

Transnational Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most acclaimed diasporic writers depicting about the dilemma of India-American immigrants. In her prominent novel, The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri, very artistically delimits the burden of alienation and rootlessness. In the novel The Namesake one gets a deep insight into the predicament of immigrants facing multiple repercussions like mental dilemma, impediments, life's oppositions and its disagreements. Identity, being an essential feature of one's personality, can never be compromised and the vacuum created in the absence of the same does never let one live peacefully with a sense of comfort. The immigrant is forever suspended in-between continents, confronting the push and pull between the two lands. In the mean while the identity quest continues. This paper focuses on Jhumpa Lahiri's work The Namesake and the fluid identity of the protagonist in it.

Keywords: Identity, culture, alienation, rootlessness, oscillation, reconcile

Many nations across the world are the products of dynasty and empire but several countries are a blend of diverse ethnic groups. This diversity leads to the emergence of trans culturalism, cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. America is a land with salad bowl culture, and to fulfil the American dream, many Asians and immigrants from various parts of the world settle there.

The Migrant populations, whether during the colonial rule or in the postcolonial times, create a hybrid space. Their dispersal cut across the geographic, cultural and political borders to build "transnational social fields" (Nanda 2). The development of technologies and the demand for highly skilled migrants in the present times create a hybrid society. Such hybrid societies are built on a willingness to abide by the duties and responsibilities. This fusion of cultures also results in a social renewal, for a better society. The Namesake eloquently crosses their sense of alienation, loss, longing for homeland or a tangible culture, and their compromises with the dominant white culture and their own, to form an amalgamated, involved and yet simple inter-relationships with the local community.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a writer is highly praised for her literary excellence through her first collection of stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*, which had fetched her the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction (2000). She was born on July 11, 1967, in London, England, but was brought up in America when her family moved there when she was three years old.

Her writings refabricate the complexity of diasporic sensibility. The characters of her writings are susceptible to the two worlds, home, and the new home. They have a fluid identity. Their heart is back in the old home but in reality they are present physically in the new land, her oeuvre represents the real world and the new world where they migrate for better prospects. She brings out the struggle of an individual between the two worlds. One can never forget the world or cannot forget the roots, but in reality has to move ahead in one's life and acculturate in the new world. They are made to live but cannot coexist in harmony. Thus the fluid state comes into existence. Jhumpa Lahiri made her debut publication in 1999. She has travelled a long journey, since then her Literary backdrop has become even more colorful and varied while she has continued to write some of most poignant work of the Indian American experience. In her novels she continues to delve even deeper into one's own root. She prefers simple prose to tell a story, and she always tells a story crisply. A second-generation Indian in America that she is, Jhumpa Lahiri writes her own experience of vast cross-cultural fertilization without negative feelings either about the culture of her origin or of the country where she was born and raised. Writings of Jhumpa Lahiri are all the more alluring in a globalizing world.

The concept of transnationalism challenges the traditional understanding of migration as a shift from one country to another, a process eventually concluding in full assimilation into a dominant culture. This explanation has particular significance because it reflects the contemporary global connections and interconnectedness of the United States to South Asia, describing American identity in a broader context. Transnationalism can be defined as a cultural space, where immigrants and their American - born children adhere to the practices of their

country of origin and the way they adapt to the new environment and the challenges and opportunities which they face. In the present novel under study, it is observed that the varied aspects of immigration, assimilation, family relations, drifting away from home, and naming your new place your home and adjusting to the new culture and creating tension while travelling between Indian/Bengali and American cultures leads to troubled identity and identity crisis.

