

Straddling the Cultural Divide: Second-Generation South Asian Identity and *The Namesake*

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Canada is in the process of another major shift to its ever-changing multicultural image. According to the 2006 Statistics Canada census data, one-in-five people in Canada is foreign-born, an increase of 13.9% between 2001 and 2006 (Statistics Canada 2007). Such an immigration surge is unprecedented in a quarter of a century. This increase is four times higher than that of the Canadian-born population. This surge also comes at a time when the country grapples with acts of overt racism that fly in the face of Canada's reputation for tolerance (Grant 2007).¹ This shift is likely to have profound consequences for Canada's educational, cultural and economic future. For the first time, the proportion of the foreign-born population born in Asia and the Middle East surpasses the proportion born in Europe. As of last year, more than half of immigrants continued to come from Asia and the Middle East, but a growing number also came from the Americas and Africa. If the trends continue, by 2030 Canada's population growth will stem solely from immigration (Grant 2007).

Because of the recent influx of immigration in Canada, it is crucial that educators pay closer attention to questions of cultural identity among second-generation Canadian students.² Especially within this ever-changing demographic of Canadian culture, South Asians have become a visible and integral part of Canada.³ I use the term 'South Asian' realising that its construction as an identity, rather than geographical description, is in many ways relevant only to the Canadian context. For example, in Canada one would call someone from India, a South Asian, but in Britain that person would be called Black or Asian, in Trinidad, Indian, and in the United States, Asian. The process of migration has important implications for a redefinition of what it means to be Canadian as well as South Asian. The changing racial and ethnic composition within Canada's borders has led to much angst and controversy over the definition of 'Canadian'. In a discussion of Canadian and South Asian discourses of cultural protectionism, Amita Handa (2003, 5) suggests,

Second-generation youth in Canada are particularly troubling to these discourses because their presence points to the ruptures and contradictions between 'modern' and 'traditional'. Young South Asians struggle to fashion an identity that speaks to their experience of being South Asian in Canada. In doing so, they often unsettle and resist certain mainstream definitions of both *South Asian* and *Canadian*.

The children of the post-1965 wave of immigrants are less visible in the media, and in academic literature. Although this group of second-generation Canadians have moved into adulthood and created their own social, personal, professional and familial spaces, their ethnic and national identity development has not been adequately researched. Exploration of second-generation Canadian identity is timely

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and significant in light of new research that questions the efficacy of official multiculturalism for the children of visible minority Canadians who exhibit ‘a more profound sense of exclusion than their parents’ (Jimenez 2007). Canada continues to support high immigration levels, and Toronto may be one of the world’s first really ‘plural’ cities, in that nearly half of the residents were born somewhere else, and no one ethnic group dominates.

Canadian official multiculturalism developed through the 1970s and 1980s, and by the 1990s had become a major part of Canadian political discourse and electoral organisation (Bannerji 2000). Canadians also continue to support ‘multiculturalism’, which Pierre Trudeau introduced in 1971 as a way to encourage newcomers to keep their cultures while adapting to the country’s norms. Now in the new millennium, we see another major shift in the multicultural paradigm of Canada. Will Canada be a truly pluralist country? If the population of immigrants continues to soar – and it is estimated that most of the population growth in Canada over the next decade will stem solely from immigration – then the second-generation offspring of these immigrants will also continue to climb and populate Canadian classrooms. Indeed, from an educational standpoint, it is important to question how the cultural identity experiences of second-generation South Asian Canadians affect current classroom and institutional approaches to literacy. This essay explores how contemporary postcolonial texts can influence and redefine how we understand and teach literacies.⁴ It also asks how postcolonial texts, in print and other media, might help second-generation South Asian Canadian secondary students interrogate notions of cultural identity.

