

JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*: AFFIRMATIVE REPRESENTATION OF INDIAN IMMIGRANT WOMAN

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Abstract

In today's 'glocal' world, with the advent of Feminism, contemporary Indian women are violating the patriarchal Indian society for their self-realization and self-reliance. They are crossing the boundaries and stepping into the conventionally male dominated areas such as arts, literature, philosophy, culture etc. The modern woman is going beyond the seven seas willingly to achieve her identity irrespective of the consequences. The women writers especially the novelists are authentically portraying these immigrants' experiences of loss, gain, culture, identity-conflict, reformation and negotiation, love, rape, death, rebirth etc. in the new, foreign land. It seems, being capable of and aware about their creative writing, the willing diaspora writers show the opportunities for the 'greener pasture' in the 'new land'. They avoid depicting the mere failure in adopting the foreign country as their land of settlement. The research paper reveals the protagonist's experiences of pain and wounds while shedding off one identity for another, to fit in the 'adopted/ diasporic world/situation'.

Present day multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial societies are a result of willing or forceful migration of people in hope of the better life and opportunities shown by the 'promised land'. In the last few decades, the immigration of Indians to the Western or the 'developed' countries is an intentional, willing choice of individuals, particularly men. Willing immigrants have several dreams of success in their minds, but, in reality when they land on foreign terrain, they face many problems - as foreign culture, people, and language. They strive hard to get 'assimilated' in the culture of the country they have migrated to and

try to achieve their dreams of a 'good life'. But this process of assimilation is not an easy one. In the process of getting adjusted the immigrants go through the feelings of alienation, loneliness, humiliation, longing for the motherland. The yearning for the 'lost home', in fact, brings an extra attachment to the land they have left behind. Their experiences of immigration and efforts to assimilate themselves in their adopted land are penned down by the writers under the term 'Diaspora writing'.

Lahiri's writing represents an affirmative image of women as they are emerging and realizing themselves as an individual 'new woman'. They gradually initiated to be free from all the shackles of old conventions. They are willing to go global. However, in *The Namesake*, Lahiri's protagonist Ashima Ganguli wife of Ashoke Ganguli is, initially, not a willing immigrant to the US. Like other immigrants, she also goes through the phase of longing for the 'old world', but, certainly, she emerges as an individual. Unlike the typical image of immigrant women, Ashima adopts a more dynamic approach to deal with the feeling of loneliness. She adjusts her yearning for the 'lost home' and its memories in America to get assimilate in the new adopted world. Ashima grows out of a feeling of alienation as she creates an alternative idea of 'home' for herself by forming a group of Bengali community as well as making friends at her workplace, Library. Her culinary art enables her to create a sense of her own individual self among the group. Through the intentional efforts changes her identity from an individual to "transnational" one.

Immigration, mostly, for Indian women, comes through marriage and they go through the aforesaid experiences rigorously. The pain of separation from the 'old world' becomes unbearable, and memories of this 'old world' linger. But many of them emerge as new, independent, individual women, subverting the typical image of diasporic women. However, traditional diaspora discourse is hardly approached through women's perspective, even if it so, it barely depicts constructive or genuine response of women immigrants to foreign land. The leading diasporic Indian women writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Desai offer a comparatively positive approach. They try to present the global identity of Indian diaspora, particularly those of women in much more positive light, subverting the archetypal image of diasporic Indian women.

Jhumpa Lahiri's is a commendable effort in giving voice to the experiences of immigrant women. She has made a profound and lasting impression on the literary canvass by exploring the multiple facets and phases of diaspora such as socio-cultural crisis, feeling of alienation, inferiority complex, nostalgia, humiliation and failure or success in assimilating in the foreign country.

This paper portrays Lahiri's female protagonist Ashima Ganguli's tribulations of migration, the unbearable pain of being alone and her intentional efforts to create a 'self

hood', an individual identity, for herself in the foreign country. True to her name Ashima (borderless), she creates a transnational identity for herself. As opposed to the traditional Diaspora literature, *The Namesake* creates a space for female diaspora to form an independent, creative and cross cultural identity in the foreign land.