Transnationalism, as depicted in the novel, is a cultural phenomenon in which both first generation immigrants and their American-born children maintain their ethnic properties—even when they do not experience racial discrimination and marginalization—in adaptive ways, and make connections between their country of residence and country of origin. *The Namesake* is a perfect study of transnationalism, wherein the characters maintain cultural practices from their country of origin while also adopting cultural practices from their newly adopted country. Lahiri's characters inhabit crossroads, constantly negotiating different cultural experiences. They hold strong ties to ethnic roots, but do not dissent against their status as a minority 'other'. They blend into the culture of the adopted country. Their identity is hybrid resulting from the interconnectedness of the world which they left behind and the new world. Her characters challenge oscillation and reconcile with their status and become global citizens and also represent diverse array of contemporary cultures.

In the novel, Lahiri's characters remain transnational agents who are routinely travel, and maintain transnational ties with their country of origin. Their position, which is displaced, but the cultural identities of Indian immigrants suggests that individuals cannot confine themselves within the narrow concept of national and cultural boundaries in this globalized world characterized by transculturation and relocation. In this regard, Lahiri's representation of Indian émigrés resonances, Arjun Appadurai's suggestion that the notions of nativeness and native places have become very complex as more and more people identify themselves, or are categorized, in reference to deterritorialized homelands, cultures, and origins (34). Appadurai coins the idea of "scapes" to explain the understanding of the contemporary global system and interconnectedness of the modern world. His concept of "scapes" indicates a changing social, territorial, and cultural formation of group identity, in which people regroup in new locations and reconstruct their histories and identities far from their place of origin.

Early in *The Namesake*, Lahiri shows how the circle of

Bengali acquaintances in Cambridge, Massachusetts, grows. Many bachelors go to Calcutta one by one and return with wives. They start living "within walking distance of one another in Cambridge" and "there is a new home to go to, a new couple or young family to meet" every weekend (38). The husbands are "teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers." Their "homesick" and "bewildered" wives turn to each other for recipes and advice, wondering if "it's possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat" (38). These Bengalis frequently gather at one another's homes and enjoy Indian meals, singing, dancing, and playing the harmonium. They argue over Bollywood movies, Indian politics, and various geographical locations in India. These immigrants, away from their birth country, unite on the basis of their shared history, ethnicity, and nationality. They adopt some specific characteristics of the new cultures over time, while preserving their own Indian cultures and inventing homes out of fragmented memories. They show their loyalty to both India and the United States through their activities.

In her novel '*The Namesake*' Lahiri presents a variety of diasporic selves implanted in the characters of Ashima, Ashoke, Sonali, Gogol and Moushumi. Lahiri is in fact exploring the theme of identity, hinting at the nature of fluidity of identity. The question is, of their origin and identity- 'whether I belong to the country of my birth or where I am settled today'. When studied from the perspective of the fluidity of identities, the first generation of Indian immigrants from Calcutta - Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, who after an arranged marriage soon settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in a way are prepared, resilient and flexible in accepting their multiple identities keeping themselves more open for the major compromises and adjustments. Ashoke, is exposed to the Russian writers very early in his life. He derived forte and indulgence that reality and identity are multiple and exist on many planes at the same time. So, his early resolutions that he is an Indian and American as well and that his world is the entire world of writers he has read, undermines him to be all at once -the submissive son who returns to India every year to see his family and the present erudite and respected Professor of Fiber Optics at MIT, who goes on to win fellowship and researches at Boston, the accommodative, yet typical Indian husband and a cognizant parent, who wants to groom his children in an environment of multiple identities. In fact, his very name 'Ashoke' itself hints of Lahiri's attempt to carve this character as a person who is 'a-shoka' i.e. one without sorrow. His life is one smooth float in the States till his sudden death at Boston.

As against Ashoke, Ashima evolves through the novel as

a more noticeable character. She grows from a submissive, meek nineteen year old young Bengali girl to a completely independent world citizen deciding to spend her life shuttling between India, the land of her roots and America, the land of her wings, and be with her children after the demise of her husband. Ashima "true to the meaning of her name she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276). A person with a fluid identity.