To address these questions, I discuss the term ‘second-generation South Asian’ as it pertains to a Canadian context. This article draws on interview data of a pilot study I conducted with four second-generation South Asian Canadians as they discussed South Asian cultural identity issues in reference to Mira Nair’s film of Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* (Nair 2007). Using a Lacanian analysis of the identity struggles as faced by the protagonist to highlight those of second-generation South Asian Canadians, I also draw on Slavoj Žižek’s ‘application’ of Lacan’s ideas to popular culture. The paper concludes with an examination of how contemporary postcolonial texts such as *The Namesake* can be used as spaces to highlight the lived experiences of second-generation South Asian students in secondary English curriculum. Although the participants in this study are now adults, this discussion contributes to ongoing debates about the continued dependence on the literary canon in contemporary secondary classrooms (Johnston 2003) and questions whether the use of canonical texts further complicates what it means to grow up ‘Canadian’ in a ‘multicultural’ society.

It is important to consider the differences between first- and second-generation struggles to understand postmodern identity as fluid and indeterminate. Unlike those who come to the West as young adults, second-generation South Asians ‘come of age’ in the Western country and thus experience the rites of passage of the Western secondary schools. The term ‘second generation’ shifts away from the defining criterion of nativity and allows the immigrant generation to be considered first generation rather than erasing their history from the trajectory of the group in the new country. The term ‘second generation’ also differentiates between the visible and growing population of more recent South Asian descendants who do not have the same migration history as pre-1965 South Asian descendants, a group made up

of highly educated, skilled professionals who acquired middle- to upper-middle-class status in a relatively short time.

Often initially unaware of the harsh contrasts between Eastern and Western culture, first-generation immigrants discover in the midst of raising their children that they send conflicting messages to their children, hoping they will fit into the new environment yet remain true to Eastern cultural ideals. Salman Akhtar (1995, 1051) notes,

Immigration from one country to another is a complex psychosocial process with lasting effects on an individual's identity. The dynamic shifts, resulting from an admixture of 'culture shock' and mourning over the losses inherent in migration, gradually give way to a psychostructural change and the emergence of a hybrid identity.

While it is important to represent an integrated view of how immigrants come to make a life in a chosen country, a focus on the second generation is crucial to understanding how South Asians and other new immigrant communities will be inserted into the economic and social fabric of a Canadian national identity. The paths followed by second generation individuals on the threshold of adulthood – involving occupational and career decisions, the creation a family unit or independent household and political and civic participation – will clearly have an impact on the future of the larger ethnic community (Maira 2002). As Alejandro Portes (1997, 814) observes,

The case for second-generation as a 'strategic site' is based on two features. First, the long-term effects of immigration for the host society depend less on the fate of first generation immigrants than on their descendants. Patterns of adaptation of the first generation set the stage for what is to come, but issues such as the continuing dominance of English, the growth of a welfare dependent population, the resilience of culturally distinct enclaves, and the decline or growth of ethnic intermarriages will be decided among its children or grandchildren.

This issue is crucial at a time where Canada's dependence on foreign labour is becoming more and more prevalent and attracting many new immigrants. The children of these new immigrants will lead to an even larger group of second-generation Canadians who will also have to negotiate critical issues pertaining to race, culture, school and identity.

A poststructural view of identity points to the role of subjective experience as being influential on how we come to know things about the world. Britzman (1998) notes concerns with how subjectivities become configured as an effect of history and how they are then produced at the intersection of meaning with experience. For instance, I am fully aware that my gender, culture, ethnicity and social class operate as a lens through which I see the world. I am also aware of how others may perceive my research interests; therefore my subjectivity can give meaning to the objective nature of my research. Situational and interactionist perspectives on ethnic identity also suggest that the respondents will present ethnic identifications partially in response to the context, the questions and their relationship to the interviewer and the way the questions are formulated. During the data analysis in this project, I was aware that the responses may have been influenced by my gender, ethnicity and by own history as a second-generation South Asian Canadian, which makes me an insider to second-generation South Asian Canadian experiences.

