

The tumultuous journey of the diasporic women: A study of the female characters in Jhumpa

Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Diaspora was a word which was originally used for explaining the scattering of Jewish people who were forced to exile to Babylonia. The term was used by the ancient Greek to refer to citizens who migrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization. The diasporic writers explore multiculturalism, dislocation, isolation, alienation, frustration, identity crisis, cultural conflicts etc in their works. The paper focuses on the trauma, cultural conflicts and the problems faced by the women immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

Keywords: diaspora, alienation, women, displacement, cultural identity

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri is an emerging star of Indian Diaspora sky. Lahiri is a second generation Indian immigrant as she was born to Bengali parents who settled down in America two years after Lahiri's birth. People migrate to other countries for a better living. This becomes hard when they have to leave behind everything and adopt a new and strange culture. Most of the migrants are caught in between their own culture and host culture. They experience nostalgia, loss and pain and a cultural and emotional space in their life. The diasporic women face problems like social, cultural, religious, racial and ideological conflicts in the host country. They lack support and security even from their family. The novel *The Namesake* deals with the diverging experiences of two generations of immigrants Ashoke- Ashima and Gogol- Sonia, their children. It is the story of Ganguli family in Calcutta and Boston which tells us about the psychological disturbances, their experiences and perceptions, their growing up, one's identity and the circle of their life. This novel can be said as a tribute to Indian Women who leave their country and spent their whole lives in home for the sake of husband and children. This paper focuses on the Diasporic women in the novel especially Ashima.

Ashima - a true representative of Indian womanhood

The Namesake is the story of Ashima Bahaduri who becomes Ashima Ganguli after her marriage with Ashoke Ganguli. After marriage they move to Boston. When the book opens we see an upset, homesick Ashima who is emotionally detached from her parents and other family members. She is trying to recreate the taste of her favorite Indian snack, thereby trying to recreate the past. Ashima represents what Avtar Brah terms 'the homing desire of the migrant'. She is portrayed as a hesitant migrant of fixed origins. She represents the half of the of women community who are not ready to accept or adapt the cultural changes while being in the host country. The only reason why Ashima found herself in America was her marriage to Ashoke. Pregnancy period was hard for Ashima as she was alone and no one was there to soothe her in the alien land. She always felt

lonely and the surroundings were unfamiliar which nearly killed her feelings. Ashima was the only Indian in the hospital which made her more uncomfortable. She was afraid to raise a child in a country where she herself was an alien. She is nostalgic about her family in India. Once she says to Ashoke "I am saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (p.33). Hearing this Ashoke feels guilty. Ashima is determined to face everything. She bears the pain and gives birth to a baby boy alone in the alien land. She was ready to suffer anything for the sake of her child's good future. She becomes depressed again when she was unable to hold fast to the practices of her culture i.e. assigning name to new born by her grandmother. After coming back home from hospital she becomes more restless as she has to manage the baby alone and this finally leads to sleep deprivation. Later, she gives birth to her second child and she adjusts with every situation for the sake of her children. Unlike other Indian mothers, Ashima gives full freedom to her children. She taught them Indian culture but never forced them to practice it. After her husband's death Ashima becomes exhausted and again she feels lonely. She feels that now she had become alone permanently.

Another problem which comes to her life is her son's marriage. Gogol marries a Bengali girl Moushmi which was Ashima's choice. The marriage becomes a failure as Moushmi was in relation with another guy. They divorce and Moushmi chooses to live with her lover Dimitri and plans to leave for Paris. This clearly shows the difference between the first generation and second generation immigrants. Both Ashima and Moushmi belong to the same culture. Moushmi represents the multi cultural and the global identity of the second generation Indian Immigrants. This incident also points to the concept about marriage of first and second generation migrants. For Ashima, her life is her husband and everything which belonged to him are priceless but for Moushmi things related to Gogol were mere commodities without any importance. Ashima is a true representative of Indian womanhood for whom marriage is divine and her husband the embodiment of all positive qualities.

Ashima always remembered to follow the words of her elders “not to eat beef or wear skirts or cutoff her hair or forget her family” (p.37). The second generation never tried to follow the culture of their parents. They live a life of their own. Moushmi is a new generation Bengali, born and brought up in America. She is more exposed to America’s multicultural society. She is more westernized in her attitude and she has “privately vowed that she had never grown fully dependent on her husband” (p.247). This can be considered as a reason for the end of her marriage with Gogol.

Sonia, Ashima’s daughter is the other Second generation immigrant. She is more familiar with the American culture than Bengali culture. She visited Calcutta once but never felt it as her home. But she is familiar with Indian culture through her father and mother. Her parents never forced her to follow their culture. Displacement and marginality in Sonia’s case triggered a sense of alienation and nostalgia in her. Unlike Moushmi Sonia has a sense of duty. So she decides to look after her mother after the death of her father and marries her boyfriend Ben. Sonia’s sense of duty can be said to be acquired from her mother who never failed to perform her duties properly.

Conclusion

In Indian English fiction, women are always depicted as upholders of tradition and traditional values. They are considered as silent sufferers who have to dedicate their whole life for the sake of family. Ashima is born and brought up in India. So she never fails to uphold her traditional and cultural values even in America. Ashima as her name suggests “...will be without borders, without a home of her, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (p.276). She never failed to give importance to family and relationships as she belongs to Bengal not to America. Ashima always tried to uphold her traditional values against the materialistic values of America.

The Namesake focuses on the journeys which are undertaken by Ashima Ganguli both mentally and physically. Lahiri is a true representative of diaspora. She presents the distressing emotion of a woman living in foreign country through the existential struggle of Ashima. Ashima was cent percent true to the roles assigned to her as a daughter, granddaughter, wife and a mother and emerges a true winner.

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