

Indian Women in Diaspora: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

In Indian English fiction women are usually presented as passive, submissive, and docile. The traditional, patriarchal society is largely responsible for this. But when these women shift to an overseas country, they face some different kinds of problems. While men in foreign countries, apart from all the problems regarding dislocation, can somehow console themselves by the dream to fulfill which they have gone there; the women, specially the homemakers, find nothing to clutch upon. They suffer heavily from rootlessness, nostalgia, and identity crisis. This paper is therefore a study of some of these female characters from *The Namesake*, where we shall try to focus on how they assimilate themselves in a foreign nation and finally find out a new identity.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*, Diaspora, identity crisis, women.

Introduction

Name is a very essential part of our identity. It is the name which identifies and differentiates one from other at the initial level. In the words of Hamid Farahmandian et al, “Names we are given by our parents help shape our identity and sense of belonging.” (953). Thus, name undoubtedly plays a vital role in our life. However, the main theme of *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri is also the name that is given to a person, its meaningfulness, the culture it carries with it, the effect that it leaves upon somebody when its meaning is something undesirable and how all these things together contribute to develop the identity of the character.

Gogol Ganguli, the son of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, the main protagonist of the novel, was named after the famous Russian author Nikolai Gogol, a name which does not apparently have any meaning and the whole story revolves around his life, his growing up in Boston, the mental tensions and traumas and his struggle to find out his identity in a very confusing state of mind. Being raised up in a Bengali atmosphere at home, surrounded by the American atmosphere outside home and having a name which is neither Bengali nor American and which is not even a name but a surname, Gogol finds it really difficult to cope up with his name from the very childhood and this affected his psyche a lot to assert his

identity. The cultural conflicts, language and the problems regarding manners and values, all of which together constitute a state of in-betweenness among every Indian diasporic to America, tormented Gogol too. But when the question comes to the identity of Indian Diasporic women, the situation becomes more acute. Their sense of belongingness, isolation, dislocation, mental conflicts and nostalgia are totally different from that of men. They face completely different sets of problems while asserting their identities and finding a place in a foreign land where everybody and everything is different from what they are habituated to see. Therefore, this paper will examine the female characters in *The Namesake*, with special emphasis on Ashima Ganguli, Moshumi and Sonia and thereby try to analyse these characters' mentality, attitudes and how they respond to their diasporic situations in America.

The word "Diaspora" comes from Greek "Diaspeirein" which means to disperse or to spread. Ancient Greeks used Diaspeirein to refer to the people who immigrated to a new land with the aim of colonization or to spread their empire. But today, as Md. Abdul Jabbar Sk mentions, "The term Diaspora is now a very popular term, thanks to globalization" (432). Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines it as "...diaspora refers to the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country" (421). So today, simply diasporics refer to the people who leave their motherland and settle down in another territory, due to some reason, where they face difficulty in accepting the foreign culture and lifestyle by discarding his own; which eventually leads to homesickness, feeling of rootlessness and identity crisis. They can neither embrace the new culture where they are now, nor can they reject the culture which they nourished so far. Indian diaspora in the U.S.A. it is said, "[it] was mostly for a better life" (Macwan, 46).

In the 1990s the rapid growth of the IT sector and the economic development in the U.S.A. attracted a large number of Indians to immigrate and settle there. This was the same reason for what Mr. Ashoke Ganguli, father of Gogol, decided to move to America, who in the words of Spivak can also be categorized as one of the "professional Indians" who "went to the United States, as part of the brain drain" (61). However, this kind of displacement which is not only of location but also of language, habits and cultural roots create a kind of in-betweenness among the diasporics which gradually triggers the feeling of isolation, nostalgia, and mental trauma. The feeling of homelessness is a major problem that every diasporic subject experiences. They cannot adapt themselves to the new land while they long for the land which has also undergone changes till they left it.

Salman Rushdie for this reason says that in Diaspora there is always a longing for "the lost origin" and "imaginary homelands" (10). And all these exotic things together arise among the readers the kind of interest which makes diaspora one of the favourite topics in the field of literature in recent years. The authors of diasporic writings try "to represent these feelings in diverse ways in diverse writings all over the world" (Macwan 45).

"The element of homesickness, longing and a quest for identity or roots mark the Diaspora fiction" (Macwan 46). Jhumpa Lahiri, being the child of Bengali parents, born in

England and raised in America, is well-aware of these feelings and that is why she depicts the characters of the protagonists so beautifully and realistically in her works. Hamid Farahmandian et al. say, “She attempts to cope with psyche of her characters, to examine, psychologically the difficulties and obstacles of people” (953). But when the point comes to the difficulties faced by the diasporic women especially the homemakers, in comparison to the men, the analysis takes a different turn.

