

The Tension between the Family Tradition and Individual Freedom

in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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The emergence of female writers in the current literary sphere is quiet inevitable. In their works, the female writers explore various women-centered issues like Feminism, gender discrimination, nostalgia, marginalization etc., with powerful character portrayals. They loudly knock at the door of the world and the world looks back with enthusiasm. With their elegant style, enthralling storytelling, many women writers overtake the men of letters. Feminism is one of the most important subject matters today. Feminism is a doctrine advocating social, political and economic rights for women equal to those of men. It is an attitude favoring the movement to eliminate all types of discriminations against women. It is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining and establishing equal opportunities for women in education, employment and all walks of life. Feminists have worked to protect women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. Feminist theory aims at understanding gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality.

The history of Indian English novels, a journey which began long back has witnessed a lot of alteration to gain today's chic cantour. In the past few years many writers of prominence have made a mark on the Indian Diaspora. Eminent writers like Anita Desai, Shoba De, Bharathi Mukherjee, Sashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri etc, have given Indian English novel a whole new level. Their novels include various concepts of fact and fiction and are based on current events and recent social problems. They shire hard to endeavor a solution for making the female gender get rid of all discriminations.

Women writers explore old wives tales, condemn exploitation and try to make sense of the fast changing pace of the new world. KamalaDass explores women's plight in India and the world. Shashi Deshpande paints characters who blame their own complacence for their remorseful condition. Arundati Roy begins her story without a beginning and does not

end it. Jhumpa Lahiri's well-crafted tales move at a perfect pace. Apart from them, a number of women writers portray the suppression of women in their novels.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a Bengali American author whose debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Immediately her's is a popular name worldwide known for her ability to engross the readers in the different dimensions of the stories. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) brought her more laurels to fix a permanent place among the leading women writers. The novel was adapted into the popular film of the same name directed by Mira Nair. Lahiri is a member of the President's committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by the U.S. President BarakObama. She was born on July 11, 1967 in London, the daughter of Bengali Indian immigrants, her family moved to the United States when she was at the age of three. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Anar Lahiri worked as a Librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, so her family often visited relatives in Calcutta. These frequented visits make her understand the condition of her homeland and its culture. In 2008, *Unaccustomed Earth* was published. It is a collection of short Stories.

Since 2005, Lahiri has been a Vice President of the PEN American Center, an Organization designed to promote friendship and intellectual cooperation among writers. In February 2010, she was appointed a member of the committee on the Arts and Humanists along with five others. Jhumpa has also had a distinguished relationship with The New Yorker Magazine. In 2013, her latest novel *The Lowlands* was published and was immediately short listed for Booker Prize. But the air of fortune does not fly on her side, she now lives in Fort Greene, Brooklyn with her husband *Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush*, a journalist who was once a Deputy Editor of TIME Latin America and her and two children, Octavio (b.2002) and Noor (b.2005). She was awarded a number of reputed organizations.

The Namesake (2003) is the second by Lahiri. It was originally a novella published in The New Yorker and was later expanded to a full length novel. It exports putitzer prize-winning *Interpreter of Maladies*. Moving between events in Calcutta, Boston and New

York City, the novel examines the nuances involved with being caught between two conflicting cultures with their highly distinct religious, social and ideological differences.

The Novel describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to from a life outside of everything they are accustomed to. The story begins as Asoke and Ashima Leave Calcutta, and settles in Central Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Through a series of errors, their son's nickname. Gogol becomes his official birth name, an event which will shape many aspects of his life.

