

# A Study of the Spatial Images and Identity in *The Namesake*

Peifang Zhang

College of Foreign Language  
Hubei University of Technology  
Wuhan, China  
College of Liberal Arts  
Jinan University  
Guangzhou, China

**Abstract**—*The Namesake*, a novel written by Indian-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri who won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2004, tells a story of the first and second generation of Indian immigrants in the United States. In the novel, different types of spatial images such as train, house and so on really play an important role in shaping characters, displaying themes and promoting the plot development of the story.

**Keywords**—*spatial images; identity; The Namesake*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Namesake* is a novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian-American writer who won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2004. It was named the best book of 2004 by influential magazines such as the New York Times, USA Today, Entertainment Weekly, Newsday, San Jose Mercury News, New York Magazine and The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. In 2006, it was adapted into a film of the same name by world-famous director Mira Nair. It tells the life story of the first and second generation of Indian immigrants in the United States. In addition to the time dimension, the novel has obvious spatial narrative characteristics. Instead of the traditional single time sequence, it employs the methods of space-time crossover and space-time inversion to present the spatial effect. Then, how do the spatial images such as house and train, which appear repeatedly in the novel, participate in the narration of the works? What role do these spatial images play in shaping character images and how do they connect with the theme of the story? This paper will answer the questions by analyzing the narrative mode, plot framework, character image and identity theme with the help of relevant theories.

## II. THE IMAGE OF "HOUSE" AND THE PURSUIT OF AMERICAN IDENTITY

In the novel, "house" is not only a small and individual space, but also a space-time dimension that witnesses the residents' patience, obedience and courage to resist. It is no longer just a shelter, but the expression of identity. In other words, the image of house is the spatial representation of the image and identity of the characters. Different living spaces

represent different stages of their lives. Meanwhile, they tell different identities and images of the main three characters. The change of living space highlights their pursuit and desire for identity in the United States. Just as Long Diyong said, in all kinds of spaces, the relationship between the house and people is the most often used by the narrator to represent the "spatial image" of characters. In the novel, Ashima immigrates to the United States from India with her new husband Ganguly who is a doctor of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She imagines their wonderful life in the America at first. However, their first house in the United States left Ashima very disappointed and even a little nauseous because the house is so shabby, narrow and small. Besides, outside the house, the broken snow, bald trees, dog urine, musty convenience stores and fluffy black cats, as well as cockroaches that haunt the bathroom tile at night make Ashima feel panic and gloom. In other words, the terrible setting of the house reflects the residents' desire for safety, warmth and happiness. Houses are supposed to be shelters for human beings. However, the house here presents a prison cage for Ashima which indicates individual fragmentary perplexity and pain instead. In such living space, the individual not only loses the sense of security, but also loses the spiritual refuge. It is no exaggeration to say that the "house" here is more of an embodiment of the diaspora and dislocation of the experience.

Gaston Bachelard believes that house has a dream value, protecting the dream and the dreamer. Meanwhile, house is a powerful combination of thoughts, memories and dreams. It is not only a shelter for the body shelter, but also a spiritual habitat. Instead of feeling at home, Ashima feels very miserable in such a building. The drift and anxiety of the first generation of immigrants make them want their own spiritual home. They had to find and build such houses to satisfy their spiritual need.

The Gangulys' second house is the teachers' building on campus, which is in a college town outside Boston. At this time, Ganguly had been hired as an assistant professor in the department of Electrical Engineering. In a sense, Ganguly realizes his dream at last because to be a teacher in American University is his ideal job. He feels excited and proud to

teach American students. However, with his sense of accomplishment, Ashima suffers greater sense of loss. For Ashima, moving to the suburbs means distressing. She is horrified by the inconveniences of suburban life because there are not any sidewalks, street lights and even public transportation. The suburbs represent the edge, which indicates that they are still outside the mainstream. Their modest success at work does not mask or erase their anxiety about their identity. In addition, they are the only minority residents in university town. Such a situation has stimulated Ashima's sensitive nerves, reminding her of her immigrant status and making her aware of the embarrassment and pain of being a foreigner.

After that, they move into a third house as Ganguly's status grows steadily. It is a recently built two-story colonial with shingles where no one has ever lived in. For the first time, they have their own piece of "universe", because the house is owned by them from the attic to the basement and is not shared with anyone else. Although they appear to be same with their neighbors, Gogol's many second-hand toys and almost all second-hand furniture suggest that they are aliens who are unable to construct an authentic American identity. It turns out that they still suffer from serious racial discrimination and prejudice. For example, during their return visit to India, the family name plates outside their house are painted with derision and insults. Besides, Ganguly's strong Indian accent is always jeered at by shop assistants. Even Gogol is also often mocked by others for his race and color.