Indian society is typically patriarchal; and though Lahiri grew up amid a modern western society, the Indian social customs were well imbibed in her mind, which may have affected her in a way that in many of her works the main protagonists are male and even if there is a female protagonist, Lahiri had created a male character equally strong and important to stand by her side. “The Interpreter of Maladies”, one of her famous short stories, for example, when starts, it looks like the story is about the exotic vacation of Das family at Puri and Mrs. Das is surely the main character. But as the story proceeds and we reach the end we find Mr. Kapashi to emerge as equally important to Mrs. Das and he eventually occupies the position of the main protagonist, and nothing can justify it properly than the title itself.

Our present point of discussion, *The Namesake* is also not an exception where the whole story revolves around Gogol, the hero. And though some scholars consider Ashima, Gogol’s mother, to be the main character, Lahiri’s own confession is enough to nullify the argument when she says, “I wanted to write about a pet name/good name distinction for a long time.” Women always remain as a passive, submissive and confused character in Lahiri’s discourses. Just like “Sexy” where Miranda, the confused lady, although the main protagonist cannot be discussed independently without referring to Dev; in this novel, Ashima’s character can also not be evaluated without talking about her submissive attitude and confused behavior that we find in the novel.

Several studies have been done on *The Namesake*, the first novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, most of which focuses on Gogol, and his life struggle in Diasporic situations, while very few works have tried to focus on the lives of the women and their activities in this novel.

This paper therefore will try to explore the traumas and difficulties in the lives of the female characters like Ashima and will also try to analyse Lahiri’s discourse about how she handles and differentiates between the experiences of first generation diasporic woman, that is Ashima and the second generation diasporic women like Moushumi and Sonia.

The Namesake: A Tale of Indian Women in Diaspora

The most prominent female character in *The Namesake* is undoubtedly Ashima Ganguli mother of the main protagonist Gogol Ganguli. Hamid Farahmandian et al. say, “Name defines who you are and who you will be, most of the names not only a name, it was a good wish from parents.” (955). That is why, perhaps, Ashima was destined to be displaced and uprooted, whose name, justifiably means no boundary or the existence across borders.

However, this shift did not bring any “good” to her life. She suffered heavily due to identity crisis.

Diasporic identity, as suggested by Homi K. Bhabha, is a kind of impure identity rather than fixed identity. Dual or hybrid nature of identity constructs an identity crisis in one’s creating home of familiarity in the overseas countries. The novel opens with Ashima, during her pregnancy preparing her favourite Indian snacks of puffed rice and enjoys it. She loves to wear traditional sari even at home and upon being asked to remove her silk sari and put on a knee high gown at the hospital she feels embarrassed. Like a traditional Bengali wife, she does not call her husband by his name- “She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety’s sake, to utter his first. It’s not the type of thing Bengali wives do” (Lahiri 1). She faithfully maintains her Bengali appearance by wearing “the cavalcade of matrimonial bracelets on both her arms: iron, gold, coral, conch.” (Lahiri 2). While in labour she calculates the Indian time in her watch rather than American and she cherishes reading Bengali “Desh” magazine with texts written in Bengali script. These are the ways in which she recreates her past. Ashima is reluctant to forsake her values that she learnt in her land of origin. “The printed pages of Bengali type, slightly rough to the touch, are a perpetual comfort to her.” (Lahiri 3).

The norms of the Indian patriarchal society which always provide a lower position to female gender and make them submissive is well applied in her life also and this is manifested by her recollection that before her marriage with Mr. Ashoke the two previous expected grooms, one of whom was a widower with four children and the other one with physical disabilities, rejected her rather than the opposite. And even after her betrothal with Ashoke nobody asked her whether she wanted to leave India or not. Going to America, for her, was like performing a duty towards her husband and family. And all these things were embedded in her mind in such a way that never a doubt appeared in her mind. She was torn apart between her duty and her unconscious will to retain her Indianness.

