

The Inner Conflicts of Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake*: Assimilation, Culture Preservation and Adaptation in Diasporic Conditions

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Abstract

Diaspora means strong feeling about their homelands; so far as women diasporic writers are concerned. Just as the issue of homelands, the issue of preserving its own culture is an equally important need for any community. The diasporic in ensuring their culture face the problems of assimilation, adaptation, resistance, exclusion and discrimination. One reason of these problems faced by diasporics is their withdrawal into their culture. They rely on the strength of the emotional and cultural ties between them and their homeland. The numerous novels, short stories, poems, and plays published by the diasporic women writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Desai, Monica Ali, Meena Alexander, Yasmine Gooneratne, Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee, provide not merely a bird's eye view of life in diaspora but also the different shades of experiences and responses of different individuals to different situations. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* deals with the theme of identity crisis and the problem of assimilation and adaptation in another country. This paper shows the conflicts of Ashima in assimilation, cultural preservation and adaptation in diasporic conditions.

KEYWORDS: culture, homeland, diaspora, adaptation, nostalgia

1. Introduction:

The Namesake is an evocative story of Ashima Bhaduri, studying in a degree class in Calcutta who will become Ashima Ganguly after her marriage to Ashoke Ganguly. Ashoke shifts his home to Boston to seek after his Ph.D. Ashima's migrant experience – the conflict of societies in the US, and her underlying disapproval of the American Society are the primary issues of the author in the projection of this Bengali couple and their American children. The novel projects Ashima as cultural survivor in America's multicultural milieu. She demonstrates the life of hybridity and in-betweenness. It is difficult for her to maintain cultural insularity, and like millions of immigrant Indians she essentialises her life in the cultural available of America. In the novel, the author skilfully explores the complexities of the diasporic sentiments of peculiarity, the clashing lifestyles, social bewilderment, struggles for association and the interceding ties between ages.

The novel opens with Ashima's precariousness about living in the U.S. especially about the difficulties going with parenthood in a foreign land. It closes with her determining departure from home, rural life to which she has absorbed, in her own peculiar manner, through the span of three decades. All through the novel, Ashima typifies probably the most crucial difficulties confronting the postcolonial female subject in diaspora: in a country whose qualities and traditions are strange to her, she should safeguard the Bengali customs that questionably connect her to her country while at the same time, promising an effective future for her American children. In spite of the fact that, she saves Bengali culture in numerous parts of her local life,

Ashima's Americanised kids and the needs of sub-urban American life compel her to adjust in unforeseen ways. Ashima does not embrace an American character, she invariably constructing a personality that mediates between the needs of the two societies and satisfies the importance of her name, she is boundless, without peripheries.

As an Indian woman, Ashima has ascertained from the adolescence to surrender her very own wants and yearnings so as to satisfy her husband and family. So for her the agony, the desires for returning to her own nation, own land is hidden in some remote corner of her heart. Ashima typifies the highly disturbing experience of a person away from home. The novel commences with her painful pregnancy and child bearing abroad and culminates in her ultimate choice to spend her remaining life among India and America.

2. Homesickness:

Ashima regularly feels resentful and nostalgic about her home and sulks alone in their three rooms flat. She feels spatially and psychologically separated for the secure and congenial home of her father replete with such a large number of adoring and caring one's and desires to return to Calcutta. More often, she always seems lost in the recollections of her 'home' contemplating about the activities going on there by ascertaining the Indian time. She passes her time reading her Bengali short stories, ballads and articles from the Bengali magazines she has carried with her, time and again. Yet, the most frightening affair for her is 'motherhood in an alien country' which is noticeable in the very first chapter of the novel:

“It’s not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It’s the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land...That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is 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 and spare” (1).

She is resolved to manage the pain of labor in an alien land and to endure. After her delivery, she desires to return to Calcutta and bring up her son in the presence of the loved ones, yet she chooses to remain in America because of Ashoke and raises the child in the Bengali way: “to put him to sleep, she sings him the Bengali songs her mother had sung to her”(p.35). She keeps all her spiritual threats and frustrations to herself and not proposing to trouble her family, she shows in her letters a decent image of the household premises. Eventually she becomes self-reliant, and moves out alone in the market with her baby boy, Gogol, in the pram, and speaks with the passers-by who grin at her child and goes to meet Ashoke in the university.

