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Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* (2003) is a culture-oriented, more precisely, a Bengali diasporic culture-oriented novel. As a diasporic novel it represents the diasporic themes like displaced, dislocated and deterritorised feelings of the first generation expatriates like Ashima Ganguli, the female protagonist of the novel; assimilated, translational and transcultural tendency among the diasporic people, especially among the second generation immigrants in the novel like Gogol Ganguli, Sonali Ganguli and Moushumi Mazoomdar; a feeling of nostalgia towards the natal/imaginary homeland by the first generation expatriates like Ashima Ganguli; the community feeling among the diasporic people; the familial, human relationships within a diasporic family in a diasporic land and other traits. Ashima Ganguli is moored in diasporic land with her feelings of rootlessness/uprooting/re-rooting/tracking root and also finds routes to discover her at home in many homes in the world. The Bengali diasporic cultures are amalgamated dexterously in the texture of the novel.

Lahiri’s *The Namesake* was adapted as a film in 2006, released on March 9, 2007, following screenings at film festivals in Toronto and New York City. The film is directed by an Indian born filmmaker Mira Nair, living in the US. Sooni Taraporevala adapted the novel into a screenplay. The film received positive reviews/acclaims from American critics and won ‘Love is Folly International Film Festival’ (Bulgaria)-"Golden Aphrodite"-Mira Nair.’ It was also nominated for many countries’ film festivals.

In his seminal paper “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”, Roman Jakobson describes inter-semiotic translation as one of the three possible types of translation. According to his explanation unlike intra-lingual translation which is related to the signs of one language only and inter-lingual translation which occurs between two different languages, inter-semiotic translation involves translation between two different media, as for example, verbal medium into musical medium or verbal medium into cinematographic medium, and so on (114). Mira Nair’s *The Namesake* (2007) uses immigrants’ experiences to explore the meaning of identity. The film follows the Ganguli couple from India into the American family they create. Mira Nair herself a diasporic Indian has dealt with similar themes in earlier films, notably 1991’s *Mississippi Masala*, an interracial romance set in the Deep South.

About adaptation of a novel/text into a film version, P. Torop writes: “The main difference between film and literary work lies in the fact that literature is fixed in a written form, while in a film the image (representation) is supported by the sound, in form of music or words” (300). Torop’s concern here is the transfer of the word into the image. In film adaptation, the former is used rarely and dialogue is given much space. A film version is composed of different elements, such as dialogue, setting, possible voice-overs, musical score, editing, framing, lighting, coloration, close-up (or not), perspective, and in the case of human voice, also the timbre and the intonation patterns. For this film translation of a verbal text through inter-semiotic translation, a rational subdivision of the original is inevitable for deciding to what elements of the film composition to entrust the translation of given stylistic or narratological elements of the prototext.

The cultural elements present in Lahiri’s *The Namesake* are different Bengali sangeet(s)/songs, some taboos imposed on Bengali Hindu house-wife, maintaining Bengali
dressing style in the diasporic world, selection of a Bengali baby’s name, celebration of a Bengali baby’s rice ceremony, practices of different Bengali Hindu rituals, the use of Bengali literature magazines to remember Bengali ‘men, milieu and moment’, nationalism among the Bengali ‘imagined community’ (Benedict Anderson’s term) in Boston and Cambridge areas, different Bengali deities and festivals, the use of Bengali culinary items in Ashima’s Pemberton’s home and some other cultural traits. These elements are also found in Mira Nair’s film version. But there is a difference between the narrative pattern of the printed text and the visual medium of the film. In the text, the Bengali diasporic cultures are presented in a third person point of view, sometimes also from third person omniscient point of view. As there are many unexplained sections in the novel urging the reader’s creatively interpretation, the film version doesn’t present such ambiguities. Nair presents Bengali cultures clearly through audio-visual modes and relies on “chronotopic” (Bakhtin’s term) motifs or, sequences of time and spaces in narrative pattern that unify multiple temporalities and histories. The narrative of the text starts with Ashoke’s and Ashima’s travel to the US in the 1960s. The film advances the timeframe by ten years, restaging Ashoke’s accident and marriage to Ashima in the 1970s. Whereas the novel starts with Ashima’s delivery, the film starts with the train journey of Ashoke Ganguli, a young Bengali graduate from Calcutta to Jamshedpur in the mid-1970s. Mira Nair modifies the progressive, singular, and linear representation of time that emerges from the space of the hospital with multiple and fractured temporalities that unfold in the chaos of the train crash that Ashoke faces.

