

Transnational Diaspora Identity in JhumpaLahiri'sThe Namesake

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ABSTRACT: *This paper demonstrates the circumstances through which diasporic migration can create transnational identities for women who are otherwise not the agents of migration. JhumpaLahiri'sThe Namesake, focuses on the themes of: class, space and location; community, love, romance and the relationships with husband and children; the protagonist's lack of voice and muteness; the circumstances which lead her to a recognition and expression of her agency; the strategies that she uses to deal with absence and loss; her dawning self-reliance, at first as a coping mechanism but later leading to 'self-hood' and the development of an individual identity. I will conclude this paper by an analysis of how the novel creates possibilities for new diasporic and transnational gender identity.*

Keyword: *transnational, identity, gender, diaspora, class, space, location, community.*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

The diaspora rewrites home and presents new identities and subjectivities emerging within a confluence of heterogeneous cultures (Capello 2004:57).

Migration discourses are not usually approached through a female gaze. This paper contributes towards scholarship on female narrative of migration by exploring how traditional (male) immigrant discourses of alienation and loss can be positively subverted by a woman, liberating her from familiar norms and allowing them the space to interrogate their roles and create new, individual identities.

The milieu of JhumpaLahiri's text, a middle-class, suburban environment, creates a solitary, transnational identity, lived between countries, where travel between the land of birth and the land of adoption remains accessible.

Homi K. Bhabha, one of the seminal scholars of diaspora theory, in his influential and widely disseminated essay, 'Border Lives: The Art of the Present', argues that:

It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond....The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion (1994:1-2).

Bhabha is one of the originators of the contemporary discourse of 'narrative' constructions that arise from the 'hybrid' interactions emerging from transnational existence and cosmopolitan consciousness:

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated....Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference...is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation (Bhabha 1994:2-3).

Extrapolating on this idea of diaspora as social consciousness, contemporary feminist diasporic scholar, Chandra TalpadeMohanty, speaks of a 'feminism without borders' in which diaspora is border- crossing. She argues for a trans-cultural, feminist identity that seeks:

The simultaneous plurality and narrowness of borders and the emancipatory potential of crossing through, with, and over these borders. (Mohanty 2003:2)

Peggy Levitt (2001) further suggests that transnationalism is possible when streams of migration are continuous and circular, and allow the elements of the homeland, continuously to infuse immigrant life. In other words, a transnational identity is possible when ideas and people can flow back and forth and when the home identity of immigrants is not locked to the time when they left their country of origin.

To these scholars diaspora does not imply universality but the movements of ideas, images and people, who carry ideas and memories with them.

Analysis of Transnational Identity in The Namesake:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding (Lahiri 2004:49-50).

In her first novel, *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri uses the concept of the longed-for but irretrievably lost homeland to challenge the traditional construct of identity creation for one of her central characters, Ashima. The novel's protagonists all grapple with notions of shifting identity. But Ashima is the most vivid symbol of the argument that engagements of 'exile' can challenge the patriarchal and traditional constructs of 'home' to create new gender identities, in this case a contemporary, middle-aged, transnational woman. While women like Ashima are not agents of diasporic migration and in fact follow their men as passengers, they do not remain passive in the land of adoption. In fact, they are compelled by their challenging circumstances of loneliness and isolation and the trauma of migration to build new and dynamic identities.

The Namesake begins in the 1960s and traverses a period until the 2000s. It is the story of a young Bengali girl, Ashima, who is uprooted from her native and beloved Calcutta, India, to be married off to a young and promising Bengali academic, Ashoke, in Boston, America. In the novel Ashima is not a diasporic by choice as her husband Ashoke is. As the dutiful and obedient daughter of middle-class Bengali parents living in Calcutta in the early 1960s, she enters marriage, "obediently but without expectation" (Lahiri, 7). She marries the groom that her parents choose for her, grateful only that he is neither too old nor incapacitated (Lahiri, 7). The marriage is arranged by the two sets of parents and Ashoke and Ashima exert little personal choice in the decision and barely meet each other prior to the marriage: "It was only after the betrothal that she'd learned his name" (Lahiri, 9).

Following their wedding, the two virtual strangers, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, leave Calcutta for the cold climes of Cambridge, Massachusetts in America where Ashoke is studying for his PhD. Here Ashima confronts the unfamiliar cold, the unexpected smallness of her cramped, three-roomed house and comes to know her husband.