As *The Namesake* opens, Ashima Ganguli is a young bride who is about to deliver her first child in a hospital in Massachussets, her husband, Asoke is an engineering student at the Massachussets Institute of Technology (MIT). As she prepares to give birth, she realizes how isolated she has become. If she was still in Calcutta, she would have her baby at home, surrounded by all the women in her family who would administer all the proper Bengali ceremonies and would tell her what to expect. In the United States, Ashima struggles through language and cultural barriers as well as her own fears, a woman's fear, as she delivers her first child. The baby boy is healthy and the new parents are prepared to take their son home. But Ashima and Ashoke are stunned to learn that they cannot leave the hospital before they give their son a legal name. The traditional naming process in their families is to have an elder give the new baby a name. They have chosen Ashima's Grandmother for this honour. They have written the grandmother to also to give the baby a name. But the letter never arrives and soon after the grandmother dies. In the meantime. Asoke suggests the name of Gogol. He chooses this name for two reasons.

First, it is the name of his favorite author, the famous Russian writer. The second reason is that Asoke, before he was married, had been in a very serious accident. The train he was riding in had derailed. Many people died. Asoke had broken his back and could not move. He had been reading Gogol just before the accident. He had a page of that book clutched in his hand. The paper caught the attention of the medics who had come to rescue him. If it had not been for that page, acting as a flag in the darkness, Asoke could have died.

While he insists on being called Gogol in elementary school, by the time he turns 14 he starts to hate the name. His father tries once to explain the significance of it. But he senses that Gogol is not old enough to understand. As Gogol progresses through High school he hates his name more and more. He informs his parents that he wishes to change his name. His father is rather indifferent to the idea and agrees. Shortly before leaving for college, he travels to the court house and has his name legally changed to Nikhil Gogol Ganguly. When Gogol goes off to college, he uses his public name. This change in name and Gogol's going to Yale, rather than following his father's footsteps to MIT, sets up the barrier between Gogol and his family. The distance, both geographically and emotionally between Gogol and his parents continues to increase. Gogol wants to be American, not Bengali.

He goes home less frequently, dates American girls and becomes angry when any one calls him Gogol. During his college days, he smokes cigarettes and marijuana goes to many parties and loses his virginity to a girl he cannot remember. When he goes home for the summer. Gogol's train is suddenly stopped and temporarily loses electricity. A man had jumped in front of the train and committed suicide. The waiting for the authorities causes a long delay. Ashoke, who is waiting at the train station for Gogol becomes very concerned when he calls the train company and hears of this incident.

When they pull into the Ganguly's drive away, Ashoke turns off the car and finally explains the true significances of Gogol's name. Gogol is deeply troubled by this news, asking his father why he didn't tell him this earlier. He starts to regret changing his name and changing his identity. He lives in a very small apartment in New York City where he has landed a job in an established architectural office after graduating from Columbia. He is rather stiff personality wise, perpetually angry or else he always on the lookout for someone to make a stereo typical comment about his background.

At a party, Gogol meets a very attractive and rather socially aggressive Barnard girl named Maxine. Gogol becomes completely wrapped up in her family. Maxine's parents are financially well off and live in a four-story house in New York City. Maxine has one floor to herself and invites Gogol to move in. Gogol becomes a member of the family,

helping with the cooking and shopping. Maxine's parents appear to have accepted him as a son. When Maxine's parents leave the city for the summer, they invite Maxine and Gogol to join them for a couple of weeks. They are staying in the mountains in New Hampshire, where her grandparents live. For a while Gogol is fixed on this very American family. Gogol introduces Maxine to his parents. Ashima dismisses Maxine that Gogol will eventually get over. Shortly after this meeting, Asoke dies of a heart attack while he is working on a temporary project in Ohio. Gogol travels to Ohio to gather his father's belonging and his father's ashes. Something suddenly changes inside Gogol.

He slowly with draws from Maxine as he tries to sort out his emotions. Maxine tries to pressure him to open up to her. Gogol breaks off the relationship and begins to spend more time with his mother and sister Sonia. After sometime, Ashima has gone by, suggesting that Gogol contact the daughter of one of her friend from her roots. Gogol knows the girl from his childhood. Her name is Moushimi. Gogol is reluctant to meet Moushimi for two reasons, she is Bengali and she is recovering from having been shamed. But he meets her anyway to please her mother.