“*The Namesake* is a documentary of immigrants' lives who feel displaced, alienated, and homesick, floating in an anonymous island, far away from the homeland”(Rana Sujata). Before interpreting the maladies and analyzing the tribulations of diaspora, an attempt is being made here to define the term. The term 'diaspora' signifies “the political as individual consequences of cultural alienation, a strong sense of exile and a terrible reality of homelessness resulting in the loss of geo (physical) boundaries...In [the] diasporas' desperate attempt to grapple with the truth and extent of the loss, there is always a constant effort to build the lost boundaries in the host space” (Komalesha, 151).

The novel portrays experiences of diasporic characters differing from each other. The immigrant experience differs person to person. Ashima is not a diasporic by choice. Her marriage to a young and promising Bengali scholar, Ashoke Ganguli, uproots her from her native place, Calcutta, and takes her to America. Thus, like most Indian women, it is marriage that brings Ashima the immigrant experience. Ashoke, dreams of being a professor in America. Hence, the experience of migration varies for both. Ashoke is a willing immigrant while Ashima becomes an immigrant on account of her marriage with Ashoke. Ashoke wishes to achieve the ‘American Dream’. Being a dutiful daughter of middle class Bengali parents, Ashima accepts the proposal of Ashoke and marries him obediently but without expectations. She is so steeped in tradition that she doesn't even bother to find out the name of her betrothed. Ashima comes to know her husband's name only after the betrothal. The marriage is solemnized with all the traditional rituals as both belong to typical Bengali families. Ashima leaves Calcutta for America carrying with her the Bengali cultural heritage and values.

In Calcutta, she was all the time surrounded by a crowd of relatives and friends. While in America, being a sensitive immigrant finds herself caught between the memories of ‘old home’ and reality of the ‘new strange world’. She feels lonely as Ashoke is occupied with his research. She finds it difficult to cope up with the feelings of alienation and loneliness that she encounters in the ‘foreign’ land. In her moments of loneliness “...she clings to her old world sentimentality and is always reminded of her deceased parents' words...” to adhere to their culture. Initially, she is unable to negotiate the new culture that surrounds her. She is not willing to accept the American culture and continuously yearns for the ‘lost home’. Ashima visits and revisits Calcutta through nostalgia. The desire for the past continues to haunt her psyche. She spends most of her time crying “... in the silent house, suffering from sleep deprivation far worse than the first of her jet lag, sits by three sided

window in the living room on one of the triangular chairs and cries the whole day” (The Namesake 34)

The yearning and adherence to the ‘lost world’ and its culture, and ‘new world’s’ demand of adopting Western culture creates cross-cultural dilemma for immigrants. The novelist represents their cross-cultural experiences through the magnificent use of various literary devices, one of them is, memory. It’s been used as a tool for immigrants to reconstitute the past to live in present. Ashima's present becomes a victim of 'what is not there'. She always 'looks back' at her old world. During her labour pain, she recalls the days in Calcutta and imagines that had she been in Calcutta she would have been surrounded by women relatives, and they would have performed different rituals associated with the birth of a child. This looking back always pushes such immigrants in dilemma. In such kind of conflicting worlds, the old and the new, the new world does not seem to be a ‘dreamland’ but rather it becomes a compromise, adjustment, and at times, an annihilation of the self to 'fit in' the 'adopted world', resulting in a new integrated /disintegrated identity. As an outcome of this, it may bring the feeling of humiliation, alienation, rejection. The feeling of alienation in Ashima becomes more severe as Ashoke is busy with his teaching and research. Lack of familiarity with the surroundings, no relatives and strangeness to the language – all combine to reinforce the feeling of alienation in Ashima. Above all, Language is the main barrier to communicate with natives. In the hospital, when Patty asks her, "Hoping for a boy or girl?" Ashima replies, "As long as there are ten fingers and ten toe." Patty smiles, a little too widely, and suddenly Ashima realizes her error, knows she should have said "fingers" and "toes". This error pains her almost as much as her last contraction. She begins to feel linguistically, emotionally, socially, culturally estranged. “But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all” (The Namesake 5-6). Ashima’s case is a representative of the fact that women immigrants tend to be more nostalgic as compared to men. Generally, men are busy with their work and they get adjusted in the ‘new’ culture with little difficulty. However, women struggle to overcome these feelings.