Growing up in Calcutta, surrounded by crowds of family and loved ones, Ashima finds her singular foreign-ness in Boston deeply unsettling after her ubiquitous rootedness in Calcutta. The lack of familiarity with her surroundings in Boston, the absence of a large and involved family, the strangeness of language, the sparse presence of her own community, all contribute to Ashima's sense of helplessness and isolation, "Nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all" (Lahiri, 6). And when some months after her arrival in Boston Ashima becomes pregnant with her first child Gogol, the experience of pregnancy, childbirth and the prospect of child-rearing in this land that feels so utterly foreign to her is almost more than she can bear.

For the next few years, Ashima's life follows the trajectory of success that Ashoke charts for it:

The Gangulis have moved to a university town outside of Boston. As far as they know, they are the only Bengali residents... Ashoke has been hired as an assistant professor of electrical engineering at the university... The job is everything Ashoke has ever dreamed of... For Ashima, migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been. She wishes Ashoke had accepted the position at Northeastern so that they could have stayed in the city (Lahiri, 49).

But this too, she accepts, as she has everything else that her life has thrown at her and finally,

Ashima and Ashoke are ready to purchase a home. In the evenings, after dinner, they set out in their car, Gogol in the back seat, to look for houses for sale... In the end they decide on a shingled two-storey colonial in a recently built development... This is the small patch of America to which they lay claim... The address is 67 Pemberton Road (Lahiri, 51).

This is the house where Ashima lives for the next 27 years, till Ashoke's death. It is in this house that her daughter Sonali, who is called Sonia, is born and in this house that her children grow up, go to school and leave home. It is in this house that she entertains her swelling community of Bengali friends with lavish parties, full of painstakingly cooked foods that recall the taste of home for her and her community of migrants. As her children grow up, she learns to accept their American tastes in food, clothes, friends and relationships, including their relationships with their parents.

Every few years she visits her hometown, Calcutta, with her children and Ashoke and one year she and her family spend eight months in India for Ashoke's sabbatical, which she and Ashoke love and her children hate.

As the years pass, Ashima becomes the centre of her community of Bengalis and her life in New England expands as she takes on a part-time job at the community library and builds alliances and friendships there. But through it all Ashima remains the tremulous immigrant. When Ashoke takes a job in Cleveland, she

reluctantly learns to live on her own, "At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind". (Lahiri, 161)

It is when Ashoke suddenly dies in Cleveland that she realizes the outlines of her own identity. Surrounded by her community of friends and flanked by her children, she decides to stay in this adopted land, where she has made a home for her husband:

For the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died. (Lahiri, 183)

At the end of the novel, Lahiri leaves us with Ashima's decision to sell the house that she has lived in for most of her married life and become a transnational, living partly in India and partly in America with her children and friends:

Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States... In Calcutta, Ashima will live with her younger brother, Rana, and his wife...in a spacious flat in Salt Lake. In spring and summer she will return to the Northeast, dividing her time among her son, her daughter, and her close Bengali friends. True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere. (Lahiri, 276)

Ashima the immigrant by circumstance transforms into the transnational by choice, as she decides to carve her own life and identity, lived between countries and beyond borders.

II. CONCLUSION: JOURNEY FROM TRADITIONAL VOICELESS TO AN INDEPENDENT DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN THE NAMESAKE:

Initially Ashima that we meet in the novel is a mute, passive, without expectation, prepared for rejection and without any agency of her own. The novel explores Ashima's transformation from a traditional, family-loving, voiceless, obedient Bengali girl with strong roots in Calcutta, to a hesitant but independent diasporic. The novel spans thirty-odd years, tracing Ashima's early sense of helpless loneliness to her ultimate recognition of herself as a self-sufficient, self-governing woman with agency and choice. It is significant to dwell upon Lahiri's choice of name for her protagonist: 'Ashima' in Bengali means one without limits or boundaries and Ashima lives up to her eponymous potential by reconstructing her sense of self by eroding boundaries and choosing to live between cultures and countries. Through the pain and disruption of her immigrant experience, Ashima chooses for herself a discourse of negotiation by means of which she both crosses borders and redefines them. Through Ashima's voice, the reader can view identity within the diaspora as a realm of dynamic dialogue, resolutely conducted from the traditional spaces of home and marriage; in this space, Ashima chooses a future of movement, of transnationalism – and so promotes a gendered vision of diasporic identity.

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