



Feminine Sensibility in *The Namesake*: A Study

KEYWORDS

Dr. Rushi B. Joshi

Plot no. 2061 – C – 2 – B, Near Adhyatma Vidya Mandir, Sanskar Mandal, Bhavnagar – 364002. Gujarat.

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the theme of dislocation, displacement, divided identity, problems of history, confrontation with racism, the problematic inbetweenness and sometimes “comforting” hybridity abound in diasporic fiction *The Namesake*. Much research and writings in the area of post-colonial feminism have focussed on women’s problems and search for identity in a “foreign” land. But then one needs to study these works to explore the subtle semantic inflections and the politics of gender in the representation of men belonging to the Indian diaspora and configure masculinity from postcolonial perspective.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the 21st century leading women writers of Indian origin in America. Her works largely reflect the cultural conflicts and issues of identities in the first and second generation emigrants in the west. The keen insight she projects in her works has won various awards and gained critical appreciation both at home and abroad. But, this must be reiterated that her works do not focus on the traditional Hindu philosophy of god, man and universe. She doesn’t create miracles or magic rather, focuses on the psyches that form the destiny of her characters. She uses humdrum affairs of human life to make her reader feel the anguish in the life of those living away from ‘home.’ Her characters are learned young professionals who deny theological tenets and find themselves struggling with their personal issues to create identity.

The celebrated women novelists like Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni, Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin and a host of others from the “third world” engage with these issues in their novels in an autobiographical vein where women occupy the forefront. Virginia Woolf was invited to deliver a lecture on ‘Women and fiction’ and her hypothesis runs as follows; “. . . a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf, 6). In other words, economic independence and domestic space (privacy within the home and stretches of freedom from cares associated with it) are according to Woolf, prerequisites for women to write. It was a period of history when women were not given any rights or privacy to work for their economic independence or bring forth their creativity.

Jhumpa Lahiri has presented women sensibility minutely in her work specially in case of women character Jhumpa has presented the real condition of Indian women in the U.S.A. Whether it is India or the USA the disciplinarian patriarchal norms are followed with great reverence by women conditioned in it; Ashima Ganguli is typical example of this. An instance to substantiate is that;

“when she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn’t say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband’s name even though she knows perfectly well what it is, She had adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety’s sake, to utter his first . . . instead of saying Ashoke’s name, she utters the interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as, Are you listening to me?” (TN, 2).

Ashima was quite young and could have very well completed her studies, probably secured a good job and chosen a life partner on her own. But the Indian patriarchal society does not permit this and hence the parents are ever anxious to get rid of their daughters at the right age. And it is not required for the girl to know the name or the kind of person the man is, whom she is going to be married; “It was only after the betrothal that she’d learned his name” (TN, 9). Even the girl’s likes or dislikes or even her expectation is not bothered about. This thing happens with her as; “Ashima had never heard of Boston or of fiberoptics. She was asked whether she was willing to fly on a plane and then if she was capable of living in a city characterized by severe, snowy winters, alone” (TN, 9).

Ashima is not very happy living in Cambridge. She feels alien and isolated. Within a short time she becomes a mother. She feels her parents and relatives. She wishes to return to India, where her true identity lies. She feels that she has deprived her son of the love and affection he should rightfully get of his grandparents and relatives. Ashima becomes sick with misery and nostalgia; “Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby’s birth, like almost everything in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true . . . she has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived” (TN, 25). If it had been in India the situation would have been more favourable for her because in India; “women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives” (TN, 4).

But in America as Jhumpa observes,

“nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she’s arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all . . . that it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous 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” (TN, 6).

Though Woolf voices the discrepancy seen in literature and real life her times, much of it is true even today and in diverse fields apart from literature can also be seen. Apart

from the manacles of patriarchal dominance the translocation of Ashima from one culture to another, a totally alien one is distressing. Jhumpa remarks in the novel; "It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land" (TN, 6). It is a totally different culture where; ". . . American in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge common, prefer their privacy" (TN, 3).