At the beginning of the novel, the novelist portrays the pain that Ashima feels as a foreigner, “For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy-a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding” (The Namesake 49). The experience of pregnancy, the thought of childbirth and the prospect of child-rearing in America makes her feel entirely alien and lonely:

... But now, with a baby crying in her arms...it is all suddenly unbearable.

'I can't do this,' she tells Ashoke....
'In a few days you'll get the hang of it,' he says, hoping to encourage her...
'I won't,' she insists thickly.... 'Not here. Not like this.'
'What are you saying, Ashima?'...
'I'm saying hurry up and finish your degree..... I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country...I want to go back. (The Namesake 32-35)

But realizes soon that they can't go back and hence she tries to overcome feeling of alienation by maintaining a close contact with her family in Calcutta through letters and phone-calls. She also forms a group of Bengali immigrants. "As the baby grows so, too, does their circle of Bengali acquaintances" (The Namesake 38), especially women because "The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice..." (*The Namesake* 38). Ashima tries to create a substitute of 'lost home' by maintaining relations with Bengali immigrants. It helps her to form a space and an identity of her own in the adopted land, adhering to the Bengali culture. Ashima deliberately creates and maintains familial relationships with the natives i.e. other professor friends of Ashoke. She keeps herself busy with household things such as taking care of her husband, children, throwing parties for the friends, going to the classical theatre performances etc. "...She works at the library to pass the time...She is friendly with the other women who work at the library...There are the first American friends she has made in her life." (*The Namesake* 162). Ashima begins to realize her own individual self and begins accepting the American culture and society with its emphasis on individual freedom. As the years pass, her children grow up, she 'learns' to accept their tastes in food, clothes, friends, and affairs: "Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep a distance from her, is something she will never understand. Still she has not argued with them. This, too, she is beginning to learn" (*The Namesake* 166).

In course of time she becomes a central personality of the community: "People talk of how much they've to love Ashima's.... parties...that it won't be the same without her. They have come to rely on her...to collect them together, to organize the holiday, to convert it, to introduce the tradition to those who are new" (*The Namesake* 286). But through it all, she strictly adheres to her Bengali traditions and sentiments. Ashima creates a small 'world' for her to deal with the diasporic feelings wherein, now, she seems to be happy. It is when Ashoke takes a job in Cleveland and suddenly dies there, Ashima takes the decision to stay in this adopted land, where she has made a home for her husband: "For the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not immediately at least. She refuses to be far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died." (*The*

Namesake 183). Though, now she had the option of returning permanently to her oft-remembered home, she decides to shuttle between America and India. "Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States...In Calcutta, Ashima will live with her brother, Rana, and his wife....In spring and summer she will return to the Northeast, dividing her time among her son, her daughter, and her close Bengali friends. True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (*The Namesake* 275-276). Ashima is unable to leave the country where she has spent *thirty-three* long years with her husband and created a home: "...she knows that this is a home nevertheless-the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her" (*The Namesake* 280). Her 'home' becomes her 'world'. However, after the demise of Ashoke:

Ashima feels lonely, suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. She feels impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live, for something tells her she will not go quickly as her husband did.... Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (*The Namesake* 278-279).

Though Ashima wants to stay in America, she finds it agonizing to reside in the same house without her husband. Therefore, Ashima takes the decision to sell the house. She now develops a kind of nostalgia and longing for the 'old world' (America). As a result, she decides to live in the 'old world' and 'present world', freely acquiring the transnational identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri, through the character of Ashima, depicts a more creative and positive response of female immigrants to their 'adopted land' in contrast to the conventional image of

diasporic women. Ashima shows her willingness to accept a global, cross-cultural identity, gradually shedding off the immigrant identity. In the novel, Ashima's efforts to cope up with the feeling of loss and alienation lead her to realize her own individual identity. Ashima is initially portrayed as a typical Indian woman who is not willing to think out of the traditional framework. However, in the course of her stay, she evolves as an individual, steps out and crosses the threshold. This 'stepping out' enables Ashima to 'adjust' herself in the new milieu.

Ashima, ultimately, owns a transnational identity through her efforts and circumstances. Initially, Ashima suffers the trauma of being alone in the foreign land but because of her own efforts 'accepts' and gets 'accepted' in America. In a way America offers a 'dreamland' for those who wish to realize their individual identity.

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