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VOICING THE EXPATRIATE SENSIBILITY THROUGH ASHIMA AND GOGOL IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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Abstract

The journey of the Indian English novels dates back the time when there was not so much nerve and passion among the readers but it has witnessed a lot of alternation to get chick, accommodating and vivacious cantour. The emergence of the female novelists in the twentieth century has brought out a radical shift and it has given a new direction to the people. It has been seen that generally women novelists have portrayed only women-centric concerns in their works but some women writers have written about their immigrant experiences through their enthralling storytelling style, interesting plot and impressive narration. In the past a few decades, many women writers of prominence such as Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Anita Nair, etc. have lucidly explored the immigrants' feminist sensibility in the foreign countries. Their cross-cultural experiences in the West remain the most traumatic as they start thinking themselves rootless and placeless both in their host country and in their native country. This paper intends to shed light on the nuances faced by the two characters Ashima Gangoli and her son, Gogol in a country that considers them nothing but outsiders.

Keywords

Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*, Immigration, Cultural Clash, Liminality, Syncretic Tendencies, Feminism, Ashima, Patriarchy, Assimilation, Indian Women's Writings.

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People migrate from one country to another to realize their dreams and fulfill materialistic pursuits. Many of them emerge as writers and they write about their foreign experiences, homesickness, nostalgia, alienation, displacement, selflessness, etc. Bhikhu Parekh et al. write that “[Indian Diaspora] is like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life spread out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one who the rest dries up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world” (Parekh et al. 106). Though the immigrants get name, fame and money in the other countries but ‘the homing desire of the migrant’ (Brah 180) keeps haunting them and they are considered as outsiders in their host countries. They feel so alienated that sometimes they think to return to their native country. Kushaba Salunke also observes, “Alienation is the part of experience of the Indian Diaspora and even if people are at home in part of the world, it does not mean that they will not become victims of the sense of alienation” (Salunke 41). Among such writers, Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, generally known as Jhumpa Lahiri, is one of the foremost Indian English women novelists who have won many prestigious awards and honours in the literary circle. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for her short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*. Nadia Anwar remarks about Jhumpa Lahiri’s works, “In Lahiri’s works, there is not lurking nostalgia for their past traditions and relations, rather it is a great desire to give up old world with all its fears and constraints” (Anwar 13). Lahiri’s first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) was made into a film. Her second collection of short stories titled *Unaccustomed Earth* was published in 2008. Her novel *Whereabouts*, published in 2021, is an intriguing novel about an unnamed narrator of around forty at an unknown place. Presently, Jhumpa Lahiri lives in Rome, Italy.

The novel *The Namesake* is the story of cultural clash and the fractured identity of two characters Ashima and Gogol who feel much alienated in the United States. Gwendolyn Foster writes that, “Identity is also a form of translation ... from who one is to who one is perceived to be” (Foster 102). Ashima’s pet name is Monu and all the persons of her family call her by this name only. She was a college student when Ashoke Ganguli comes to her home as prospective suitor and she comes to know that Ashoke will go to America as he had applied to MIT

and received a fellowship to study engineering there. Ashima has been depicted as a naïve girl who feels much nonplussed to think about her foreign life. After their marriage, they start living in their apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashima's problems begin due to her gender, language barrier and also because her husband does not allow her to go outside alone. She feels disturbed because she has to live alone the whole day during the absence of her husband. Ashu Yadav writes about this novel, "The theme of alienation, of being a stranger in a foreign land, is prominent throughout the novel" (Yadav 400). Stuart Hall writes that migrants like Ashima face identity crisis. He writes:

Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (Hall 223)

When the novel opens, Ashima is pregnant and she is depicted busy doing her household chores, "She wipes sweat from her face with the free end of her sari. ... Her pelvis aches with baby's weight" (Lahiri1). When her husband returns, labour pains start and they go to the hospital for delivery but the medical staff tells Ashoke that delivery may take time, "Don't you worry, Mr Ganguli. She's got a long ways to go. We can take over from here" (Lahiri3). Ashima's problems are multiplied when she has to spend the night alone in the labour pain. When she tries to talk to the hospital staff members on duty, they ignore her. Her husband also leaves her at night. She feels alone among strangers. Jhumpa Lahiri writes about it:

It is the first time in her life she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents or with Ashoke at her side. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American woman. (Lahiri3)

She feels nostalgic and thinks that in India when a woman is in labour pains, women do not leave her alone and keep boosting her morale till her delivery. She thinks that generally Indian women go to their parents' home in order to get some mental solace. She ponders over it, "In India she thinks to herself, women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, recreating briefly to childhood when baby arrives" (Lahiri 4). Her husband returns in the morning and she gives birth to a son. Before her discharge, the hospital staff asks the name of the child but they face problems because Ashima's grandmother had not replied regarding the suggested name of the newborn baby. Ashoke put his name Gogol after discussion with Ashima. Ashoke's Bengali friends also come to see the child. It was the time that Ashima does not feel good in the USA and she puts pressure on Ashoke to return to India:

"What are you saying, Ashima?"

"I'm saying, hurry up and finish your degree." And then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol in this country. It is not right. I want to go back." (Lahiri33)

America remains a dream for millions of men and in fact, Ashoke also does not want to do this mistake, keeping in mind the remorse of one of his friends who told him that "It is my greatest regret coming back" (Lahiri33). Ashima gives birth to the second child, a girl now. Thus, Ashima faces problems alone and being a wife, she cannot return to India without her husband and children.

Ashima remains much alienated and estranged. She refuses to learn driving and prefers to wear her Indian clothes without caring for others' comments. Though Ashima does not feel comfortable in America but she feels a bit relaxed when she finds that her children like living in America and call it their country. Though the American ways, lifestyle and culture mystify and frustrate her a lot but she starts living her life for the happiness of her children. It shows the sacrifice of a mother for her children. To please herself, she starts organizing small gatherings with other Indian families. She becomes a locus of Bengali immigrant activities and shares Indian dishes made with available American ingredients. Even other women also come to her for advice in cuisine, "The wives homesick and bewildered turned to Ashima for recipes and advice" (Lahiri 38).

Her son Gogol also faces difficulty in the USA because his name, Gogol looks awkward in the American school and the students make fun of his name saying "Giggle" or "Goggle" (Lahiri 67), that's why his parents decide to change his name from Gogol to Nikhil. Gogol does not like his new name but his old name also become a nuisance to him. His father tells him, "Don't worry... To me and your mother, you will never be anyone but Gogol" (Lahiri 57).

Gogol's name creates many problems for him. When Gogol was studying in his elementary school and the school principal examines his immunization card, he finds that his name is Gogol. He asks Gogol's father whether Nikhil is Gogol's middle name or a nickname. His father gets much irritated by this question and replies gallingly, "No, no, it's not a middle name...he has no middle name. No nickname. The boy's good name, his school name, is Nikhil" (Lahiri 59). Thus, both Ashima and Ashoke face many problems in Cambridge. The novel has ample illustrations where both the characters are seen striving for their identity: Jyoti Arora contends about both the characters:

Through the character of Ashima, Lahiri affirms her Bengali cultural identity and substantiates it as a reality in multicultural America by first incorporating and then by imposing Bengali culture on the American platform. On the other hand, Gogol as the second-generation protagonist becomes an extension of writer's own sense of dual identity as he struggles with a sense of namelessness. (Arora 757)

Another problem is that Ashoke and Ashima want their children to adhere to the Bengali culture and they send Gogol to learn Bengali language and culture lessons on weekends but Gogol does not take much interest in these classes. The native Americans consider him an outsider. Gogol feels much embarrassed due to his name, and he asks his father why he put his name Gogol. His father narrates about it in the below conversation:

"I feel a special kinship with Gogol," Ashoke says, "more than with any other writer. Do you know why?"

"You like his stories."

"Apart from that. He spent most of his adult life outside his homeland. Like me."