After the train derailment, Ashoke is confined to bed. Immediately follows the montage of Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning being carried with fanfare. The film starts as Ashima is seen attending a classical music class. After arriving home, her mother asks her to come to drawing room as a man is waiting to ‘see’ her for marriage as per tradition of ‘arranged marriage.’ The next scene gives a kaleidoscopic picture of a Bengali marriage ceremony. The printed text carries only a small paragraph on it. Though these cultures are not diasporic, the visuals show Nair’s ingenuity as a good translator. A text can depict all these, but within a limited period of show-time it is not easy to depict all aspects in a film.

When the Ganguli couple settles in the US, Ashoke explains to Ashima the way to the Fulton Fish Market. Fish is an important motif in the novel, but in the film ‘samosa’ takes the place of fish. When Ashoke comes to see Ashima with his parents with the prospect of marriage, the guests are provided samosas. When Gogol and Maxine are leaving for Maxine’s parents’ New Hampshire home, Ashima gives them a lunch parcel of samosas. After Moushumi’s marriage with Gogol when she visits her in law’s home before the Christmas party, Ashima is frying big samosas for the party. When Ashima gives her last farewell party to her Bengali friends at her Pemberton home before her departure to India, she gives a party with piles of samosas in plates.

The Bengali practice of keeping of ‘calling name’ (pet name) and bhalonam (good name) is also used by Nair. Though Gogol’s rice ceremony is elaborately described in the novel, it is not shown in the film. Nair shows only Sonali’s rice ceremony. The reason may be the limited time for two rice ceremonies to be included. Perhaps Nair intention is not to depict the entire novel but the Bengali diasporic cultures.

The behaviour of a second generation diaspora to the first generation is complex. Gogol is extremely ashamed of his name and angry with his father for his odd name. When he makes harsh comments to his father about his odd name, Ashima rebukes him severely.

The baul song is popular in Bengal. The themes are philosophical and allegorical focusing on the state of disconnect between the earthly soul and the spiritual world. Often they philosophise on love and the many-splendored bonds of the heart, subtly revealing the mystery of life, the laws of nature, the decree of destiny and the ultimate union with the divine. The famous Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore was greatly influenced and inspired by
the *baul* songs. Tagore’s songs are heavily influenced by *baul* themes. Other Bengali poets such as Kazi Nazrul Islam have also been influenced by the *baul* songs and their message of non-sectarian devotion through love. The *Bhatiali* is another kind of folk song. This song is associated with particular groups such as fishermen, cart-drivers and hermits. It's hard to think of Bengali cultures, more precisely Bengali rural cultures without the *baul* and *bhatiali* songs. They are not only intrinsic to Bengal's music cultures but are also in the earth and air of the land and pervade the mind of the people.

There are many *baul* and *bhatiali* songs in film, heard when Gogol and Sonali visit India with their parents. Gogol notices a *baul* singing outside from his maternal grandfather’s home and another one while returning after practicing yoga. Sometimes *baul* and *bhatiali* songs portray the sorry/unhappy picture of a person. When Gogol performs the mourner’s ceremony for his father and Maxine comes to meet him, she is unable to understand this emotion. She fails to convince Gogol to come out of his family bond and starts weeping after being rejected by Gogol. In this scene, a background *bhatiali* song “*Oh majhi re, mon kasther nokar majhi...*” (Nair, 2007) is used. When Ashima and her family are busy with the last part of the mourner’s ceremony on the bank of the Ganges, that song is heard again from a boatman. Besides, there are also classical songs sung by Ashima at the beginning and ending of the film as well as other background songs and ethnic music.

