

Tracing the Gendered Diaspora through a Post-colonial Lens: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's '*The Namesake*'

Akanksha Nautiyal

Abstract

Women are subject to the diasporic situation for ages. The very idea of moving to a new home after marriage, away from one's parents brings in the experience of displacement and nostalgia for a woman. This paper focuses on analysing the life-like fictional portrayal of an Indian migrant 'Ashima' and her struggle to fit into the shoes of a new world around her. After her marriage to 'Ashoke', she not only had to leave her home but also her motherland and shift to America with her husband. The novel forefronts a gendered encounter of diasporic theories, therefore the paper evaluates how the first and the second-generation characters come to terms in reconciling their un-identified selves. Since the postcolonial theory, helps in a better understanding of the diaspora literature, it has been employed to unravel the problems faced by characters within the novel. These problems arise from the third-world ideology or Indo-American Identity which revolves around racial, cultural, and ethnic differences faced by the two generations in '*The Namesake*'.

Keywords: Acculturation; Displacement; Gendered diaspora; Indo-American Identity; Marital adjustments; Migration.

How features are abroad I am skill-less of, but, by my modesty,
(The jewel in my dower), I would not wish any companion in the
world but you, Nor can imagination form a shape besides your-
self to like of.

(Miranda, Act III, Scene I, *The Tempest*)

The relocation of people across borders and cross-cultural boundaries is either chosen by themselves or forced upon them which gives birth to the diaspora. This displacement or re-settlement across continents can be due to historical, political, or economic reasons. Normally, people migrate for a better prospect of life or for studying abroad. Diaspora studies can be better understood in the light of postcolonial theory since it helps to unravel and acknowledge the difficulties faced by third-world migrants.

Postcolonial features in *The Namesake* attribute to issues of diaspora, alterity, alienation, multiculturalism, fragmented identity, feminism, cultural conflicts, and homesickness experienced by two generations. The characters are conceded as an unsettled race who struggles hard to assimilate and evolve in the hybrid culture. Unlike Miranda, who openly expresses her love and commitment to Ferdinand and accepts that she knows nothing of the world beyond the Island, Ashima is discrete. Her life is to be defined either by her family or by the family to whom they marry her. She has been brought up with the very idea of unquestioningly accepting whatever comes to her. Traditional gender roles are often treated in an inferior manner both by the homeland nation as well as by the alien-borders.

In the novel, it was Ashoke's choice to move abroad. He uses his mental turmoil to seek help from his educational and later professional excuse, to re-settle in America. Being bedridden in India, after the horrifying train accident "he imagined not only walking but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died" (20). This very imagination of Ashoke's changed Ashima's life, who was still years away from "packing her pillow and a blanket" as Ghosh suggested Ashoke (16) before the accident. Ashima's relocation was rather a forced one, for she has no other option but to move with her husband only to serve him by accompanying him and giving him a family.

Ashima being brought up in a very dependent environment accepts the fact of being a subordinate and an obedient follower. Be it getting ready for the two suitors, "one being a widow with four children and the other, a single-handed cartoonist", who both dare to reject her only to her relief (7). Her submissive nature is further extended when she dutifully changes to a new sari as asked by her mother to meet Ashoke (who was also slightly limp from his right leg due to the train accident) and his parents, and further recites Daffodils by Wordsworth for them, to give a proof of her academics in English Literature. No matter her qualification, her life was to be decided by the strand of marriage.

Before coming to America, she was admonished by her parents and relatives about the American culture, but for her grandmother who “had not been fearful of such signs of betrayal [eating beef, wearing skirts or cutting off her hair, she was the only person to predict rightly, that Ashima would never change” (37). It was completely on Ashima’s shoulders to maintain her Indian Identity and grow her family by maintaining her Indian-Hindu-Bengali culture, thousands of kilometers away from her home and her country. Ashima was expected to be an emblem of a ‘Bhartiya Nari’ or ‘The Indian Woman’ which would be her national identity, a role in which she grew up watching her mother, grandmother, and other female relatives in India. And a role she stepped into after marrying Ashoke, where she was expected to follow her culture, her tradition, and her roots no matter which part of the world she makes her home in.

Coming across two cultures, Ashima feels alienated. Her strong Indian roots bar her to acculturate immediately with the American lifestyle and way of living. According to her family, both her parent’s family and her in-laws, she was to respect her Indian culture and of course assimilate into the American culture without compromising with her tradition. These were not only her family’s outlooks from her but her own expectations from herself.

Being a homemaker, she pines from the very idea of homelessness. For her home is a joint big family with parents, grandparents, and relatives as she has seen since childhood, and every member unlike the Americans has a say on the rest of the family members. The sense of alterity is so strong that her biggest fear is to be misinterpreted, as while talking to the nurse in the maternity ward she realises that she has made a grammatical mistake by saying, “ten finger and ten toe” (7). Her error made her heart pain as bad as her contractions, and she could only wish to go back in time and correct her error and even tell proudly that her country can speak and write far better English than the Americans.