It is in the earlier days of motherhood, that she starts to acculturate in minor ways, to cut out a daily schedule in which she draws in with the world outside of her home. In fact, it is literally motherhood that enables Ashima’s adjustment to America’s self-sufficiency and independence:

“She begins to pride herself on doing it alone, in devising a routine”(p.34).

But, little acquaintance with the place, people and culture of the United States augments Ashima’s agony of failure in performing her functions as her parents did. Her problem compounds, when, after the baby is delivered and they are waiting for a

letter from India carrying the name which Ashima's grandmother (who stays in India) has assigned to it, the couple confronts the immediacy of christening it. They are faced with the rule of recording the name of the boy in the hospital book before discharge. To get rid of this dilemma, they temporarily christen the baby as Gogol; the name which harbours the secret of a traumatic event in Ashoke's life. The whole episode reveals Ashima's intense desire for holding fast to the conceptions of the homeland and equally intense pain at the failure to do so due to the circumstances. Lahiri captures the emotional state of Ashima when the fellow Bengali expatriates visit them.

“For as grateful as she feels for the company of the Nandis and Dr. Gupta, these acquaintances are only substitutes for the people who really ought to be surrounding them. Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true”(p.24).

Like migrants of different sections, Ashima and Ashoke too make their group of Bengali associates, getting known, through each other. These Bengali families assemble on various events like the rice and name rituals of their youngsters, their birthday events, relational unions, deaths and Bengali celebrations like navratras and pujas. Ashima commends all these according to Bengali traditions “a silvery sari a wedding gift worn for the first time” (p.39)wearing the best conventional clothing types, in this manner attempting to save her way of life in another land. John Mcleod comments here that infact, their (migrants) 'convictions, conventions, traditions, practices, and qualities' alongside their “possessions and belongings are carried by migrants with them to new places” (2).

Ashima's reaction at Gogol's annaprasan,” (p.38) his rice ceremony is also noticeable. She begins to acquire the American methods for living, however Indianness in her is kept intact by sticking to the Indian culture and ceremonies. In this manner, all through the novel it is by facilitating elaborate gatherings for the Bengali companions that she and Ashoke assemble in New England.

After few days, Ashima and Ashoke receive a call from India about her father's death. Now, she doesn't want to go to her home in Calcutta because she is haunted by the pictures which she will see after reaching there: “her mother's vermilion erased from her part, her brother's thick hair shaved from his head in mourning..... “I don't want to go .” she says... “I don't want to see them. I can't”(p.47). Here Ashima's reaction reveals that she lacks the courage, the toughness and the mental strength.

3. Ashima: A cultural Survivor:

How these immigrants keep alive the memories of their homeland in some other ways is shown by by Lahiri by giving us peep into Ashima's Bengali home. Ashima affixes a water colour painting made by her father on her drawing room wall and she is very touchy about it.

While they are trying to protect their native culture in their new homes, in an alien nation, these first generation migrants train their kids in Bengali language, writing and history at home and through Bengali classes, and open them to their very own family heredity, religious traditions, ceremonies, convictions, tastes, propensities and peculiarities. In spite of the fact that they additionally groom them to adapt to the

lifestyle in America, yet they emphasize and incline toward Indianness in them. Ashima educates Gogol:

“To memorize a four-line children’s poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adoring the ten-handed durga during pujo...every afternoon Ashima sleeps, but before nodding off she switches the television channel-2 and tells Gogol to watch Sesame Street and The Electric company, in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school”(p.54).

The original diaspora needs to hold their native culture and shift it to the second generation, it is through the eyes of the older generation that the new generation understands and discovers their native culture. This is clear from Ashima’s reaction on sending a child to cemeteries and its comparison with her homeland.

There is another incident which shows the apprehensiveness of Ashima about the American ways and styles of living as she does not want her children to be totally American in their ways. In the U.S., she does her best to accomplish the job of an ideal homemaker in a foreign country and transformed into a connecting power in holding up the conventional Indian qualities against the materialistic ethics of American life. In spite of the fact, the dread of losing her Bengali social and cultural qualities and of her children’s disregard of their unique culture covertly distresses her.