Moushimi and Gogol are attracted to one another and are married. However, by the end of their first year of marriage, Moushimi becomes restless. She feels tied down by marriage and begins to regret what she has done. Gogol suspects something wrong and often feels like a poor substitute for Moushimi's ex-fiancé, Graham who abandoned her. Oneday, Moushimi comes across the name of a man she knew when she was a senior in high school. She often contacts him and they begin an affair. Gogol finds out. Moushimi and Gogol divorce. The story ends with Ashima selling the family home so she can live in India with her siblings for half of the year. Sonia is preparing to marry an American named Ben. Gogol is once again insolated. But he feels comforted by one thing: before his father died, he finally told his son why had chosen that name for him. Lahiri skillfully winds up the novel by making Gogol accept his name and picks up a collection of the Russian author's stories that his father has given him as a birthday present many years ago.

Despite all his efforts, Gogol could not ignore the memories of his past-his name his parents, his Indian heritage. After his father's death, he realizes that he can't simply walk

away from who he is and begins to feel that his efforts to create an entirely new person are just reactions against the past. In order to make peace with his past, he accepts his heritage which is highly displaced in his new land. And the lesson he learns as a student paves the way for a peaceful future. He finds himself increasingly drawn to his heritage. The Omission of a concrete ending serves as a final reminder of Lahiri's focus on the tension between the past and present. Thus the story of Gogol develops progressively through the novel into the allegorical saga of cultural displacements.

With penetrating insight, Lahiri's writing is characterized by the "plain" language and her characters, often Indian immigrants to America. They must navigate between the cultural values of their homeland and their adopted home. Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar, she examines her displaced characters' struggle, anxiety, nostalgia, alienation and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychologies and behavior. *The Namesake* is a best example. The story spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguly family. The Calcutta-born parents immigrated as young adults to the United States where their children grow up experiencing the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. Ashima is a victim who has to leave her own home land and love. The early chapters deal with her longing for her siblings and the pain is beyond explanation.

Leaving their parents and all relatives, Women in India suffer a lot at a particular age. But as an immigrant her nostalgia is worse than that of her son Gogol who thrives and is puzzled with his own name. Even though his identity crisis is the main plot of *The Namesake*, his mother Ashima is the heart of the story. While the other characters do not show a lot of emotion, Ashima is the one who feels. So it's through her, Lahiri brings out the feelings of alienation, cultural shock and homelessness that many immigrants feel. As the title of this paper suggests, Ashima travels in a river called life with a foot in two boats - India and the United States.

At the beginning of the novel Ashima is the most conservative member of the Bengali family. She misses her life back in Calcutta terribly and has troubles setting into her new American life. Unlike Ashoke, who attends graduate school, Ashima is isolated in

Cambridge, with no friends of her own in alien land. In Calcutta she would have had the company of siblings, parents, cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles who shower their true love and affections on her but now they are thousands of miles away. In Cambridge, Ashima is surrounded by strangers and she does not quite feel that she fits in. There are new customs to learn, new ways of doing things. Though Ashima seems to be apparently comfortable with her children to take care of, the same irritation and loneliness remain the same.

At the beginning, Ashima gets engrossed in the reminiscence of the past. Feeling of nostalgia clouded her mind when she was taken to the hospital, she gave birth to her first child. She forgot the labour pains when she dreamt about the illusionary world. There is a feeling of insecurity in her when she thinks of parenting her child in a foreign land. When the immigrant group enters a new land it faces the problem of communication in a foreign language and experience language shock, culture shock and culture stress. Language and culture are inseparable. Jhumpa Lahiri visualizes the picture of Bengali culture through the most dominating character Ashima who moves towards reconstruction, assimilation towards the host culture.

Ashima perceives migration to America as a process of alienation and exile. What she receives in the new world is often overshadowed by the pains of what has been lost by leaving home. However, at the end of the novel, when she prepares to return to India, Ashima is presented as feeling that her America experience is not simply one pain and loss. This is reflected in the things she carries back with her, the fact that she will periodically return to America and her realization that, like India America and its way of life too have become an integral part of herself. The hyphen in the Indian-American identity is not an indicator of conflict but suggest the necessary mingling of two cultures.