The different attitudes of the first generation and the second generation diasporic people are beautifully shown in the film. After Gogol gets Maxine as his girlfriend, he starts avoiding his parental home. He does not even pick up his mother’s call. When his father is about to leave his Pemberton home for Cleveland, Ashima calls Gogol who says he can’t come as he wants to visit his girlfriend’s parents’ lake-view house in New Hampshire. When Gogol and Maxine come to meet Ashoke for few minutes on their way to that house, Maxine is very American. Maxine addresses Ashima by her name and says, “I’ll get a drink” (Nair, 2007). Ashima offers *lassi* instead of alcohol. Gogol warns Maxine not to hold hands in front of his parents, but Maxine forgets and holds Gogol’s hands at the dining table. She addresses Ashoke also by his name and kisses his cheek. These create awkwardness in Gogol’s family. When they are about to leave, Ashoke tells Gogol to check up on his mother time to time during his absence. But Maxine remarks that “[n]ever guess the parents and of their subject matters” (Nair, 2007). Ashima gets a temporary job in the library and develops close friendship with one of her colleagues. She shares her anxieties about the behaviour of her children who avoid them. When Ashoke is dying from a ‘massive heart attack’, Gogol is busy with Maxine’s writer friend’s party in New Hampshire. These behavioral and cultural differences are documented nicely in the film.

Before his father death Gogol is seen as assimilationist, transculturist and transnationalist in the US. But after her father’s death he returns to his Bengali Pemberton ‘home’, shaving his head before leaving Ohio. Ashima is astonished to see him. She embraces him and placing her right hand on his shaved head says, “You didn’t have to do this” (Nair, 2007). But like a son of a Bengali family Gogol for the first time says in Bengali to his mother, “I wanted it” (Nair, 2007). Gogol’s change shows that the second generation’s desire for acculturation in a foreign land is not total yet.

The mourner’s ceremony of Ashoke is, perhaps, the clearest hallmark of Bengali culture in the movie and the text in a diasporic world. The telescopic Indian cultural practices are seen by Gogol as he returns to his ‘little India’ the Pemberton ‘home,’ and changes from an Americanized Indian immigrant into a faithful Indo-American expatriate.

**The Film Version: Addition and Deduction**

A text may be lengthy, but when a film-maker makes a movie out of that text, cuts are necessary to fit the stipulated time. Mira Nair is faithful to the original text, but some portions are not represented in the film version. The important scenes which are included are:
Ashima’s time with the Montgomery family, Gogol’s rice-ceremony, Gogol’s Bengali lessons and visit to Calcutta during Durga Puja, his first adolescent encounters with Kim and Ruth and the extra-marital relationship with Bridget, a panel discussion about Indian English novels when the second generation Indian diaspora in the US are addressed as ABCD (‘American-born-confused-deshi’), Moushumi’s sexual relations, Graham’s racial abuse of Indians etc.

Mira Nair not only cuts scenes, but adds also a few which seem necessary for depicting Bengali cultures, as Bengali folk music which in Lahiri’s novel does not have. The movie uses Bengali songs like Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul geeti, traditional Bengali lullabies beside baul and bhatiali.

Internationalisation of The Namesake:

This movie is mainly made for Anglophone audiences as is the novel. Certain scenes like picturing the poor people in Calcutta and their cooking food by roadside etc. are shown as Indian poverty that satisfies the Western assumptions about the Third World. In a panel discussion on Indian English novels the immigrant Indians are called “American born confused deshi” (118). Graham, an American, abuses the Bengali people openly. These scenes are not there in the movie. Thus, there is a kind of invisible manipulation by filmmaker during translation.