The question of identity is very difficult as it is related to fit in a cultural milieu and especially arises when a person is culturally displaced. In such conditions one can't correlate with either of the two world in which he is living. This lands them in a multiethnic, space. Ashima Ganguly, born and raised in India, tied the nuptial knot to an expatriate in America undergoes this phase and she feels that living in a foreign land is like a 'lifelong pregnancy'. She sticks to her moral and cultural belief of a Bengali Indian. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguly try to create a small Bengal holding to their roots and culture in America, far from the land of their birth. At home and with friends of Indian origin they speak in Bengali and eat Bengali dishes with their hands, to get back to their roots and stay in touch with their country of origin.

An atmosphere of home is created far from their real home. But when it comes to their children, the sense of alienation from their own culture and the land where they live creates a feeling of rootlessness, as they relate to America as home and India is a distinct land for them.

After her initial adjustments, in the new land, she was lonely as her husband was away the whole day, but her state of seclusion decreases with the arrival of her children. She still considers Calcutta her home and gets nostalgic about it. She keeps rereading her parent's letters and cries on finding "no letters from Calcutta" (Lahiri 34). She preserves the "tattered copy of *Desh* magazine" and "printed pages of Bengali type" (6). She is quite skeptical about raising her son Gogol alone in an alien country (33). She felt that her family members should be by her side and in their absence "the baby's birth, like most everything in America, feels somehow confused, only half true". She feels bad for her son for entering the world without the family's affection. But she resolves to bring the baby in Bengali 'ways' singing Bengali lullabies, and making efforts to preserve her 'home culture' in her new home, along with, a circle of Bengali friends. In this way she tries to give an atmosphere of home away from home.

Ashima gradually comes to reality, that it is this new place where she has to stay with her husband and children. In order to maintain her roots and her pangs of

separation, Ashima goes to Calcutta for a six weeks' trip. But soon realizes that being a foreigner "is a sort of lifelong pregnancy - a perpetual wait" and "a constant burden" (Lahiri 49). Ashima does not give away her traditional way of dressing, as it is a part of her identity, which at any cost she wants to retain.

She celebrates the 'Anna Prashana' ceremonies of her son and daughter the traditional way. She observes Hindu festivals like Deepavali and Durga Pooja with fervor. At the same time, she accommodates the celebration of Christmas and thanksgiving the way, a Catholic does. By doing so, Ashima along with Ashok seems to assimilate US culture along with her Bengali culture. Though she crosses national boundaries and she herself has achieved fluid identity, making her own path in her life of contentment and achievement, undertaking the task of being a good homemaker, a submissive wife, a caring mother, who instills all the values in her children. After the untimely death of her husband, she takes the strings of her life in her hand. After performing all the rituals of mourning, the transformation of her towards an empowered woman begins. She chooses to abandon her permanent residence and travel back and forth between her homeland and her adoptive country. At the age of 53, when one looks for security, she takes a step towards independence, she sells the house to an American family, the Walkers, and decides to divide her year into six months in India with her relatives and six months in the United States with her children. She sticks to the plans she and Ashoke had made for superannuation. In Calcutta in her brother's spacious flat she will have a room of her own, which she cannot call her own home. "True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere".

Transnational Feminism reconnoiters the meaning of feminism from diverse political, cultural and economic circumstances and perspectives. The protagonist Ashima is a true Transnational Feminist. After the demise of her husband, all of a sudden she realized, though she has her children and her family in India, but the vacuum created by the loss of her partner cannot be filled. She will have to traverse the journey of life, but alone. This no longer scares her, as she has become self-sufficient. She still wears saris and puts her long hair in a bun, but, she is not the same Ashima who had once left Calcutta. Her documents (American passport, Massachusetts driving license, social security card) prove her official belonging, but they cannot capture her long passage of time and her transformation from a naïve girl to an independent woman. She stood apart from the other Indian women, as she took up driving

or procuring a job. At the same time has tried her best to bring up her children with the values and ethics of India and America. Her experience of living abroad, has given her an advantage, having gained access to things inaccessible to women in her traditionalist home country and having become a transnational character par excellence.

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