Indian director Mira Nair (2007) has adapted Jhumpa Lahiri's bestselling novel *The Namesake* (2003) for a film of the same title. *The Namesake* is a story deeply attuned to feelings of shame, ethnic identity and intergenerational/cultural

differences between South Asian immigrant parents from West Bengal and their American-born children. The film chronicles the struggles between generations with extraordinary visual and cultural detail. Nair outlines the cultural realities of the second generation while trying to embrace Indian parental values, thus allowing the viewer a first hand glimpse into the complexities of cultural assimilation. *The Namesake* (2007) frequently floats between New York City and Calcutta, two ostensibly different, yet inherently similar cities and worlds. The film also explores the importance of names and naming practices. The title reflects the struggles Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his unusual name. From the beginning of the film, the issue of names and the link to identity is apparent to the viewer. The film chronicles the cross-cultural experiences of Gogol, the protagonist, through the rejection and the subsequent exploration of his Indian culture. The disavowal of Gogol's own name is used as an extended metaphor throughout the film to explore larger issues of integration, assimilation and cultural identity. The name 'Gogol' only fills the young American with dissonance and shame which infiltrate his entire life, soon to be riddled with one identity crisis after the next.

The interview data presented in this article describes the experiences of second-generation South Asian Canadians that are significant in forming their beliefs about what it means to grow up Canadian. How do South Asian Canadian young adults perceive their national identity, ethnicity and citizenship? How do they move through institutions of higher education and into the workforce? The findings of this pilot project were drawn from a questionnaire with four second-generation South Asian Canadians, two males and two females, between the ages of 25 and 35 years. Both males and one female participant came from small, middle- to upper-class suburbs of a larger city in central Alberta, with a dominantly white population. The other female was born in Arusha, Tanzania and had immigrated to Canada by the age of five. All four participants were well-educated (students, postgraduate students and young professionals), whom I contacted through professional organisations and acquaintances. My respondents came from families that represented earlier waves of post-1965 Pakistani and Ugandan immigrants who are also well-educated, upper-middle-class professionals.

Like the character Gogol, the participants of this pilot study also discussed the complexities of having an 'ethnic' name. One male participant said,

Officially, I have 5 names. If you were to ask me why I have so many names, why I have two last names, or which names are on my birth certificate, I would be hard pressed to answer honestly.

My first name has been the most awkward for me. The name ____ is not the easiest word for English-speaking Canadians to pronounce phonetically and causes me to become somewhat anxious when introducing myself to new friends or colleagues. It can get somewhat irritating spelling your name out every time you meet someone new.

Throughout his life, this participant struggled with the 'uniqueness' of his name. However, in South Asian culture, names are of great importance, something to be proud of; 'individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared' (Lahiri 2003, 28); they are something special. However, like Gogol, the participant said that much of his adolescence was spent being embarrassed by his name and his culture, and he tried his best to reject all things 'Indian'. Growing up in Western society where children are often ashamed of their differences, this participant wanted just to blend in and live unnoticed. This struggle

also led to more difficulties into adulthood. When discussing how he felt about his name while going through the interview process for medical school, this participant expressed anxiety about being introduced by others or introducing himself to others:

People would sometimes not make an effort to learn my name; it becomes a barrier and makes it somewhat difficult to evaluate me out of a hundred others when they can't put a name to the face.

The other male participant reflected similar frustrations with how others treated his name:

Growing up it was bothersome to a point, but after a while, I never cared, because no matter how often I would correct people, they still would screw up a three-letter name.

Indeed, both male participants struggled to varying degrees with how their names were received by their dominant white peer groups and social groups:

I believe I was named after my paternal grandmother's brother; however the historical significance of my name lies in the Qur'an as one of Prophet Muhammad's most trusted companions, who was also a prophet.

My name was given to me by my grandfather. To me that is special, that my grandfather wished a name upon me and it was fulfilled. My name also holds a religious meaning to me.

The female participants also alluded to difficulties with names growing up in Canada:

Often, we are prejudged by our names. In part, our names define us to the world and in turn we may or may not identify with our name.

Not only are first introductions a source of anxiety, but as both female respondents indicate, names have an intimate connection with identity in relation to the Western/Canadian gaze. Both males pointed out, however, that their names had special significance and thus an impact on how they saw themselves in relation to their cultural and religious identity. When the cultural, social and public practices of the dominant culture intersect with South Asian culture and specifically with the significance or the rejection of a name, a cultural conflict emerges between how second-generation South Asian Canadians perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others.