Lawrence Venuti’s idea of “foreignization” is also seen in the translation process by Nair. Venuti points out that the strategy “foreignization” happens when a target text “deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original” (5). Though Nair’s film cannot break the US’s societal conventions, it retains the ‘foreign milieu’, or Bengali milieu which is totally foreign to the US citizens. Thus, “foreignization” is adopted in Nair’s translation strategy.

Drawbacks of the Film:

These are many scenes in the film which are not appropriate or probable. The film starts with Ashoke going by train to Jamshedpur to meet his grandfather. Ghosh, a middle aged businessman, is a fellow traveler who drinks alcohol in train. Lahiri’s novel describes Ghosh smoking. Drinking alcohol and smoking are not allowed in Indian trains, but of course there can be exceptions. After their marriage, when Ashoke and Ashima are leaving Calcutta, they carry two small bags that may appear to an audience as going for shopping. Nair could have shown bigger luggage for the newly married couple going abroad to settle there. They wear long flower garlands as though they come out of a marriage ceremony. When Ashima’s father dies and Ashima and Ashoke are going to catch flight to return to India, Sonali, their newly born baby girl is not seen with them. But after few minutes we see the baby girl on Ashima’s shoulder. In a Bengali family after a death in the family generally after 10 days or 15 days male relatives of the dead person shave their head. But Nair’s film shows that Gogol comes to her mother from Ohio with his shaved head though his father has died before one day. Perhaps Gogol may not know the norm.

The Namesake Film in Literary Polysystem:

Itamar Even-Zohar first introduced the term “polysystem” as the aggregate of literary systems such as poetry to “low” or “non-canonized” forms in a given culture. He recognised both the “primary” (creating new items and models) as well as “secondary” (reinforcing existing items and models) importance of translated literature in literary history (21-22). He developed the “polysystem” theory early in the 1970s as a working for Israel-Hebrew literature. According to him, the term “polysystem” refers to “the entire network of correlated systems-literary and extraliterary-within society” (114). Through this theory he wanted to explain the function of all kinds of writing within a given culture-from the central canonical texts to the most marginal non-canonical texts.
The relation between the translated works and the literary polysystem, as Zohar suggests in his essay “The Position of Translated Literature Within the Literary Polysystem”, cannot be categorised as either primary or secondary, but as variable depending upon the specific circumstance operating within the literary system. Even-Zohar opines that a translated literature can occupy a central position in any literary canon in three social circumstances: when a literature is “young” or in the process of being established; when a literature is “peripheral” or “weak” or both; and when a literature is experiencing a “crisis” or “turning point” (46-47). He also says that if a translated literature occupies a central position, the border between translated texts and original texts “diffuses” and the definitions of translation become liberalized, expanding to include version, imitations, and adaptations as well. But to occupy the central position of a literary canon, a translated text should be innovative, inventive and contextual to the historical settings of the occupied literary canon. Gideon Toury, a younger colleague of Zohar, adopted his polysystem concept and participated in various field studies for “testing” Zohar’s hypothesis.

Mira Nair’s film The Namesake is in English. Though we can find some Bengali conversations between Ashima and Ashoke, this is done to show the diasporic people’s ethnic continuity in familial spaces. This film is not comparable to the Hollywood’s mainstream films that are marked by huge investment, innovative and inventive camera settings, use of light contrasts, enriched and ultra-modern sound tracts, varieties of symbolism and others post-modern techniques. Such productions are not easy for independent directions. Mira Nair makes her film with techniques which are used by traditional commercial Bollywood filmmakers. Though this film won awards in film festivals and was nominated in different films award categories, it occupies the ‘peripheral’ position in the dominant Hollywood Films’ canon. The critical acclaim was won for its handling of debatable issues and diasporic themes which are topical in a multicultural globalized world.