Being a postcolonial migrant from India, she suffered from a lack of communication with her family. The first few chapters in which she longs for her native place is set in the 1960s to 1980s, which unfortunately was the time when in India ISD calls were very expensive and also telephones were still decades away to reach every household. Her only hope to communicate with her parents was through letters, which also proved to be futile since the letter containing their child’s name sent for her by her grandmother never reached them. This made her more and more homesick and “though no longer pregnant, she continues, at times”, to have the

Indian snacks that she craved during her pregnancy. Lahiri describes this craving, which is one of the most cited and quoted phrases of the novel as:

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... Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (Lahiri 49-50)

Ashima's homesickness and reminiscence lead to her postpartum depression. Though Ashoke feels guilt-ridden for being responsible for her immigration to America, he reminisces Ghosh's revelation that coming home from England for his wife was his greatest repentance. His wife like Ashima was 'inconsolably miserable abroad'. Ashoke does not want to experience the same regret. Moreover, he meticulously enjoys his academic recognition and newly acquired social status. Since he easily accomplished his aim of becoming a professor in the American University he is swiftly acculturated in the American culture, assimilating everything foreign. Addressing a room full of American students, having a personal secretary, and being called 'Professor Ganguli' in itself was huge growth for him. He wanted to pass on this growth and academic exposure to his children as well. He was probably ready to spend the rest of his life in America. While Ashima suffers from lonesomeness and sorrow in the alien country abroad, Ashok greatly enjoys going to the library and is proud of his academic status.

There were many events in which she feared she would be considered inferior or uncivilised. This fear of being 'the other' or coming from an underdeveloped country that was once colonised, rather made her have a bitter heart, in the initial years for the American culture. From removing her silk sari for the first time in the maternity ward, to willing to talk to the fellow patients, but procrastinating it from the very idea of Americans preferring their privacy, from pretending to take sips from the champagne mugs raised by Judy and Alan to not being comfortable with the very idea of using second-hand items as the Americans do, shows Ashima's conflict with the Indo-American identity she was to acquire.

But no matter her rejection Ashima changed, rather changed positively, not refusing or betraying her culture and her background, but assimilating the American culture. She accepts it at the end of the novel by saying, 'I didn't know a thing back then' (285). The gendered diaspora she experiences while living in America, equally subordinate in the post-colo-

nial context, actually empowers her later to be a completely independent woman, which she never would have been in India. Living in America she struggled for decades to maintain her traditional Bengali culture along with the pressure of being a sensible American woman living in the US. Living abroad does not stop her from being a typical married Indian woman. She longs for her maternal family similar to any Indian girl in India. She has a watercolour painting made by her father, which hangs through her living room. A camel convoy in Rajasthan's desert is depicted in this painting. She framed it herself at a nearby print shop, and the fact that it was painted by her father makes her care more and more for the painting.

On numerous occasions from the book Ashima relies on her Indian Kitchen to feel more and more close to her Indian identity. Be it craving for the *bhel-puri* she used to have in India, and making a substitute of it by 'mixing Rice Krispies, peanuts and onion' or preparing 'ten separate bowls of food during Gogol's 'Annaprashan Sanskar' to what Lahiri calls as his 'Rice ceremony' Ashima tries to connect to her homeland through food. She would always prepare 'payesh' the rice pudding on her children's birthday alongside the cake, in order to show respect to her Indian culture because cutting the cake was not an Indian tradition. She would even make at least thirty samosas once a week and sell them at the International coffeehouse, where she would make twenty cents for each samosa. All these arrangements by Ashima shows the connection of Food with diaspora and nostalgia.

Kitchen is something very sacred in Indian households. And when the eleven-year-old Gogol, from the field trip to a cemetery brings home the rubbed names of dead people, beautifully rubbed with the help of his crayons and offers it to his mother, who usually displays his other creation in the Kitchen wall, Ashima rejects it. She reasons it by saying "How can she be expected to cook dinner for her family with the names of dead people on the wall?" (71) These minutes details of Ashima's actions and emotions are the major features of Gendered diaspora. This in no sense values the diaspora of Ashoke any less, but it shows how initially the immigration of Ashima was far too painful than that of Ashok. Despite alienation and hardship, she emerges out to be a survivor or a fighter amidst a hybrid culture. She celebrates Christmas for her children liked celebrating it and for the American community she befriended, with the same enthusiasm as she would celebrate Diwali and Durga Puja with them.

She succeeds to make an understanding relationship with her children, which was tough as it was equally hard for both generations to under-

stand each other. She happens to be a patient learner, be it driving a car, acculturation, allowing her children to have lovers, accepting an American son-in-law Ben, making Christmas cards for friends and relatives, or finally living her life on her own and being completely self-dependent. Years after relying first on her family, then-husband, and later her children who used to decide for her, she finally accepts her freedom. This acceptance was rather brave because throughout her life she lived for others. Her transformation to a self-dependent woman was commendable as Lahiri writes:

She has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta. She will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver's license, her social security card. (Lahiri 276)

Her decision to live both in America and India for six months each was her way of adapting and assimilating within both cultures. It was appreciative enough that she transcends boundaries and finally understands her true self, the meaning of Ashima, "she who is limitless, without borders" (26). But technically the diaspora continues as Lahiri put down:

For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library [in the U.S], the women with whom she's worked. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed...She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (Lahiri 279)

Thus, the overlapping experience of both the cross-cultural boundary and diaspora was adjusted by Ashima, which would not have been possible for her husband Ashoke himself. The idea of a 'changed woman as Ashima becomes without jeopardising her ethics, her values and culture preserve the equilibrium of her personality. She discovers the strength herself by enabling herself to encounter an independent and powerful self. Her self-dependence enlightens the readers in which the gender and the diaspora intersect and survives within the migrant. The constant reminder of in-betweenness of identity, nation, culture, past/present, parenting, and longing for both India and later America entangles Ashima's gendered diasporic consciousness within the novel.

Works Cited:

Hall, Stuart. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. 1990.

Karmakar, Indrani. "Being a Foreigner...Is a Sort of Lifelong Pregnancy: Interrogating the Maternal and the Diasporic in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Scrutiny*, vol.24, no. 1, 2019, pp. 44-57.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake: A Novel*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003.

Said, Edward. "Introduction". *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994. pp. III-XI.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Edited by Howard H. Furness, 6th ed., vol. 9, Classic Books Company, 2001.