In an effort to find a more congruous blend with the dominant society, second-generation South Asians must deal with the mispronunciation of their names as well as having their names anglicised. The participants discussed the impact of names on their cultural and Canadian identity at length. Slavoj Žižek (1992) offers us a useful way to understand the difference between how we see ourselves and the point from which we are being observed as the difference between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In Imaginary identification, we imitate the Other at the level of resemblance, therefore identifying ourselves with the image of the Other. This is precisely why South Asians identify more with an anglicised nickname. In Symbolic identification, we identify ourselves with the Other at precisely the point at which he is inimitable, the point which eludes resemblance (1992, 109). A decision to change our name, in effect, is our effort to resemble our I(O) or ego-ideal: s/he who speaks without an accent, who does not smell Indian, who does not act Indian, ultimately rejecting the symbolic order of our South Asian culture. The participants pointed to the coping practices that they had to use as having influential consequences on their cultural identity:

Having an uncommon name in society, we often find ourselves changing the true pronunciation, modifying the name thereby changing its meaning and ultimately changing how we define ourselves to society. I believe this is where we run the risk of disconnecting with our true identity and being comfortable with who we are and where we come from. It's often ignorance that forces us to do so.

It is useful to draw upon Žižek to understand the distinction between i(o), the ideal ego, and I(O), the ego-ideal, as they present in this particular discussion. A nickname stands to replace the good name or the legal first name. According to Žižek (1992), in Lacan's theory of forename and family name, the first name designates the ideal ego or the point of imaginary identification. The family name comes from the father – it designates the name-of-the-father or the point of symbolic identification; the agency through which we observe and judge ourselves. According to Žižek (1992) the facet that should not be overlooked in this distinction is that 'i(o) is always already subordinated to I(O); it is that which dominates and determines the image, the imaginary form in which we appear to ourselves likeable' (108). On the level of formal functioning this subordination is attested by the fact that the nickname which marks i(o) also functions as a rigid designator, not as simple description, thus demonstrating that names can hold great emotional and psychic significance for an individual. We may come to identify with a name early on in life and thus we may prefer this *daak naam* or nickname to our proper name if it is more convenient to the persona that fits best with a particular situation. Conversely, it may have negative effects on how we see ourselves:

I went through a period of seven years (teens through to early adulthood) where I used a different name in the workplace, initially given to me by a co-worker who just could not pronounce my name. I adopted this nickname in and I believe it affected how I saw myself, how others saw me and how I interacted with people around me. I finally decided at the age of 22 to go back to using my real given name and as a result began to feel like I was once again my true self...

Adolescence is commonly known as a time of peer identification. Situational and cognitive factors during adolescence create a disconnect and shift in the identification with an ethnic name. In the film of *The Namesake*, Gogol goes to great lengths to begin the process of dismembering his name from his identity. He changes his name from 'Gogol' to his good name 'Nikhil', which later becomes anglicised to 'Nick'. Many South Asians experience similar dissonant and conflicting feelings associated with their nicknames and the accompanying new identity that comes with trying to negotiate multiple identities that are highly dependent on situational factors. The ensuing struggles to define themselves in the contexts of family and two diverse cultures throughout early adolescence and well into adulthood are evident in the narratives of the participants. In response to the question 'How does Gogol's shifting sense of self, family and relationships mirror your own experiences?' one male participant explained his ability to blend into various situations:

Like Gogol, I believe that part of my ability to make friends in high school and university was my ability to properly assimilate in many ways to Canadian culture; with dress, sports, music and relationships, I was able to somehow create a Canadian personality in Indian skin. While I know that this was merely a product of my surroundings, I could see those who did not assimilate as well get shunned and actively teased by our peers for their accent, dress, etc.

