gogol’s inability to articulate his grief after his father’s death further underscores the limits of language in processing trauma. His silence reflects a broader diasporic condition in which emotional expression is constrained by cultural expectations and intergenerational gaps. Trauma thus emerges as both personal and collective, shaping identities across time and space.

Cross-Cultural Memory and the Myth of Home

Memory in diasporic fiction often functions as a bridge between past and present, homeland and hostland. In *Americanah*, memory is closely tied to return. Ifemelu’s decision to return to Nigeria is motivated by a desire to reclaim a sense of self unmediated by American racial categories. However, her return complicates the notion of home, as she confronts a Nigeria that has changed in her absence. Memory here is revealed as selective and unstable, shaped by nostalgia and loss. Adichie resists romanticizing return by portraying Ifemelu as an “Americanah,” a figure marked by her time abroad and perceived as different by those who never left. This ambivalence reflects what Jan Assmann describes as cultural memory, which is constantly renegotiated within social contexts (Assmann, 113). Home is no longer a fixed location but a site of negotiation between memory and present reality.

In *The Namesake*, memory operates primarily through objects, rituals, and food that connect the Ganguli family to India. Ashima’s cooking and adherence to Bengali traditions serve as acts of remembrance that sustain cultural continuity. Yet these practices also highlight the impossibility of fully recreating home in diaspora. Second-generation migrant narratives frequently articulate memory through emotional inheritance rather than lived experience, producing identities shaped by narrative transmission and familial silence (Kaur, 2011). For Gogol, India exists largely as a remembered or imagined space, mediated through stories and visits that never fully resolve his sense of unbelonging. In this context it is noteworthy that Feminist diaspora critics have noted that

women's migrant narratives frequently oscillate between speech and silence, revealing gendered modes of coping with cultural displacement (Grewal, 2005). Both novels thus challenge the myth of home as a stable origin. Instead, they present home as fragmented and mobile, constituted through memory, language, and affect rather than geography.

Trauma, Language, and Ethical Representation

Trauma theory provides a crucial lens for understanding narrative fragmentation and silence in migrant literature. Cathy Caruth conceptualises trauma as an experience that is not fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence and returns belatedly through fragments, repetitions, and gaps. Postcolonial critics caution that Euro-American trauma models often overlook colonial and migratory histories, urging instead a framework attentive to silence, belatedness, and cultural dislocation (Craps & Buelens, 2008). Recent trauma scholarship has extended Caruth's model by emphasizing every day and slow forms of trauma, particularly in migrant and postcolonial contexts, where suffering is normalized rather than spectacular (Craps, 2013). While Caruth's work emerges from studies of extreme historical trauma, its emphasis on narrative rupture is productive for reading everyday, accumulative forms of migrant trauma- racial microaggressions, linguistic alienation, and cultural erasure.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through further illuminates the ethical stakes of narration. In cross-cultural texts, excessive articulation risks aestheticising suffering, while silence risks erasure. Ethical representation lies in negotiating this tension. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory is also relevant, particularly in *The Namesake*, where second-generation characters inherit memories of displacement, they did not directly experience but which shape their identities profoundly. Within postcolonial theory, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of cultural liminality and the "in-between" underscores how migrant subjects inhabit fractured linguistic and cultural spaces. Language in such contexts is not merely a communicative tool but a marker of power, belonging, and exclusion. Fractured language and narrative silence thus emerge as deliberate formal choices that ethically register displacement without forcing it into totalising explanations.

The blog posts interrupt the linear narrative, functioning as reflective fragments rather than confessional outpourings. They allow Ifemelu to articulate racial experiences that remain unspeakable in her everyday interactions. Yet even these entries are marked by irony and restraint, suggesting the limits of language in fully conveying the psychological toll of displacement. Ifemelu's use of blogging as a narrative strategy resonates with postcolonial analyses of migrant self-representation, where alternative media forms enable marginalized voices to contest dominant racial and linguistic hierarchies (Nayar, 2012). Moreover, Adichie uses linguistic shifts to signal emotional dislocation. Ifemelu's adoption and later rejection of an American accent underscore how language can become a site of ethical tension. Speaking "correctly" promises belonging but demands self-erasure. Her eventual return to a Nigerian accent is not framed as triumphant resolution but as a complex reclamation marked by lingering dissonance. The fractured linguistic journey reflects a self that remains unsettled, resisting narrative closure.