Through the existential struggle of Ashima, Lahiri displays the torments of a woman in diaspora; an agony brought about by a feeling of disconnection and dislocation. Binda Sah observes that, “here we find isolation from both the local society and her own society, which is further intensified by Ashoke’s inability to give more time to Ashima due to his professional assignments” (3). Lahiri contrasts the steady rise in the educational stages for Ashoke with Ashima’s life which is an incessant encounter to embrace the absolutely new situations and environments.

Ashima continues with her temporary work at library, but with ever-increasing sense of being alone despite the presence of her husband goes out of Boston for nine months on a research project she finally seems to realise the enormity of solitary existence.

4. Changed Outlook: Adaptation:

A cross-cultural growth is seen in Ashima when she works in a library. It additionally constitutes Ashima’s exploration into a culture that is indistinguishable but then dissimilar to her very own Indian culture. Here Indira Nityanandam observes, that she now lives “life without too many rules, without do’s and don’ts being imposed on her” (4). With the changed perspectives and opinions, Ashima absorbs the various aspects of the predominant culture i.e. American.

Tejinder Kaur points out that, Lahiri has deftly, “narrated the struggle of these immigrants to assimilate and adopt the host culture and in the process of alteration they give up the rigid hold of their past and alternate his/her behaviour with the need of situation” (5). As Ashima has taken too long to adjust herself into the mainstream of American culture and its way of life, Ashima typifies a large number of immigrant women, including Indians, who are hesitant to change or to adapt the way of life of the foreign nation. This hesitance to change could be an immediate result of the fact that Ashima and others like her are not completely aware of the customs and

traditions of the new migrated land. As example of Ashima's approval for Sonia's marriage to Ben, a half Jewish and half Chinese kid, shows her changed outlook.

Then, the sudden demise of Ashoke after his departure from Boston changed the course of Ashima's life and sets in motion a series of sufferings for her. Everything changes at this unexpected news; her reaction at her husband's death in an unknown country shows her changed perspective with time: "For the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta" (p.183). This indicates that she does not want to escape and finally learns to live alone. After Ashoke's death, when she comes to know about the breakup of Gogol and Maxine- a break up occasioned by Gogol's growing awareness of filial duty and his sense of responsibility- Ashima asks him ' to move on with his life'. It gives a clear sight of Ashima's positive attitude even when she is all alone in a foreign country without any relatives and even without her husband.

Therefore, it is very much clear from her mixed reactions at her departure that she needs to connect to her origins and yet be a part of the new land is important of Ashima. Like Ashima, Jhumpa Lahiri is caught between the socio-cultural nuances of her Indian origin and the American life- way. This consistent struggle is depicted in the novel, as original migrants and their children endeavours to make their place in the foreign society.

The life situations of Ashima, as seen through her reactions in an alien country, despite being emotional and psychological, and triggered by past experiences and encounters, are also linked up with her immediate environments. Her diasporic existence highlights her acute sense of loss, pain and nostalgia for the native land, its people and culture and heightens her feelings of alienation and at times of deep despair.

5. Conclusion:

So, we finally conclude that, as the novel advances we find that Ashima cautiously adapts herself into the American society. She does not remain the same Ashima once we used to know in the beginning of the novel. Indeed, even the prospect that she will make the journey totally on her own never again frightens her. She had figured out how to get things done without anyone else. Despite the fact that she keeps on dressing in the traditional Indian saree, even though many of her friends, she makes, are Bengalis, even though the children are forced to become familiar with the Bengali alphabet in order, Ashima continuously embraces and adjusts to the mainstream culture. A case of her organising Christmas parties well shows her own freedom. No longer the disconnected, anxious Bengali girl who entered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, uncertain of how to hold her cultural Indian values, decides to spend her life between India and America, in a way she will be "true to the meaning of her name, she will be without a home for her, a resident of everywhere and nowhere"(p.276). Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays through Ashima the picture of a diasporic woman with her pains and difficulties she copes up with.

References:

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