Gogol's growth and pursuit of self-identity are also reflected in the description of spatial residence. Gogol never feels at home in all the houses he lives in with his parents. However, he considers the school dormitory as home unconsciously because he likes its old and elegant style. Gogol's fondness for dorms speaks to his quest for identity as an American citizen to some extent. However, Gogol's behavior strengthens Ashima's confusion about her identity and her fractured sense of the roots of traditional culture, because the significance of home is to embody a kind of love and warmth, carrying past memories and future beliefs and dreams, and mother is usually the embodiment and guardian of the home.

After graduating from university, Gogol rents his own cramped studio apartment, a stark contrast to the luxurious and spacious house of his upper-class white girlfriend McKexin. According to Anderson, housing style and its decoration are ways of expressing identity, which can reveal residents' economic class, ethnic characteristics and sense of community. The grandeur of the house reveals its owner's class and status. As white Americans, the McKexins had a sense of innate superiority. While this sense of privilege and superiority, identity and belonging is exactly what Gogol, as a minority, is looking forward to. Gogol fell in love with McKexin, and also fell in love with her attitude to life including her house, which symbolized his worship of American culture and his desire to become a member of it.

Gogol eventually married a Bengali woman at his parents' request. But he hasn't given up on his quest for

identity. The small apartment they buy on the top floor after their marriage hints their longing for the upper class. From the apartment's bathroom window, one can see the Empire State Building which is not only one of the landmarks of New York, but also an icon of America. The connection between the house and the American mansion expresses Gogol's desire for American cultural identity.

The fixed frame of residential space is a true portrayal of the situation and identity of the three protagonists. These buildings are the main place where the story takes place. Every spatial movement represents an important narrative transition, and the change of space finally shows the change of narrative time. Duan Yifu once pointed out that because architectural space reflects the rhythm of human emotions, it is called "frozen music", that is, spatialized time. In the novel, the time has been embodied in "now" as the center of the space. Building has become a booster of the development of the plot. Therefore, it seems that readers are always following the space image rather than the passing of time.

### III. THE IMAGE OF "TRAIN" AND THE RETROSPECT OF INDIAN IDENTITY

If "house", as a static image, continuously pushes forward the development of time and space, showing the dream and pursuit of the protagonist, then the recurring image of "train", as a dynamic one, implying the individual's desire to constantly looks back on the past to escape from reality and pursue himself. In the novel, the image of "train" is really repeated again and again. For example, Gogol's father suffers from accident on the train; Gogol knows his girlfriend on the train; Gogol breaks with his wife on the train, so on and so forth. As Wright expresses the black's struggle and resist with the image of train in his works, Lahiri indicates the helpless escape of the ethnic minorities who are eager to go back to the past status to eliminate racial discrimination.

The protagonists in the novel do not realize the ultimate dream through the change of residence, which further stimulates the generation of identity needs, because the need for identity is generated by the failure of identity. Bachelard has also said that it is a wonderful practice to turn the dream of living in an ideal house into traveling by train. Therefore, in a sense, it can be said that the image of train carries the protagonist's dream of pursuing identity.

According to Thomas Morgan, trains are symbols of freedom, fear, and racial codes; train also means life with the blues of melancholy; trains are way to escape. So does the train in Ganguly's life. At the age of 22, he went to visit his grandparents by train in India. However, the train crashed and derailed from the standard track. As a result, almost all the passengers died in their sleep. Ganguly nearly lost his life too. However, he used up all his energy to lift a page from Gogol's *Overcoat*, eventually drawing rescuers to help him. Later, at every turn of his life he would like to forget the painful memories, but he could not get them out of his mind. His wife Ashima was awakened by his pent-up screams at many nights. Such a traumatic memory of an "unusual past" or "past that will not disappear" breaks the order between

time and experience, affecting the reality of his life from moment to moment. Ganguly's flashback to his hometown is bound to be divisive and painful in the fragmented memory of the train.