Silence and Inherited Memory in *The Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* presents displacement through quieter, more interior forms of narrative silence. Unlike *Americanah*, the novel rarely foregrounds overt racial confrontation. Instead, trauma emerges through emotional restraint, miscommunication, and generational gaps. Ashima's early life in the United States is marked by isolation and homesickness, yet Lahiri renders these experiences through subdued prose and understated scenes. Silence is central to Lahiri's ethical representation of migrant life. Characters often withhold emotions rather than articulate them. Ashima's grief, Gogol's identity confusion, and Ashoke's traumatic train accident are all narrated with remarkable restraint. The train accident- arguably the novel's most overtly traumatic

event- is revealed gradually, through delayed disclosure. This narrative postponement mirrors trauma's belated emergence and respects the character's inability to speak directly about the event.

Language in *The Namesake* is also fractured through naming, misnaming, and translation. Gogol's name becomes a site of silent trauma, embodying cultural dislocation and inherited memory. His discomfort is rarely verbalised; instead, it surfaces through avoidance and emotional withdrawal. Lahiri's refusal to dramatise Gogol's anguish turns silence into an ethical strategy that avoids simplifying identity conflict. Furthermore, Lahiri's prose style- measured, minimalist, and observational- creates narrative gaps that readers must inhabit. These silences invite ethical participation rather than passive consumption. The novel suggests that migrant trauma often resides not in spectacular suffering but in sustained emotional dissonance and unspoken loss.

Comparative Frame: Ethical Silence and Cross-Cultural Memory

When read together, *Americanah* and *The Namesake* reveal how fractured language and silence function across different cultural and racial contexts. Adichie foregrounds racialised speech and public discourse, while Lahiri emphasises domestic spaces and interiority. Yet both authors resist narrative excess and emotional over-articulation. In *Americanah*, fragmentation appears through blog interruptions, tonal shifts, and linguistic self-consciousness. In *The Namesake*, it appears through delayed revelation, muted dialogue, and narrative understatement. Despite these formal differences, both texts treat silence as an ethical response- one that acknowledges trauma without claiming to resolve it. Cross-cultural memory in both novels is transmitted through everyday practices rather than explicit testimony. Food, rituals, names, and accents become repositories of unspoken histories. Feminist diaspora studies underline how women's migrant narratives are structured through everyday affect, domestic memory, and emotional labour, often resisting public modes of articulation (Brah & Phoenix, 2004).

These narrative choices challenge dominant expectations that migrant narratives must explain themselves fully to a global readership. Instead, Adichie and Lahiri preserve opacity, compelling readers to accept partial understanding. By attending to what is unsaid as much as to what is spoken, these texts redefine cross-cultural memory as incomplete, ongoing, and ethically charged. In doing so, they contribute to contemporary literary discourse that values attentiveness, humility, and respect in the representation of displaced lives.

Conclusion

In this way, both *Americanah* and *The Namesake* offer compelling narratives of displacement that illuminate the complexities of diasporic life in a globalized world. Through their nuanced engagement with language, trauma, and cross-cultural memory, the novels reveal displacement as an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a problem to be resolved. Language emerges as both a site of exclusion and a means of empowerment; trauma is shown to be embedded in everyday experiences of migration; and memory functions as a dynamic force that shapes identity across generations. Silence in these texts does not signal absence- it acknowledges the limits of representation. In privileging restraint over spectacle, both novels transform literary form into a site of moral responsibility in the narration of displaced lives. By placing these texts in dialogue, this paper demonstrates how contemporary diasporic fiction challenges assimilationist narratives and reimagines belonging as fluid and relational. In doing so, *Americanah* and *The Namesake* contribute to a broader literary and theoretical conversation on migration, identity, and the ethics of remembering in a transnational world.

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