As Wieviorker states, when a diasporic subject is “constantly rejected or interiorized while only wanting to be included, socially or culturally, ...and are demonized under the argument of a supposed cultural difference” then her feeling of embarrassment “leads to a self-definition and behaviours based on this culture...” (72). But in case of Ashima she neither wanted to be included in American culture nor her American surrounding provided her the space. Therefore, she grips on her own Indian culture and ideology. Along with her husband she tries to recreate a mini Bengal in the foreign land of America. At home they eat Bengali food and speak in Bengali. They used to meet Bengali people there and often threw parties to enjoy some time together in a Bengali ambience. They used to perform pujas at home and called Brahmins for the rituals. To the children Ashima told the Indian mythological stories and about festivals like Durga Puja. In spite of all these, she suffered a lot physically and mentally. The feeling of being rootless devastated her. The house where she lived had three apartments and the climate always remained extreme both in summer and in winter- “The apartment is drafty during winter, and in summer, intolerably hot” (Lahiri

14). She often yearns for her days in Calcutta with her parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, and kin when she compares her life in America which is completely unknown with no friend or acquaintance to sit and talk along. She finds it extremely difficult to assimilate herself to American culture. She dislikes chicken here because Americans eat chicken with its skin. She is always reminded of her Hindu culture and her elders' prohibition of eating beef. She does not dare to speak to the lady next to her during her first pregnancy; and for her living alone with her children at home in a foreign land with nobody to stand by her was a horrible thought- "On more than one occasion [Ashoke] has come home from the university to find her morose, in bed, reading her parents' letters" (Lahiri 16). To her, living in a foreign land is like a "life-long pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sort" (Lahiri 23). But as she did not want to "offend Ashoke, or worry her parents", she "kept her disappointment to herself" (Lahiri 18). She gets mentally disturbed regarding Gogol's divorce with Moushumi and the biggest shock comes to her when husband Ashoke suddenly dies. "Ashima feels lonely, suddenly, horribly, permanently alone..." (Lahiri 133). However, after stay in America for almost thirty-five years even her memories of Calcutta had faded a lot. She does not find Calcutta to be familiar anymore, while in America she has made herself habituated quite a lot and has even made some friends along with getting a job at the library. So her decision to stay six months in America and six months in Calcutta, towards the end of the novel, gives us a positive connotation that she may have succeeded in finding a dual kind of identity to assert as an Indian diasporic in America.

Apart from Ashima, the two other diasporic female characters in *The Namesake* are Moushumi, the divorced wife of Gogol and Sonia, Ashima's daughter. While Ashima is a first generation diasporic, Moushumi and Sonia are the second generation. Naturally the approaches towards their culture of origin are also completely different from each other. While the first generation diasporic has first handedly experienced the two cultures, the second generation diasporics have learnt about their origin through stories only and thus they consider America to be their home by heart.

According to Hiral Macwan, "Diaspora writers concentrate on generational differences in exploring how new and old Diasporas relate to their land of origin and the host culture. Often their major concerns in works are split and flowing nature of individual identities." (46). And this is well represented in Jhumpa Lahiri's narration also where she says, "I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for her lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for her children." Moushumi does not like Bengali gatherings at all. Her stay in Britain, America and France did not allow her to pin down her identity at a fixed culture. Her sense of identity is rather fluid. She is so much used to the Western culture that she hardly finds any sense of attachment to her Bengali origin. Unlike Ashima, she was reluctant to take her husband's surname and she had also an attitude of being an independent woman which is very rare in first generation diasporic women like Ashima. Therefore, Barnali Dutta says, "Moushumi... can be viewed from the point of transnationalism". (5). Sonia, on the other hand, though got Bengali orientation at home, she also fails to connect her identity to India

only on the basis of stories of Durga Puja and practices at home. She, like her brother, prefers American food rather than the traditional Bengali foods and therefore when she, along with her parents visits Calcutta, she feels alienated and odd. She also thinks America to be her native home rather than India and thus feels comfortable while amid American culture and lifestyle.

Conclusion

According to H.M. Tomlinson, “The right good book is always a book of travel; it is about a life’s journey.” In this paper, we have tried to go through and analyse the lives of the three women characters in *The Namesake* with different sets of mind and approaches to different cultures. While Moushumi’s sense of belongingness is fluid and Sonia also prefers her American identity, Ashima, towards the end of the novel, somehow succeeds in developing a dual identity with mixed characteristics from both the lands. She gradually learns to adjust in the foreign land with the foreign cultures and this gets reflected when she however accepts her daughter’s relationship with her non-Indian fiancé. The characters are portrayed beautifully and realistically and Jhumpa Lahiri is quite successful as an objective narrator to present the situations of Indian women in Diaspora and eventually how they come over all their traumas and problems of displacement and ultimately assert their identity positively and confidently.

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