This respondent related strongly to the shifting identities of 'Nick' and 'Gogol'. Like the protagonist, this participant's identities were conflicting, self-hating and

indicative of the various schemas he had negotiate between. In the film, the viewer is a firsthand spectator into the conflicts between South Asian culture and American culture as it is lived out for second-generation youth and the continual tensions between the traditional and modern, culture of origin and assimilation. The viewer sees the split between who Gogol thinks he wants to be and who he is struggling to become.

According to Lacan, what sustains our fantasy and what accounts for our investment in it, is the enjoyment we take in it (Taubman 2007). Adopting different strategies of fitting in can be seen as *jouissance*, or the kernel of enjoyment that visible minorities get from being accepted in white society as someone other than the 'outsider'. Persisting in what may be perceived as self-defeating and self-destructive behaviours (such as the rejection of cultural markers such as dress, food, customs or even cultural value systems) and by breaking cultural norms, second-generation South Asians may conversely find pleasure in this pursuit. *Jouissance* then becomes helpful in trying to understand why these coping strategies would then be considered logical and rational reasons to shed attitudes that would otherwise be considered contra-intuitive to healthy identity development.

The interviewees were also asked to discuss what details made the characters in the film realistic and what details reminded them of their own story growing up between cultures. They expressed anger and frustration towards having to reject their South Asian culture in order to 'fit in'. Here, they comment on how the film related to their own experiences of growing up as a second-generation South Asian:

I felt guilty for not embracing my culture more and angry at Canadian culture and school system for the pressures it put on me as a child to repress any sort of culture I had. My parents did not encourage us to learn their mother tongue out of fear we would develop accents and be teased at school or have lesser opportunities at success in the workplace.

I knew that my cultural heritage was important, but I wanted to embrace being a Canadian more, therefore thinking some traditions were stupid or old.

Reflective of the different struggles of growing up between cultures, the participant responses are helpful when considering how identity acts as a key site for narrative construction and reconstruction. A contemporary postcolonial film like *The Namesake* can highlight the various ways that film and other media are particularly productive of public narratives of individual or collective identities. Theoretically, there is a homology in the conceptualisations of memory, identity and media experiences. According to Brigitte Hipfl (1995) all three of these conceptualisations are defined by provisional and continuous processes; they are negotiated and modified in the light of experiences of the present. At the same time, these three concepts supplement each other because of the different aspects being elaborated. In the case of the participants' engagement with the film, their experiences deepen our understanding of the complex and contradictory ways in which media are of relevance for our constructions of second-generation South Asian identity.

Reader response theorists Wolfgang Iser (1974) and Louise Rosenblatt (1995) suggest that readers play a central role in the form of engagement within the reading process. In an exploration of the social norms and challenges to these norms offered by a work of fiction, readers are offered the opportunity to live vicariously through the text (and by extension we could include other media, such as film). Readers

encounter their own reality and live out experiences beyond their frame of reference as offered by the text. Similarly, Umberto Eco (1979) describes the 'two way' process of reading whereby the reader, bringing his or her own experience to the text, not only receives a meaning, but also becomes an active contributor to that meaning.

A text such as *The Namesake* – whether the novel or the film – reflects the concepts of reader response theory, which posits that we continually construct representations or interpretations of what we read and view. At each reading or viewing moment we generate expectations about what might happen ahead in the text; we anticipate and modify our interpretations of what we have read or seen in light of what we are reading or viewing now. The reader or viewer's activity is not independent of either textual or cultural constraints but rather guided by the text and influenced by personal experience, cultural history, his or her present representation and the reading conventions she or he has internalised (Rosenblatt 1995). Iser (1974) argues that literary meaning is not a hidden object or substance that can be extracted from a text; rather it is the text that activates the reader/viewer to produce meaning so that literature is an event, something that happens as we read.