Gogol nods, "Right." (Lahiri 77)

The children face another problem. They fall ill whenever they visit to India. "Doctors come to the house in the evening with stethoscope in black leather bags" (Lahiri 86). They are the products of America and they think that they have no roots in India while Ashima finds her roots in India. This is merely the ideological difference of the members of the same family.

Gogol faces problems because the American girls do not give him much importance due to his Indian roots. To assimilate into the new culture, he starts accepting that he is Nikhil. He tells his name Nikhil to his girlfriend, Kim for the first time, "I'm Nikhil" (Lahiri 96). Kim likes

his new name and kisses him. Gogol runs his hand through her hair. Lahiri writes about this experience, "It is the first time he's kissed anyone, the first time he's felt a girls' face and body and breathe so close to his own" (Lahiri96). His friends also get surprised to see Gogol's boldness and one of his friends says to him, "I can't believe you have kissed her, Gogol" (Lahiri 96). After that, he starts taking an interest in other girls also:

It is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party at Ezra Stiles, with a girl wearing a plaid woolen skirt and combat boots and mustard tights. By the time he wakes up, hung over, at three in the morning, she has vanished from the room, and he is unable to recall his name. (Lahiri 105)

Gogol is preoccupied with the unfolding of his new and challenging life in America that transcends the Bengalese culture of his parents. He gets many negative feedbacks due to his name, his Indian roots and the traditional lifestyle of his family. He thinks to transform himself by all means. A girl Maxine also comes in his life but he leaves her when his father dies.

Gogol's relationships with a Bengali girl, Moushumi also do not last for a long time. Though they get married but Moushumi is not so simple like other Bengali girls. She starts having interest in other boys. She leaves Gogol for her high school crush, Damaitri. Gogol feels broken after his separation.

Gogol's mother, Ashima also faces many problems. Even before Gogol's marriage with Moushumi, Ashoke tells one day by calling Ashima that he has stomachache and he is in the hospital, "My stomach has been bothering me since morning" (Lahiri 164). Later when Ashima contacts the hospital, she is shocked to know that Ashoke is no more. Ashima's life is filled with uncertainty and complications after her husband's death. After a few years, her son Gogol's marriage also breaks. Ashima spends six months in India and six months in the United States of America. Md Abdul Jabbar S K also writes about Ashima, "In the end of the novel *The Namesake* we find Ashima preparing to go back to Calcutta. But she undergoes a drastic change in her attitude. She is not the same person as she was in the beginning of the story" (Jabbar 437).

Thus, towards the end of the novel, Ashima is seen in the company of her younger brother, Rana and his wife in Salt Lake. She passes her time in the company of her son, with her daughter and her Bengali friends. Major and minor tragic events change her drastically and she starts handling many things herself as Jhumpa Lahiri narrates, "She has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her longer hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta" (Lahiri 277). She felt lonely when her husband left her alone in the apartment in her youth and in this age also, circumstances make her feel alienated and disenchanted. Her pain has been described in the following words:

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. (278)

Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* is about the rootlessness, placelessness and identity crisis of two characters, Gogol and Ashima who are representatives of two generations, having many differences but the common thread of link between them is that both have been depicted as outsider in the novel. So, in spite of the various possibilities, problems and the process of shaping and asserting their identity, both Ashima and Gogol, more or less, have a common fate and experience as migrants and their failed attempts to assimilate in a foreign culture and their frustration and exasperation have been deftly depicted by the novelist.

The whole analysis compares these two characters and their comparison brings home the point that both these characters remain dissatisfied and rootless in their life. It is also seen that the concept of belonging of these two characters enormously prevails in the whole novel. Lahiri has painted their characters with vibrant hues, and thematic representation, and the setting of the novel also offers the contrast of two different cultures. In this respect, the analysis focuses on the cultural and tragic shocks of Gogol and his mother. Ashima also comes to know the futility of the materialistic things in her life. She also feels lonely and is unable to share her grief with anyone. The novel depicts the autonomy and her independence focusing on her leanings to adopt neo-orientalist paradigms. Reshmi Lahiri-Roy also remarks about Ashima, "Ashima's character appears to signify the transcreation of a new Bengali-American identity" (Roy 10).

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