

Diasporic Women in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explain the cross cultural conflicts, trauma, isolation, aspirations and dilemmas of the Indian Women immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, especially Aashima Ganguly, who find herself in between the native culture and host culture and her trishanku experience of being neither in Calcutta nor in America which is at the very centre of diasporic trauma. Ashima is a true representative of the majority of women expatriates who are reluctant to change or adapt to the culture of the host country. But still she sacrifices all her comforts for the sake of her family and like the typical traditional Indian women; her life revolves around her husband and children.

Key Words: diaspora, assimilation, acculturation

People are always in the search for 'utopia' which as we all know is nonexistent, the story of the better tomorrow and a happily ever after can act as the source of their strength. People migrate for better standards of living but it becomes hard task for them as the migrants leave behind everything and habituate to new and strange things. The world of Diasporas is a world of in betweenness where most of them have a thrishanku like existence. They experience a nostalgia, loss and pain of duty, a cultural and emotional vacuum in their effort to settle and adjust to the new life which are the indeed the foundations of diasporic identity.

The life of Indian diasporic communities especially that of women and the social, cultural and religious, racial and ideological conflicts faced by them in the host country becomes highly relevant here. The concept of space is very relevant in the study of diasporic communities. Cultural otherness, generational and cultural alienation from their ethnic community leaves the Indian diasporic women trapped in a space between the culture of homeland and that of the host country. They lack security and emotional support from their family and this isolation leads diasporic women who are emotionally and economically dependent on their husbands to the problems like depression, loss and nostalgia.

Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration is acknowledged as one of the eminent women writers in Indian English literature. Being an immigrant she Lahiri is interested in the large section of new generation Indian Americans their traditions values and relationships and the significance of family and how it ties man to his homeland. Lahiri a dispassionate chronicler of the lives in a global society remains as a detached observer of the daily events in the lives of her characters. Her immigrant characters

have a double vision and assert their identity in a bicultural universe. Her works portray the many issues that Indians settled abroad face in America.

Her novel *The Namesake* focuses on the contrasting experiences of the two generations of expatriate Ashoke and Ashima who are not inclined towards getting Americanized, while Gogol and Sonia, their children face the need to belong. The novel, the saga of Ganguli family in Calcutta and Boston portrays the struggle involved in the family, the psychological disturbance and uprooting they live with, revealing the experiences and perceptions, their hopes and aspirations traumatizing their psyche, their growing up, the circle of life and one's identity. It's a tribute to Indian women who leave their country and spent their best years of their lives in home for their children and husband. This paper deals with the diasporic women in the novel especially Aashima.

Lahiri's *The Namesake*, a cross cultural multi generational story examines the cultural conflicts, pangs, aspirations and dilemmas of the Indian immigrants who find themselves in between the native and host cultures. Namesake is the story of Ashima Bhaduri, a student in degree class who becomes Ashima Ganguli after her betrothal to Ashoke Ganguli of Alipre. After marriage they shift to Boston. The book opens with Ashima Ganguly who is upset, homesick, spatially and emotionally alienated from her ancestral home, trying to recreate the taste of her favorite Indian snack, thereby trying to reconstruct her past. She thinks of her past with nostalgia of her home and spends her leisure in reading Bengali poems, stories and articles.

Ashima's immigrant experience, identity problems, the tension between India and United States and between family tradition and individual freedom, the generation gap, the relationship between parents and children the uneasy status of the immigrants are the major themes dealt with in *The Namesake*. Ashima represents the majority of women expatriates who are reluctant to change or adapt to the culture of the host country and the social, cultural, religious and ideological conflicts faced by them in the host country.

The first generation especially Aashima finds it very difficult to accustom to the host culture. Pregnancy was a hard time for her as there was no one to soothe her in the alien land. Motherhood is a glorious stage for a woman but for a migrant in a foreign alien land, loneliness and strange surroundings nearly kill such feelings. She was the only Indian in the hospital with three other American women in the adjoining room. Ashima "is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one ,where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare"(p. 6). She is always nostalgic about her relatives in India. After Gogol's birth she says to Ashoke, "I am saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (p. 33). Ashoke feels guilty for bringing her to this alien land. But she is determined to bear the pain and to give birth to the infant in an alien land for the sake of the child. She wants her grandmother who is staying in India to assign a name to her new born which shows her desire to hold fast to the conventions of her culture and the resulting disappointment because of the failure to do so. She suffers from sleep deprivation in a house alone with her baby and she visits the supermarket where everyone is a stranger to her. Often recalls her paralyzed grandmother and is never able to give up her Indianness. She gives her children full freedom to move out and explore the world, teaches the culture of her own country but never force them to do or practice it.

There is a perfect harmonization between Ashima and her husband. Ashima is “shattered into pieces and she feels lonely, suddenly, horribly, permanently alone” (p. 278) after her husband’s death. She decides to stay six months in States and six months in India. This move shows her new way of adaptation towards host culture. After her husband’s death she became worried about her son’s marriage .Gogol marries Moushmi but her secret affair with Dimitri creates problems in their married life. Moushumi after the divorce goes to live with Dimitri and plans to leave for Paris which reveals the multi cultural as well as the global identity of second generation Indian immigrants. Though Aashima and Moushmi belong to the same culture they are entirely different. For Aashima everything related to her husband is valuable but for Moushmi the things related to Gogol are just commodities carrying no importance. Aashima stand apart from all other characters in her commitment towards marriage.

Aashima is always reminded of the words of her elders who told her “not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family” (p. 37). But the second generation does not abide to these rules and lives a life of their own. The novel in a way portrays the problems of acculturation and assimilation faced by the first as well as the second generation immigrants. Moushumi is a new generation Bengali born and raised in America’s multicultural society and is a peculiar combination of Indian, American and French identities. Her education at New York University, her frequent visits to France and England changed her perspectives and her native cultural consciousness. She has little appreciation for India or Indians and is more westernized in her attitude. She has “privately vowed that she had never grown fully dependent on her husband (247). Their marriage relationship that developed in America’s multicultural milieu ends in divorce. The second generation immigrant Sonia when they visited Calcutta did not feel it as their home. Displacement and marginality in Sonia’s case however trigger a less sense of alienation and nostalgia in her. She gradually assimilates bits and pieces of the new culture unlike Moushmi has a sense of duty and marries her boyfriend a half Chinese boy Ben. She decides to look after her mother after her father’s death.

Woman in Indian English fiction is depicted as the silent sufferer and upholder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society. Born and brought up in India Aashima too upholds Indian values, traditions and culture even in America. The first generation immigrants feel proud to their cultural past and did not like to violate their cultural past while the second generation expresses its aberrations and deviations and does not demand it or demonstrate it. Ashima as per her name “...will be without borders, without a home of her, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (p. 276). The older immigrants are always reminded of the words of their family elders when they left India.

Ashima like many immigrant Bengali women is not culturally immunized by America’s multi culture, is a strong follower of Indian culture and gives importance to family and relationships. She does her best to perform the role of a homemaker and tries to uphold the traditional values against the materialistic values of America. The fear of losing her Bengali culture and of her children’s neglect of their original culture secretly torments her.

Through the existential struggle of Ashima, Lahiri presents the pang of a woman living in an alien land, caused by a sense of isolation. She misses her homeland and this trishanku experience of being neither in Calcutta nor in America nearly kills her. She is a true representative of diasporic people living in similar hidden trauma. Like a traditional Indian wife in appearance and in ideologies, her life revolves around her husband and children and she

sacrifices all her comforts for the sake of her family. She is true to her role assigned to her as a daughter, granddaughter, wife and a mother and emerges as a winner.

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