The evocation of memory is not only a matter of remembering itself, but also related to the needs of times, social spirit, subject identity and other factors. In order to recall his Indian identity, although suffering, Ganguly still sticks to his traumatic memory, and deliberately preserves the painful memory by naming his son. At the birth of his son, Ganguly remembers the night he nearly died. If being rescued from a broken train is the first miracle in his life, the birth of a child is the second. Therefore, he gives his son the nickname Gogol to signify the continuation of his life. No matter when and where, memory is the subject's recollection of past experiences based on reality, from the present self to the past self, from the present place to the past place. Although he was in the United States, Ganguly misses his hometown all the time, recalling "self at that time" and "life at that time". His memories of the train wreck in his hometown are instantaneous and long lasting. He clarifies the past into the present and considers the future from the reality with his son's name. This episode of his life gave him a sense of self-importance and identity.

If the image of train runs through the whole life of Ganguly, which implies his escape from reality, his memory of his hometown, and his identification and pursuit of the identity of the subject, then the image of train to Gogol symbolizes his melancholy and escape. When Gogol was a sophomore, he met his first girlfriend Ruth on a particularly crowded train. He regards his girlfriend as one of the achievements of his life, while his parents, without any pride or satisfaction, insist on his marrying a Bengali woman, which let Gogol feel very miserable and depressed. His breakup with his girlfriend is also highlighted by the image of train.

In addition, Gogol changes his attitude to his father with the help of the image of train. Ganguly tells Gogol the story of the train he took to visit his grandfather. He tells of the night that nearly killed him, the book that saved his life, and the year that followed when he was not able to move at all. As a result, the novel naturally pushes forward the story through the image of train. Gogol learns the truth of his name, understands his father's pains, and feels remorse for his insistence on changing his name.

According to Mike Crang, vehicles can be seen as the symbol of an escape from suburban life. After his father's death, Gogol left home to catch a train back to New York, which could be interpreted as a kind of escape. Yet his escape is doomed to end with failure. His father's experience is a constant reminder of his Indian heritage. Every time he feels the slant of the train, he would think of another train, the one he had never seen but nearly killed his father. It is that disaster offers him his name. When Gogol take the train home for the last time, he is still unwilling to face the fact that his father was already dead, still holding the mentality of escape. He sleeps all the way to Boston until he is alone in the train. The conductor wakes him up to get off the train.

Gogol did not go home immediately after getting off the train, but sat down on a bench by the side of the road, which is also a kind of escape in a sense.

#### IV. THIRD SPACE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

According to postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, "third space" is an intermediate mixed state between two different kinds of cultures which collide in the same space. In multi-ethnic areas, immigrants can choose the third open mixed identity, rather than the assimilated identity or only retain the cultural identity of immigrants. Edward Soja W believes that the biggest features of the third space are simultaneity and inclusiveness, where issues of race, class and gender can be discussed simultaneously without favoritism or discrimination. It can be said that the third space is a convergence point, a mixed place, where people can transcend the boundaries of existence. In the novel, all the main characters Ganguly, Gogol and Ashima find their own "third space" to live comfortably at last.

Ganguly's memory of his hometown only makes him stay in the frozen past. Meanwhile, his yearning and expectation for his hometown constantly rewrite the distorted image of it, which make him further and further away from his ideal homeland. The reality makes them realize that the homeland at present is no longer the place it used to be. It is necessary to construct an imaginary homeland in a sense, so as to alleviate the trauma of dispersion and combat with the psychological alienation brought by dispersion.

Instead of questioning his identity and separating Americans and Bangles with each other, he combines the two different cultures by adapting the Indian way of life to the American way. He asked the workers to install the security alarm for his wife, which can make her live alone safely. He tells the story of the origin of the name to his son and allows him to know himself better. After he finishes all the things he wants to do, he no longer sticks to the tradition of India. In contrast, he travels alone with the excuse of teaching. Finally, he dies in a different city lonely and quietly. Although he dies in the United States, his family members still buries him in an Indian way. For ten days after his death, they insist on fasting without touching meat. On the eleventh day, they invite friends and relatives and hold a Hindu ceremony. His ashes are scattered into the Ganges by his relatives eventually. Therefore, in a sense, at the end of his life, Ganguly creates a third space where the two cultures integrate with each other in his own way. It is just in this way, he find his identity at last.