Traumatized by the sense of being alienated forever in the adopted world, Ashima's condition is very poignant. As she feels the complete difference from what she has known in her new habitation and is baffled in her search for the familiar in the new milieu, Ashima suffers from, "anxiety arising from a sense of weightlessness, a lack of safe anchorage (126) Ashima is not shown to relish the prospect of re-fashioning herself in

America by exploring newer avenues. In America, she is never depicted as attempting to discard the Indian norms and customs, the Indianness which caused her to terminate her education and enter into marriage before she was ready for it. For her, moving away from her native land is predominantly a painful experience.

In *The Namesake*, although for Ashima, immigration to America largely entails a loss of the familiar and a desperate struggle to retain unblemished her Indian identity and heritage. A first time pregnant woman who is about to deliver a baby in India is surrounded by her dear and near ones. But Lahiri's character in United States in the novel is threatened by otherisation.

It is for 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 Asoke at her side. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American women. Perhaps one of them has given birth before, can tell her what to expect....(3)

Her anxiety to know the labour pain is vividly portrayed here. Her deep longing and the need of her mother, grandmother, and other relations shows that she has been caught up in an unknown country. The pain of being physically and psychologically distanced from her native back home is combined for her with the torments of an increasingly developing gap with her American-born children and their behavioural changes. She disapproves of her children's Americanized ways. She is dissatisfied when Gogol gets involved in affairs with white women like Ruth and Maxine. She is upset when her teenaged daughter Sonia wants an Americanized look by colouring her hair or getting additional ear piercings. Ashima's clothing is always Indian. She is completely happy and herself only during her visits to India.

It is true that even after living in America for thirty-three years. Ashima cannot embrace the prospect of living completely by herself in America. With Sonia's engagement she has to return to India to live with her brother and his family. Yet, as she prepares to depart, Ashima is shown to realise that Calcutta, the home whose memories have sustained her through her years abroad, is "now in its own way foreign to her" (278). She is

portrayed as understanding that both she and the world she has left behind have grown without each other, and, consequently, she will not be able to claim back her old world niche:

For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formedshe will miss the opportunity to driveshe will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes had been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house, in this town that he will continue to dwell in the mind. (279)

Ashima has experienced the different phases of her life as a wife, a mother and a widow in America. This country has shaped her persona; here, she evolved from a woman completely dependent on her husband for survival in a foreign land to one who has learned to do things on her own. Unlike in the past, her life in Calcutta can no longer be complete by itself. That the immigrant experience has not been merely one of pain and distress is evident from the fact that Ashima is shown to have chosen to continue her association and affinity with America. She will carry with her to Calcutta her American Passport, social security card and driver's license; she also plans to return to America every six months.

The thought of leaving America depresses her as it was once her home, which has now become a foreign land. Lahiri shows that all migrant carves their own 'route' in the course of time and it is not necessary that they want to settle in the countries of their origin thus enjoying the best of both cultures. Towards the end, Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone. 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.

Thus Jhumpa Lahiri is a master-crafter whose handling of the complexities of the immigrants experience in their various nuances in a simple and lucid manner. Through her stories, we learn bits and pieces about Indian life in diaspora and how Indians fit into their lives in America. Lahiri's familiarity with the difficulties faced by immigrant Bengali

issues related to identity, pain of assimilation, nostalgia, loneliness and cross-cultural issues are remarkably penned in her works. Her excellent mastery and command of language are amazingly helped her to posturize her characters. She writes so effortlessly and enchantingly. With her enthralling abilities in narration, she is one among the famous writers of today.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri vividly brings out Ashima's psychological conflict between her Bengali tradition and her own individuality. Ashima is one such a much applauded character whose struggle to cope with her adaptation in various places and fits herself in the places.

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