In the educational context, postcolonial texts create the space in which a reader/viewer can explore the meanings of his or her cultural nuanced understandings and experiences alongside curricular expectations. In addition to reader response theory, pertinent literature on postcolonial literary theory and critical multiculturalism reveals that the connection between literature and the students' cultural world needs to be further explored (Bhabha 1994; Giroux, 1992; Dimitriadis and McCarthy 2001). *The Namesake* is a text that can help educators to enable students to discuss their own experiences of assimilation. Encouraging students to make links between the world of the text and their experiences outside the text has powerful potential for helping students to negotiate their cultural identity formation through the complex bicultural experience. Literature has become one of the most important ways in which colonialism has influenced the perceptual frameworks of contemporary people living in the world today. Postcolonial texts question the essentialising project of English literature study by addressing ongoing issues pertaining to continued use of the Western literary canon, helping to negotiate the worlds of establishment aesthetics and popular and vernacular culture. The very existence of postcolonial literatures questions the essentialising project of English literature study, which is currently based on a single culture under the guise of the originating centre.

The findings of this pilot study suggest that South Asian identity is an issue with which many second-generation youth struggle. A more critical understanding of a hybrid notion of identity as negotiated by second-generation South Asians fosters a better understanding of their identity struggles and the implications of these struggles for literacy activities and text selection in English language arts classrooms. Participant responses to the identity and assimilation conflicts of second-generation South Asians in *The Namesake* (2007) highlight the difficulties that second-generation South Asian Canadians have in straddling the cultural and racial divide between white and non-white categories. These very conscious and reflective participant responses point to the existence of a recreation and a renewal of cultural traditions in second-generation Canadian culture. The notions of cultural authenticity in relation to hierarchies of race, class, gender and national identity that mark this generation as 'Canadian' are important to consider. Many second-generation youth explore their ethnic identities as young adults once they are slightly

detached from family culture, in many cases due to a Eurocentric school education. Many of these youth are not able to take cultural assumptions for granted and therefore find it difficult to 'blend' into the dominant society.

By focusing only on the 'hybridisation' of Western with Eastern cultural elements, such as music, film or text, the term 'hybrid' fails to capture fully the complexities of racial ideology and class expectations that South Asian youth negotiate in their daily lives. As indicated in the participant interviews, many second-generation Canadians are self-conscious about the hybrid nature of their experiences as children of immigrants; with this comes the reflexivity inherent in the participation in anything related to their culture that is outside the home environment. Contemporary postcolonial texts have the potential for creating a space to begin the complicated conversations around what it means to belong to a national identity, a conversation that is yet to be adequately researched.

Notes

1. I am referring to some recent incidents in Canada reported in *The Globe and Mail* of Toronto. For example, on Martin Luther King Day, January, 2008, racist graffiti was scrawled on the door of the Black Student Alliance at York University, Toronto, Canada. The graffiti read 'niggers go back to Africa' and on the washroom door, it read 'all niggers must die'. This incited enough fear and anger in students to spark a volatile rally later that week. In another instance, in Scarborough, a Toronto suburb where 54% of the 600,000 people are foreign-born, there is violence between and within ethnic groups. Of the 52 gun deaths in Toronto in 2005, more than half involved first- or second-generation Jamaican-Canadians, mostly in their teens or twenties. In another Scarborough altercation that lasted for six hours in the summer of 2006, a group of teenagers beat, stripped and stabbed to death a 17-year-old, the son of Jamaican immigrants – all in broad daylight. Nobody called the police. In January, 2007, vandals damaged a Muslim school in Montreal, Quebec, shattering windows and breaking doors. A judo association in Manitoba, Canada banned a little girl from wearing her hijab in November, 2007.
2. I refer to those who migrated to Canada (or to the USA and Britain) as first generation and their offspring as second.
3. I am defining South Asian in the diasporic sense. It therefore refers to people who have a historical and cultural connection to the South Asian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Republic of Myanmar [formerly Burma], Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) and those who migrated from the South Asian subcontinent to East Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, the Caribbean and Fiji.
4. In postcolonial literatures, I am including those from countries in Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries and Sri Lanka. Literature from the USA can also be considered postcolonial, but because of the USA's past neo-colonising role and its current position as a world power, its postcolonial nature has not been commonly acknowledged. However, its relationship with the metropolitan centre as it has evolved over the last two centuries has been paradigmatic for postcolonial literatures everywhere.

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