With the death of her husband, Ashima, who had never lived alone, gradually constructed a third space suitable for herself. Just as Lefebvre believed that space is social; it is the reproduction of social relations. Space, as a mode of production or control, represents domination and power. Different ideologies, such as race and gender, jointly participate in the production of space and broaden the scope and complexity of power. As a representative of space, the construction of home is inevitably influenced by various forces. Therefore, for the minorities in the marginalized social status, their home can only be the third space for the

negotiation between the two cultures. As the minorities in the marginalized social status, Ashima finds this kind of space in her own way. She plans to move between the United States and India every six months; because she believes that she will miss the days in the United States when she lives in India; while she returns to the United States, she will miss the time she spend in India. Therefore, through living in the two countries in turn, she achieves some kind of integration in her own way. Although the memory of home begins to fade, the desire to return began to be indifferent, but "home" became the heart of Ashima's lingering pain forever. As a woman, she is not only the guardian of her home, but also the defender of traditional national culture and values. But although she retains her Indian dress and appearance, she is not the woman she once was. She returned to India with an American passport. Meanwhile, she kept her Massachusetts driver's license and social security card. She learned to rely on herself in order to survive in America.

Like his parents, Gogol struggles between two cultures at first, but it turns out that neither assimilating nor only retaining an immigrant's cultural identity makes him able to live in the United States better. He can only live happily when he truly accepts his ethnic identity. When his mother is about to sell the house, he is surprised to find his father's birthday gift, a selection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol. Thinking of what his father told him about the origin of his name, he truly accepts his father in his heart and at the same time accepts the culture of his mother country. Gogol reconstructs his cultural identity by preserving his father's donated books, creating a shared past and confirming cultural continuity. Gogol follows his father's advice just like his father follows his grandfather: to broaden his horizon and enrich his life through reading. At last, he realizes that reading can drive out the identity anxiety that comes from his inner life. It is in this kind of third place that makes his heart is able to find a place. From resisting Indian culture to accepting both Indian and American cultures, he realizes the importance of negotiation between the two cultures in his final self-discovery and growth. The construction of ethnic identity in the third space brings spiritual comfort to Gogol who lives in the gap between two cultures and constantly changes his identity. Meanwhile, it strengthens his courage and confidence to survive in adversity. This identity is a combination of "becoming" and "being", which belongs to the future as well as to the past. It transcends the limit of place, time, history and culture, and is constantly changing.

## V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the image of "house" and "train" in the novel *The Namesake* frequently repeated, which highlight the hero's image and identity. The characters' pursuit of space is a kind of spiritual enlightenment to seek individual identity. They are trying to break the boundary of the gender, race, class, in order to build their own free space. By identifying with Indian culture, they inherited Indian traditions; by adapting to American culture, they accept American reality at the same time. It has been proved that only by identifying with its history and culture, identifying with its ethnic identity, and maintaining an open and

inclusive mind, can Indian-Americans successfully construct their cultural identity. It is the theme that Lahiri always focuses on. As she once said in an interview, the question of identity is a complicated one, especially for people from other cultures like immigrants. For the writer herself, she admits that the more she grows up, the more she feels that she has inherited a sense of alienation from her parents, even though in many ways she looks more American than they do.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Yaming Bao. *Modernity and Space Production*, Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press, 2003: 48.
- [2] Gaston bashara. *Spatial Poetics*, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2012: 107.
- [3] Diyong Long. *Research on Spatial Narration*, Beijing: Sanlian Publishing house, 2014: 6.
- [4] Jhumpa Lahiri. *The Namesake*, Translated by Wu Bingqing, Lu Xiaohui, Shanghai: Literature and Art Publishing House, 2005.
- [5] Ling Yun. *On the Diaspora Narration of Jhumpa Lahiri's works*, Beijing: Beijing Institute of Technology Press, 2016: 73.
- [6] Yifu Duan. *Space and Place*, Beijing: China Renmin university press, 2017.
- [7] Mike Crown. *Cultural geography*, Translated by Yang Shuhua and Song Huimin, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2003.
- [8] K. Anderson, et al., *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, Translated by Li Renlei and Zhang Jingqiu, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2009.
- [9] Jingrong Zhao. *Cultural Memory and Identity*, Beijing: Sanlian Publishing House, 2015: 101.
- [10] Homi Bhabha. *The Location of culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994: 7.
- [11] Edward Soja W, In K Ikas, & G Wagner (Eds.). *Third space: toward a new consciousness of space and spatiality*, *Communicating in the Third Space*, New York: Routledge, 2009: 56.
- [12] Morgan, Thomas L. "Inverting the Haiku Moment Alienation, Objectification, and Mobility." *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on His Haiku*. Ed. Jianqing Zheng. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2011: 92-121.