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## **SELF-ALIENATION OF ASHIMA IN AMERICA AS THE CONSEQUENCE OF HER STEADFASTNESS IN INDIAN CULTURAL HABITS: A STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE***

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### **Abstract**

The native Indian women who belong to the orthodox families are not allowed to move or mingle with other men as friends other than their blood brothers even before their marriage. They are forced to remain isolated in their respective rooms even though they are educated. Even if they enter into marital life through arranged marriage as per the cultural habits of their families, they are not expected to move with other men. Being traditionally brought up, they get used to this kind of familial and marital alienation. Hence, they never try to establish their individuality and independence against their brought up. Neither do they display their agony of alienation explicitly. Many modern women come out violating all their cultural, religious and patriarchal restraints and thereby they assert their individuality and independence. Many educated women get married to Indian men who are living as immigrants in America or England or any other alien countries with their advanced professional status. After their marriage, they go with their husbands, entertaining a hope that they can lead an independent life, enjoy their individuality without any patriarchal and matriarchal restraints, and mingle with all the people such as the natives and the other immigrants of the country of their immigration. They go with this thinking by taking into account that the other side is always greener and freer for establishing relationship. But the immigrant life becomes like their falling from frying pan into fire because they get alienated by the natives to which they have migrated and feel terribly lonely. The writer of this article has explored how a married Bengali woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* Ashima who is every inch traditional in her ways of life even before and after marriage keeps herself alienated from the natives and the immigrants of other nationalities during her immigrant life in America before and after the death of her husband. Self-alienation of Ashima is mainly because of her fidelity to her traditional brought up.

### **Keywords**

Tradition, Steadfastness, Alienation, Helplessness

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### **Introduction:**

The life of Indian New women as the natives before and after their marriage continues to be very hard because they have made attempts to establish their independent individuality only through their violations of all the cultural habits with which they have been brought up from their childhood. Their acts of violation have been not only due to their misconceived notion of feminism but also their wrong application of the principles of feminism to such violations. As a result, they have to suffer patriarchal and matriarchal imposed alienation of all types during their familial and marital life. Their life as the Indian immigrants and Diaspora in alien lands like America have become harder still when they have found themselves placed in the midst of multiculturalists. Those who can change themselves according to the multi cultural style of the alien society cope with their situations to a greater certain extent and move with all forgetting about their traditional brought up. But those who cannot adjust themselves to the changing scenario feel isolated and live a life of loneliness with agonized mind.

There is no doubt that women after their arranged marriage with the Indian men professionally settled in America go with greater expectations that they can lead a life of independence without any cultural and patriarchal restrictions. They also entertain the thought that as they are in America, they should be Americans in their ways of living lest they should be alienated as the strangers to the native culture by the Americans. There are a few Indian women immigrants who continue to remain diehard still even in America. Such women not only refuse to accept the changing situations during their immigrant life but also refrain from following alien cultural habits existing in American society. They continue to remain traditional, turn down their new identity as Indian Americans by following their cultural habits. This kind of Indian immigrant attitude keeps them naturally alienated from the Americans. As these Indian immigrants are culturally different from the natives and the immigrants of other nationalities, they find themselves more like square pegs in the round holes of the multi-culturalistic American society.

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Their inability to adopt themselves to the people of different cultural habits force them to feel companionless, alienated and mentally upset due to the happenings to them. Jhumpa Lahiri's protagonist in *The Namesake* Ashima is one such Indian immigrant in America.

