



## The Diasporic Identity of Woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

S. Rammanohar Pari

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dr.SNS Rajalakshmi College of Arts and Science, (Autonomous),  
Coimbatore – 641 049.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents the predicament of two generations of the immigrants in the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. It portrays how in the immigration and collision of cultures struggle comes out for the motherhood. It explores various problems in the identity building for the first and the second generations of the immigrants.

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### Introduction

Ashima is left all alone at house when Ashoke goes for the research project in Ohio and her children study somewhere in the other towns. She misses her husband and children so much. Once again alone at home, Ashima remembers her parents' greeting cards send to her from India over last twenty-seven years. Whenever she is alone at home, she reads nostalgically all letters of her parents:

She has saved her dead parents' letters on the top shelf of her closet, in a large white purse she used to carry in the seventies until the strap broke. Once a year she dumps the letters onto her bed and goes through them, devoting an entire day to her parents' words, allowing herself a good cry. She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly. Faithfully, across continents – all the bit of news that had had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless. (Lahiri 160-161)

Ashima develops the cross-cultural sisterhood with the American co-workers at the library, where an American librarian offers her a job. She works at the library to pass the time. She makes her first American friends of women at work who are also living alone like her because they are divorced. It truly manifests Ashima's cultural growth and represents her exploration into the American culture that is alike and yet different to her own. Lahiri shows Ashima's similarities and differences to her American co-workers. They too are isolated, but their reasons differ, and because of her culture Ashima would never be alone despite divorce.

Ashoke dies of a massive heart attack and shortly changes everything to Ashima, Sonia and Gogol.

At this time, Gogol realizes the cultural importance of the death rituals. Ashima throws away and sends back all the greeting cards for the Christmas. Her friends suggest her to go to India to see her brother and cousins, but she refuses to escape to Calcutta:

She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died. 'Now I know why he went to Cleveland,' she tells people, refusing, even in death, to utter her husband's name. 'He was teaching me how to live alone'. (Lahiri 183)

Gogol slowly withdraws from Maxine as he tries to sort out his emotions. Maxine admits that she feels jealous of his mother and sister. This accusation strikes Gogol so hard that he has no energy to argue anymore. Gogol breaks off the relationship and begins to spend more time with his mother and sister. Maxine later gets engaged to another man. Sonali lives with Ashima occupying her childhood room once again. She leaves the house early in the morning to take a bus and then a train to downtown Boston. Both of them observe their totally changed mother:

Their mother has become thinner, her hair gray. The white column of her part, the sight of her bare wrists, pains Gogol when he first catches sight of her. From Sonia he learns of how their mother spends her evenings, alone in her bed, unable to sleep, watching television without sound. (Lahiri 189)

Ashima changes to the extent that she is ready to accept Maxine as her daughter-in-law. She asks Gogol to patch-up the things with Maxine. She is ready to make all the adjustments for the sake of her dear son's happiness. But, Gogol denies any possibility of Maxine in his life.

After the breakup with Maxine, Ashima suggests Gogol to meet Moushumi—a daughter of her Bengali friend, the unfortunate as her intended American groom changed his mind at the last minute. Though reluctant to meet Moushumi, Gogol meets her anyway to please his mother. Moushumi Mazoomdar is his childhood friend who shares the same culture and background. They have celebrated the Christmas together in each others' houses. This focuses on the oneness that the immigrants share in the America. Their common raising brings them together and they feel attracted towards each other and eventually get married. Gogol and Moushumi's relationship is an example of the cultural identity construction. They are the Bengali-Americans who rely too much on the typical Bengali identity stereotypes such as over-education, preoccupation with the parental influence and the city and suburb living and the seeking to carve out their own identity. Their wedding is not what they wanted. They would have preferred a sort of venues their friends choose, but it is selected by their parents. After marriage Moushumi's dissertation completion remains an excuse for her not being a mother.

However, tied down by the marriage Moushumi becomes a restless and begins to regret for what she has done. Gogol often feels like a poor substitute for Moushumi's American ex-fiancé Graham. The predicament of Moushumi focuses on the failure and frustration in attempts to get united with the Americans. Graham's refusal at the last stage indicates the impossibility of union between Indian and American:

She was supposed to have been married a year ago, a wedding that he and his mother had Sonia had been invited to, but her fiancé, an American, had backed out of the engagement, well after the hotel had been booked, the invitations sent, the gift registry selected. (Lahiri 192)

Similar to Gogol, Moushumi also shares the habits like smoking cigarette, drinking wine and working as an independent in the city. She hates her parents' moving to America from London. She hates America for its vastness and less likeness with the India. At her twelve, she makes a pact with two other Bengali girls that she will never marry a Bengali man. They write a statement vowing never to do so. They spit on it at a time and bury it somewhere in the parents' backyard. She also hates the Indian way of marriages. During her college days her American dreams are not fulfilled and when she goes to Paris, she begins to fall effortlessly into the affairs. The line below focus on her life in Paris:

With no hesitation, she had allowed men to seduce her in cafes, in parks, while she gazed at paintings in museums. She gave herself openly, completely, not caring about the consequences. . . . Some of them had been married, far older, fathers to children in secondary school. The men had been French for the most part, but also German, Persian, Italian, Lebanese. There were days she slept with one man after lunch, another after dinner. They were a bit excessive, she tells Gogol with a roll of her eyes, the type to lavish her with perfume and jewels. (Lahiri 215)

The relationship between Gogol and Moushumi seems to be an adjustment, not love, imposed upon them by their parents and the situation. Their parents are friends. Their contact is artificial and imposed. This is something like their relationship with the cousins in India and it lacks even the justification of the blood ties.

Their visit to Paris renews Moushumi's happy, liberal and full-of-joys past life she enjoyed once. It becomes an urgency of her life to regain the same happiness again. In a party attended with Moushumi at her friends' house, Gogol realizes the reality of American cultural hypocrisy:

They are an intelligent, attractive, well-dressed crowd. Also a bit incestuous. The vast majority of them knew each other from Brown, and Gogol can't even shake the feeling that half the people in the room have slept with one another. (Lahiri 236)

The difference between Bengali and American leads towards the impossibility to mesh them together. Though frequently with them in the parties, Gogol realizes how mismatched the American couples are:

And yet as much as Moushumi enjoys seeing Astrid and Donald, Gogol has recently begun to notice that she is gloomy in the aftermath, as if seeing them serves only to remind her that their own lives will never match up. (Lahiri 238)

Moushumi receives a letter of approval for the research grants. Had she got it before her marriage, she would have accepted to go to France. But now she has the husband and marriage to consider. Then, she contacts a man named Dimitri—the same person who was the first to attract her sexuality and they begin an affair. After her adulterous act, Moushumi on one hand feels guilty and on the other she feels at peace. This is very complicated feeling that justifies her adultery, as if something like this is expected and the most necessary:

She wonders if she is the only woman in her family ever to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful. This is what upsets her most to admit: that the affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day. (Lahiri 266)

When Gogol finds it out, they get divorced. By breaking the marriage of Gogol and Moushumi, Lahiri implies that the hybrid Bengali-American identity itself contains the kind of essentialism for the purer types of identities by which the Bengali and Caucasian-American identities are sometimes typified. Ashima feels guilty for causing Gogol to meet Moushumi and considers this as an American cultural influence which causes a severe damage to the Indian ethical and moral values:

How could she have known/ but unfortunately they have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do. They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in case of subsequent generation, to American common sense. (Lahiri 276)

Ashima changes totally by learning to do the things on her own. Though today she wears sari and still puts her long hair in a bun, it is not like she was in the Calcutta. Now, she decides to return to India with an American passport. Her daughter Sonia remains with her for the moral duty after her father's death. When Sonia marries, Ashima makes plans to travel and live with different portions of her family at different times during each year. But there are several other important observations to be made on this encounter. In America she misses India and when in India she will miss America.

At the end, Ashima sells the family home to live in India with her siblings for half of the year.

Ashima begins a new chapter of her life, in which she plans to travel, split her remaining years between the Calcutta and America. As she sells her house, which is no longer necessary in her retirement, she hosts a final Bengali-American party to mark the end of her days in the home she shared with her husband, son and daughter on Pemberton Road. In the party, Ashima is honored by the guests for her communal maternity and they will miss Ashima's encouraged cultural learning:

People talk of how much they've come to love Ashima's Christmas Eve parties, that they've missed them these past few years, that it won't be the same without her. They have come to rely on her, Gogol realizes, to collect them together, to organize the holiday, to convert it, to introduce the tradition to those who are new. (Lahiri 286)

Her daughter Sonia prepares to marry a Chinese-American man named Ben. This is most notable in Ashima's pride, after Gogol's failed marriage to the Bengali American Moushumi that her daughter Sonia is marrying for the love to a Chinese - American rather than for the mutual cultural similarity or because of the cultural tradition:

Something tells her Sonia will be happy with this boy—quickly she corrects herself—this young man. He has brought happiness to her daughter, in a way Moushumi had never brought it to her son. (Lahiri 276)

Gogol finally learns that the solution is not to abandon fully or attempt to diminish either of the cultures, but to mesh the two together. Gogol is not fully in tune with his identity until he realizes that he is made up of the both, and instead of weakening, his pride is strengthened. He feels proud of his identity and the meaning of his name and his roots. Gogol accepts his name and picks up a collection of the stories by the Russian author that his father has gifted as a birthday present many years ago.

The novel describes the struggles and hardships of the Bengali-Indians who immigrate to the United States. Though never explicitly addressed by name, Jhumpa Lahiri's feminist manifestations provide an insightful point of exploration. While manifesting it unintentionally, she presents the challenges and critiques of feminism.

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