**Ingenuity of Mira Nair as a Filmmaker:**

If much is lost in adaptation, much more can also be found in the hands of a good filmmaker as is the case of Nair’s The Namesake. In the film the use of Bengali language is used to mark the moments of intimacy, difference, and comfort and some serious moments. After a temporary settlement in the US when Ashoke is explaining to Ashima how to reach Fulton Fish Market, Ashima replies in Bengali that if she gets lost then what will happen? Ashoke also answers in Bengali that he will not let her get lost. Ashima does not know the process of washing system in her new house. When she washes Ashoke’s clothes which shrink, Ashoke gets angry and rebukes her. Ashima enters in her room and closes door. Then Askoke tries to cajole Ashima and speaks in Bengali: “my Ashima, dear Ashima, open the door” and “crazy girl” (Nair, 227). As time goes by, Ashoke and Ashima speak more in English, but their last phone exchange just before Ashoke’s death is in Bengali. When Gogol returns from Cleveland with shaved head, his mother is astonished and tells him that it was not necessary. He unexpectedly speaks in Bengali to tell his mother he wanted to do this. When Ashoke and Ashima are walking in a beautiful place near a school, Ashoke wants to hear from Ashima’s mouth the line ‘I love you’. In this intimate scene Ashima says “yes” in Bengali. Perhaps what Nair wants to convey is that language not only makes difference but perhaps it also works as a ‘refuge’. Anyone can say that translation is more faithful to the diasporic world than the original text. Nair’s film always tries to remind us that language plays both roles-as a bridge and as a barrier for communication.

Voyaging in a diasporic world will not be complete without the mention of suitcase and airport, and more importantly, crossing bridges. These three things in the film occur like ‘leitmotif’. At the beginning Ashoke is carrying a suitcase to visit his grandfather in Jamshedpur. Later Ashoke does the same when the whole family visits India and travels to see Agra’s the Taj Mahal. Though this journey is not to the diasporic world, but carrying
suitcase is a universal symbol of mobility and odyssey of dislocation and displacements of the diasporic milieu. The other recurrent image in the movie is the airport. The airport is the symbol of meeting point of characters who journey into another place leaving their natal/imaginary home. The showcasing of airport is a journey of sorrow for Ashima when she is seen at airport to come to India after her father’s death. Gogol is also seen at airport before returning to Pemberton ‘home’ after his father’s death with his shaved head. In an interview with Cynthia Fuchs, Nair says that the “[a]irports are like the temple for an immigrant. We’re always in these neutral spaces, you live your most crucial hours in them, as you’re on your way from one home to another, or your father’s funeral” (<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/unbridled-with-life-interview-with-mira-nair/>).

But the most ingenious feature in Nair’s film’s diasporic world is the use of two bridges in the film: one is the Howrah Bridge, the busiest cantilever bridge in the world which connects Calcutta; and the other is the 59th Street Bridge in Manhattan which connects the New York City. What Nair perhaps wants to convey is that journey with suitcase is about to moor in a place, i.e., the bridge to cross over. These two bridges of two countries stand for the diasporic people’s mobility and connection with the past and journey into the future. As described by Giuseppe Balirano: “[t]he numerous shots of the bridges …introduce the metaphor of division and re-union, calling for a reconciliation between the cities, between the East and the West and between the first and second generation Ganguli(s). The American Bridge is seen by the author as a place where the ghost of Howrah could be glimpsed as a reflection of the migrant’s dislocation” (96).

Another relevant point to be pointed out here is that Mira Nair is a feminist auteur, like some other South Asian diasporic filmmakers-Deepa Mehta, the Indo-Canadian filmmaker and Gurinder Chandha, the British Indian filmmaker. These auteurs try to deconstruct the image of ‘scopophilia’ (pleasure in looking) from the traditional Hollywood and Bollywood films for male gaze. Laura Mulvey in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” defined “scopophilia” as an act of pleasure in looking at the female characters portrayed as an erotic object mainly for the male observers (835). These diasporic films by Indian diasporic filmmakers like Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair and others are termed by Hamid Naficy in his book An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking (2001) as “Accented cinema” which emerges as Naficy argues, not from “the accented speech of the diegetic characters” within these films but from the “displacement of the filmmakers”(4). These “accented” films negotiate the interstitial dialogues between the home and host societies of the filmmakers. Thus, these films give the two sites for marginalised women-a site of resistance from the part of films’ characters and other being the site for the expression of that resistance for the filmmakers. I think this is also the expression of postcolonial feminism through these “accented” films.