## Analysis:

Ashima is a traditional Indian woman in spirit and deeds. She remains faithful to all her Indian cultural and religious habits wherever she is. Hence, she cannot adjust herself to her American multicultural life after her marriage with Ashoke. She tries to move only with other Bengali immigrant women:

Every week end [for Ashima] there is a new home to go to, a new couple or young family to meet [because] they all have come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends. Most of them live within walking distance of one another in Cambridge . . . The [married women who are] homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for [Indian] recipes . . . they sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore. (38)

But at the same time, she continues to be in touch with her relatives in India regarding the time and period of her observation of Indian special days and ceremonies during her immigrant life. Thus, she tries to preserve Indian ways of living in an American multicultural environment. Being traditional to the core, she never calls her husband by name as Americans and other immigrants do. She follows only Indian way of cooking and serving it to her husband and for herself in all situations and under all circumstances. Even during her pregnant period, she takes only homemade drinks she prepares herself:

[As and when she needs something to take or drink] she combines rice krispies and planter peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chilli pepper, wishing [that] there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. She has been consuming the concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of a snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks. (1)

Thus, she alienates herself not only from mixing with other women immigrants other than the those who are from her Calcutta but also from the American dishes, which all other Indian immigrants take.

Ashima goes through another anxiety as an Indian pregnant woman in an alien land without her mother to assist her during pregnancy. If she were in India before and after delivery, she would not bother about herself in raising her child all alone because her mother and other Indian native women will be always with her. As she is in America and all alone in her pregnant status, "She [feels] 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" (5). Had she not alienated herself from moving with the American native and other immigrant women, followed American cultural habits and moved with all in America without any difference, she would not have felt loneliness and helplessness. She would have felt at home in America too. As an Indian immigrant in America, she should have felt like an American in America but she has not entertained such a feeling. Hence, her agony is indescribable in her self-warranted alienated life. However, she frees herself from her loneliness and homesickness by going out and visiting super-markets in order to buy groceries all alone.

When she is in the supermarket, she is seen pushing a stroller in the midst of all other American and other immigrant mothers. At once and for the first time, she begins to feel that she is not all alone and enjoys her independent individuality.

Ashima, after giving birth to a male baby, begins to feel that she is not alone at home and there is another one who is always with her and it is none other than her first son Gogol. Things keep changing in her familial life after the birth of her first son and yet she remains rooted to her traditional ways of living. She is not able to forget her native Calcutta. As and when she thinks of her immigrant marital life:

She feels completely dislocated from her comfortable home of her home to that of her foreign home. Most of the time, she used to think about the activities going on there. Ashima progressively adjusts herself to the new environment and devises a schedule for herself where she absolutely merges herself in looking after Gogol, her son, who demands her extreme commitment. (Mangayarkarasi 58)

Soon there is another addition to her family and it is her second female child Sonia. In taking care of her two children all alone, she establishes her individuality. She gains confidence and independence when she is completely free from alienated life at home because of her two children. She does not mind her two children being American children in their eating habits. She allows them to buy American food items like tuna, mayonnaise and bologna even though she confines herself to eating only Indian foods cooked at home.

Adding fuel to the fire of her self-alienated life, the death of her mother and her husband saddens Ashima's heart and makes her feel lonely even though she has two children with her:

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently all alone . . . She feels impatient over the rest of her earthly days she has to live [without her husband in alien country]. But at the same time, something tells her [that] she will not go quickly as her husband did. For thirty-three years she has missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, and the women with whom she's worked....She will miss the country in which she has grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house, and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (278)

Her self-alienated life and steadfastness to her Indian cultural habits in America give her courage and brave life all alone. Loss is a loss for ever and thinking of the unbearable loss is a kind of excruciating experience to immigrant Ashima. She plans to spend six months in India and the next six months in America with her children and friends. She will be like the one "without borders, without a home of her own, [but] a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276).

## **Conclusion:**

All those married Indian women immigrants in America need not act like New Women to enjoy their individuality and independence by being one with the natives of America in their ways of living. Some married Indian women still continue to follow Indian cultural habits without identifying themselves with the natives by following their cultural ways of living. Such women are exemplary ones for other Indian women follow in America. By remaining Indian in following the

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traditional life even in alien countries is an individual trait. Since such women do not ape Americans, they look different from the natives and so they are a separate entity in multicultural societal life of America. Any Indian woman living like that during her immigrant life is a different one and so she keeps herself alienated without becoming a drop of in the ocean of multicultural sea. She keeps her Indian identity wherever she is. Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is such a woman who keeps her identity intact through her steadfastness to Indian culture.

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