Ashima was able to adjust to the city life earlier in India specially in Calcutta as there was a possibility to keep oneself preoccupied in numerous ways. And wished that, 'Ashokee had accepted the position at Northeastern so that they could have stayed in the city'. Ashima feels alienated again, but more intensely now, as there is hardly any life in the suburbs.

Ashima continues to maintain her Indian identity, she; "continues to wear nothing but saris and sandals from Bata" (TN, 65). Though Ashokee does not change, but adjust to things not available in America, with their substitutes. Ashima and Ashokee are hybridized in the sense that they become a by product, Indian as well as American, that is they assimilate from the American culture whatever enables them to live a comfortable life in the alien culture.

In India, Ashima gets opportunity to do things she could do only in India with freedom and enjoy freedom and fulfil her desires, which was perhaps impossible in America. But the children hate trips to India, which for them is alien.

Here Bhabha rightly observed that;

"Each time the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceed the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and — most important — leaves a resistant trace, a stain of...a moment in which the demand for identification becomes, primarily, a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture and politics" (Bhabha, 50).

This is the definition of cultural identity accepted and lived through by Ashima and Ashokee. This is the "cultural identity" they want to give to their children, want them to recognize and accept it as they do.

Ashima begins to feel deprived of company and communication, which would have never experienced, probably, had it been in India; "Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their distance from her, is something she will never understand. Still, she had not argued with them. This, too, she is beginning to learn" (TN, 166).

Ashima's physical maternity begins early in *The Namesake*. At the very commencement of the novel, Ashima is pregnant, arriving in Cambridge, Massachusetts from Calcutta, India. She almost immediately gives birth to and rears Gogol, but the rearing Ashima takes on is greater than traditional childbearing, and, as Gogol soon learns during his own coming-of-age story, is generously bestowed on many Americans who have no blood ties to himself or Ashima. Indeed, Ashima purposefully becomes a mother of culture for herself, her son and many young Bengali-Americans, both early on in the novel and in its later pages, where she fosters new cultural transmissions with her Caucasian American friends.

At the sum up it is observed that in diasporic fiction, feminine sensibility was focussed through women's problems and search for identity on the "foreign" land. In Lahiri's novel, the first-generation immigrants of early 21st century both male and female, who share ones history and culture, also share the similarity of experience in adjusting to life in a foreign land. Lahiri starts with the cultural displacement of Ashima. *The Namesake* opens with Ashima making an Indian snack from a spicy rack. She is portrayed as a woman who has accepted her role as a wife, moved countries and has found herself in a dependent situation. Yet, as Lahiri has presented Ashima as a dutiful mother and wife. She also presented Bengali culture and family. While she doesn't assert 'stereotypical' feminism in her life, she exudes acceptance and contentment. On a land where people enough freedom here, Ashima's cultural upbringing teaches her to be content with Indian terdition. There is a fascinating anti-feminism sentiment as Lahiri shows how traditional gender roles, often looked upon as sub-ordinate in the Western world, brings a quiet sense of empowerment. She is the Indian wife living in the suburbs of Boston, keeping a balance between Bengali traditions, nurturing her children and working in a library while fighting the pressures to become an assimilated American. In Western context, she conforms to the stereotype. However, Lahiri brilliantly steers away the reader from thinking about this woman in the Western context by reminding us of her transnational identity. The role of a mother or a wife transcends a different kind of strength in her culture back home. It is apt and essential to mention here that Jhumpa Lahiri's engagement with the problem of cultural identity of the Indian diaspora springs from her own diasporic status. Born in London to Bengali parents who subsequently migrated to America, Lahiri was raised on Rhode Island. She belongs to the category of "ABCD" or American-Born Confused Desi (an acronym she uses in the novel to describe the difficulties experienced by the U.S.-born children of Indian parents). Lahiri has appropriately highlighted by the dialogues and untold tales of women specially Ashima. Lahiri presents a manifestation of Bengali- American Feminism that is not purely American, not purely Bengali, which could prove insightful to the Feminist discussion over the local and global connections.

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