Thus, through these films the diasporic filmmakers try to eradicate the subaltern status of women and allow them a ‘space’ to be heard. In traditional Bollywood films we cannot get any female voices. Like in a socio-cultural scenario in reality women in these films are also marginalised. The film critic, Katey Rich in her article “Women On Film-Will Bollywood Best Hollywood In Opportunities For Women” argues that “[b]ollywood is as well-known as its Los Angeles counterpart for giving women small space both in front of and behind the camera. But what makes Hollywood better than the Bollywood is that American media reports like the 2009 edition of Dr. Martha Lauzen’s Celluloid Ceiling Study reveal that just 9% of Hollywood directors are women. However, there is no study comparable to Dr. Lauzen’s that Bollywood is confident to highlight the number of their female filmmakers” (<http://awfj.org/2009/03/04/women-on-film-will-bollywood-surpass-hollywood-in-opportunities-for-women-katey-rich-comments/>). In traditional Bollywood and even in Hollywood films we find the traditional virtues of womanhood like that of the sacrificing,

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake though we can find some ‘spaces’ in Ashima’s life, but in familial spaces she is totally a passive, submissive and faithful Bengali housewife. In the Mira Nair deconstructs, to some extent, this image of Ashima. Though Ashima at the first phase of her life in the US shows her passivity to the outside world around her Boston home, but gradually she starts adapting the environment and lifestyle of New York City. She starts going out for laundry and buying fish from Fulton Fish Market. Ashoke recalls his adolescent experience of train accident. In the film Ashoke has a nightmare about the accident and starts sweating even in a cold winter night. Immediately Ashima tries to make comfortable Ashoke by keeping his head on her lap and singing a song. It is like a mother’s lullaby. When her husband goes to Cleveland for nine months, she takes a part-time job in library to pass her time. Tasneem Farida argues in her article “Portrayal of Femininity in Contemporary English-language Films by South Asian Diasporic Female Filmmakers” that the film “depicts how she struggles and transforms from an all-accepting wife to a self-reliant widow and a lonely mother of two, who finally seeks solace after being back home” (13). In the novel Moushumi has many sexual relationships before marrying Gogol and shows her sexual laxities. Mira Nair also shows this in her characterisation of Moushumi. Thus, this film adaptation becomes a site of resistance for multiple purposes. Roger Bromley explains it aptly:

The transcultural and transnational narratives, texts of cultural translation, do not so much restore geography and the arbitrary, but, rather, open up again their conditions of possibility, a release, especially through women’s writing, from the ‘locked within boundaries’ of patriarchal hegemony- not by simple reversals, but through emergence texts of the third scenario: the indeterminacy of diasporic identities, the production of difference as the political and social definition of the historical present, the contemporary. (73)

Conclusion:

Lahiri’s The Namesake deals with the theme of diasporic sensibilities/culture of a Bengali family living in US. She hardly uses Bengali cultural words/phrases/slangs in the text. It may be because the text is primarily targeted towards the international readers. Thus, perhaps she tries to internationalise the Bengali diasporic sensibilities/culture through her text, particularly for Anglophone World. Nair also tries to internationalise the Bengali diasporic culture in film version. It is very difficult to recreate the same thing through a visual media, i.e. film as it presents something within a limited and fixed time. Thus, though one can get the main cultural transmission of the source text like a living picture in the film, but it lacks the diasporic sensibilities presented in the novel. The text depicts the Bengali diasporic sensibilities/culture, but it doesn’t enter into the milieu of Bengali culture in its fullest sense. Mira Nair removes many diasporic elements in the film version, but it shows the Bengali cultures in a much better way even than the source text.

Works Cited:


