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Manifestation of Womanist Maternity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri was born 1957 in London and brought up in Rhode Island. She was already a celebrated author when her first novel came in print. Her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* was selected for the O Henry Prize and for inclusion in best American short stories. *Interpreter of Maladies* won the Pulitzer Prize in literature in the 2000. Her first novel, *The Namesake* opens in 1968 and covers three decades to 2000. In this novel though the Ganguli family leads a normal suburban existence, there is tension between generations. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli socialize with other Bengali families; they could not touch and feel the counter-cultural movements that dominated America in 1970s. They tried their best to observe important Hindu rituals and holidays. They organized parties for the immigrant families like their own. But unfortunately there is contrast between them and their children. Opposite to their parents Gogol and Sonia embrace American culture. They feel uneasy on their trips to India. Through this novel, Jhumpa Lahiri tries her best to explain cross cultural conflicts, trauma, isolation, aspirations and dilemmas of the Indian immigrants. The present research tries to explore how Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* effectively portrays the manifestation of womanist maternity through the important characters.

Keywords: Manifestation, maternity, culture, womanist, Immigrants.

Introduction:

Womanism is used as a derogatory term particularly for the black woman. Womanism is related to the natural abilities of a woman like bearing children, sex-slaves, inferior to the male, adapts to the new situations easily, care-taking, devoted. The concept of womanism is related to black women and the women of colour as well as the colonial and post-colonial world of women. Womanism shows a kind of acceptance patience and tolerance. Rather than supporting separatism womanism promotes universalism. Womanism like black feminism provides a space for black feminism and woman of colour to create dialogue in a non-threatening environment.

Alice Malsenior Walker who is an American Author and Activist coined the term womanism in her 1983 work *In Search of our Mothers Gardens: Womanist Prose*. But it was in Clenora Hudson Weem's 1993 book *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming ourselves* that womanism as a literary theory was first used. Jhumpa Lahiri, in her first novel *The Namesake* does her best in manifesting womanism and presenting challenges to womanism and presenting challenges to womanism in Indian-Bengali-American form. Lahiri's *The Namesake* focuses its attention on the role not only of Indian-American women but also of Indian- American men in individually and collectively creating and developing American and Indian and Indian- American identities in their new American horizon. The novel *The Namesake* is a beautiful presentation of womanist maternity. This maternity is both physical and cultural on the part of Ashima and Gogol. Gogol, through this novel searches for his own name and identity. Lahiri's other works such as *Unaccustomed Earth* represents maternal womanism with different levels. Lahiri, through her works raises awareness of the power of

womanist maternity in the lives and actions of Indian American women. The present paper seeks to explore manifestations of maternal womanism depicted through various characters.

Expression and Reflection of Womanism:

The novel begins with Ashima who is giving birth to Gogol. In her struggle she witnesses the reflection of the coming circumstances that are going to change her entirely. Jhumpa Lahiri very aptly describes this process in the following words:

‘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’.

(The Namesake: 49-50)

Ashima is both pregnant and foreigner. It gives her the ability to see the contradiction of her situation more clearly than others. Maternity here represents two aspects: first, physical maternity that is physical mothering and secondly, cultural maternity that includes individual and communal identity formulations.

In this novel Ashima Ganguli gives birth to Gogol not only physically but also culturally. Gogol, whose search for identity is based on positive family role models, who establish his intercultural identity growth. Ashima, in this novel represents the number of women expatriates who are reluctant to change or adapt to the culture of the foreign country and the sociological and ideological conflicts faced by them in the new surroundings. The expression and reflection of this womanism is perfectly brought out in the following lines when Ashima’s doctor assures her that all is ‘perfectly normal’ she thinks:

For the past eighteen months ever since she’s arrived in Cambridge nothing has felt normal at all... Throughout the experience in spite of her growing discomfort she’d been astonished by her body’s ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great grandmothers had done. That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculously still. But she 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.

(The Namesake: 5-6)

Though at first Ashima was afraid of giving birth to her child in a foreign land she has then made her mind to bear the pain and to give birth to the infant in the foreign land.

Womanist Maternity:

Ashima’s maternity has several layers like individual, familial and communal maternity and these layers grow throughout the novel as Gogol and his intercultural identity develop. After her husband’s death; Ashima decides to stay both in America and India. This

decision shows her cultural maternity, a new way of blending and adaptation of the foreign culture. The cultural maternity is again reflected in the character of Moushumi, who after the divorce with her husband goes to live with Dimitri. This move also reveals the moults of cultural as well as global identity of the new generation Indian immigrants. Ashima's communal maternity is shown in her communal sharing of cultural decoding. Here Ashima decodes the Christian Christmas holiday into a Bengali ceremony where Bengali American's learn about the American holiday and in this way express their own cultural rituals. It is further seen that Ashima's cultural maternity is the familial maternity of raising her son and daughter itself. Ashima's attempts to get knowledge about Christmas for Sonia and Gogol enable her to show communal maternity.

Ashoke, Ashima's husband also shows cultural maternity. After the train accident Ashoke: "began to envision another sort of future. He imagined not only walking, but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he had nearly died" (*The Namesake*: 20). In this decision to move to foreign land and in naming his son after his own favourite author; Ashoke gifts a multicultural identity to his son Gogol. This is Ashoke's womanistmaternal, move in presenting Gogol a multi-cultural identity. Ashoke not only develops Gogol's multicultural identity but also he develops a new identity that is all his own, this womanistic maternity presents Gogol yet another aspect by which to explore himself and his origins.

Gogol: Unique representation of maternity:

Despite the fact that Gogol is not a woman, he displays unique manifestation of womanist maternity in this novel. Gogol understands his mother's feelings and emotions deeply at Maxine's dinner party Gogol thinks:

"His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest she would have kept her eyes on Maxine, insisting she have seconds and then thirds"

(*The Namesake*: 133)

In observing Lydia, Maxine's mother, Gogol is astonished by her difference from his own mother. Gogol attributes this difference as cultural. In the last, there is no reason in comparing Lydia, Maxine and their non-Bengali Americanness to his mother's indianness. He could not avoid his connection to his mother's culture.

Conclusion:

Womanism is used as a derogatory term particularly for the black woman. Womanism is related to the natural abilities of a woman like bearing children, sex-slaves, inferior to the male, adapts to the new situations easily, care-taking, devoted. The concept of womanism is related to black women and the women of colour as well as the colonial and post-colonial world of women. Womanism shows a kind of acceptance patience and tolerance. Jhumpa Lahiri through her novel *The Namesake* well represents the womanist maternity through the characters. She shows that the immigrants in their attempt to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs; slowly adapt the cultural and traditional ways of the foreign country. The first generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli face cultural dilemma, but it is also the fact that they always do their best to retain their cultural identity traditions, values customs and beliefs. The term maternity implies the state of being a mother. Though there is a change, a transformation from this world to a new world; this transformation brings with its own aspects, values, responsibilities, new outlooks and above all a total new identity.

Though motherhood or maternity is a glorious state for a woman but for a migrant this state of being lonely, alien and adapting to its values and cultures is a very difficult task. Jhumpa Lahiri through this novel very aptly represents the manifestation of maternity at various levels.

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