

# Portrayal of Female Reactions in Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an attempt to study the female reactions in diaspora with special reference to Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. The *Namesake* records the everyday life of an Indian immigrant family that went to America after independence. It can be assumed that as an immigrant's daughter, the novelist is familiar with the problems of immigrants living in America, particularly their norms, values, culture, religion, language, and above all, their identity. This paper is an analysis of the effects of the diaspora faced by the characters in *The Namesake*. It is in this context that the works of Jhumpa Lahiri examine the issue of exile from the diasporic point of view. The issues of home/homelessness, displacement/replacement and the consequent identity reconstruction in multiculturalist societies have been fore-grounded in the fictional works of these writers. These diasporic writers like Lahiri, and others have responded to this paradox of belonging and not belonging in their own characteristic manners, from different perspectives and positions. All the diasporic writers, thus, inherit diverse cultural backgrounds and have come across distinctive experiences evolving individualistic sensibilities and ways to relate to the worlds of longing and belonging. They try to capture in their creative writings, their experiences with a sense of alienation. In most of their works, the characteristics of diaspora can be traced. These diasporic traits separate them from the mainstream of the contemporary society where they live. Thus, the cross-cultural encounters, as depicted by Jhumpa Lahiri, assume that one group (usually the minority in an alien socio-cultural context) is bound to be absorbed by another. It is clear from the discussed work of Lahiri that people belonging to this minority group modify their behavior to cope with all sorts of problems they encounter in a foreign country. Sooner or later they tend to establish a socio-cultural and socio-linguistic bond with the members of the alien society.

**Keywords:** Woman, diaspora, migrant, contemporary society

## INTRODUCTION

'Diaspora' is the term that is regularly utilized today to portray essentially any populace that is viewed as 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational', for example that started in a land other than that which at present dwells and whose

social, financial and political organizations they cross the lines of country states or even include the entire world. These populaces are without a doubt expanding in commonness, number and mindfulness. Many are arising as (or have truly been for quite a while) significant entertainers in the development of public accounts, provincial coalitions or worldwide political economies. Avtar Brah expresses: "At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey" (Brah 180).

Diasporas are unquestionably distinguished from casual travel. They also do not discuss temporary setups. Contrary to common opinion, diasporic journeys are largely about settling down and developing roots in a new place. In different times, locations, and circumstances, the idea of diaspora means different things to different people.

The scriptural use was to "scatter", what the ruler would do as a discipline for not noticing heavenly laws. The Hebrew comparable was *galut*, which implied exile.

Jewish utilization and the Jewish experience of removal and expulsion and exile from Jerusalem give very well the premise to the utilization of the expression "diaspora" in present day times. The Jewish use of the term has the elements of forced exile, collective suffering and infinitely strong and binding sense of identity and a great nostalgia for the mother country. Bhagabat Nayak comments that she "makes the text a cultural hyper-text," and she "faithfully portrays the trauma of cultural dislocation, displacement, homelessness and immigrancy..." (135).

When a person chooses to move from his birthplace or resides in a foreign country because of the choice of his ancestors, one cannot expect it to be a smooth transition; whether by birth or by immigration, person who lives in a country which is not his by lineage, is inevitably made to experience the severity of being an alien. According to William Safran, the word "diaspora" refers to an expatriate group whose members divide up such characteristics as: "they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland — its physical location, history and achievements; they believe they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore, feel partly alienated and insulated from it" (Shailja 11).

South-Asian diaspora is widely spread across the world and varies in character. Initially the South-Asians migrated in search of work, once they were in new lands, they started contributing to every field including intellectual and literacy scene. The South-Asian diaspora can broadly be classified in two categories. Considering *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft 67) by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, which identifies settler and invader colonialists, they can be referred to as the settler and visitor diasporas.

The first class ought to have a place with every one of those constrained movements for reasons of servitude or constrained work, while the second would incorporate the deliberate relocations of financial specialists and experts who traveled to another country looking for fortune. The old Indian diasporas were exclusivist diasporas since they made moderately self-ruling 'little Indies' in the provinces. The establishing author of the old Indian diaspora is V.S.

Naipaul. The new Indian diaspora is interceded by crafted by Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Meera Nair, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and others. Thus, identity and home are two intertwined issues emphasized in the fluidity of culture and social constructions of the narrative. In the words of Linda McDowell, "migration changes individual and group identities, affiliations and cultural attitudes and practices, among the mobile population of the 'hosts'" (McDowell 210).

### **Female Reactions in Diaspora**

The novel begins with a pathetic portrayal of anxiety, uneasiness and various psycho-sociological problems such as nostalgia, rootlessness, alienation experienced by Ashima, who at a young age has migrated to a country where she is related to no one. Ashoke Ganguli leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies to do "research in the field of fibre-optics, with a prospect of settling down with security and respect" (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 6). After two years stay in the U.S.A., he comes back to India, marries a nineteen years old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima, who has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents, but agrees for the marriage. After the legal formalities, she flies alone to be with her husband, with a heavy heart and lots of instructions, from her family members and relatives who come to see her off at Dum-Dum airport, "not to eat beef or to wear skirt or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston" (*The Namesake* 37).

Being an Indian woman, Ashima has learnt from the childhood to sacrifice her own desires and cravings in order to please her husband and family. So for her the pain, the yearnings for going back to her own country, 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 final decision to divide the rest of her life between India and America.

Ashima often feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three rooms apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in winter; far removed from the descriptions of houses in the English novels she has read. She feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable home of her father full of so many loving ones and yearns to go back.

Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her 'home' thinking of the activities going on there by calculating the Indian time on her hands which is "nine and a half hours ahead in Calcutta" (*The Namesake* 4).

She spends her time re-reading Bengali short stories, poems and articles from the Bengali magazines she has brought with her, she "keeps her ear trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the postman's footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the mail slot in the door" (*The Namesake* 36), waiting for her parents' letters which she keeps collecting in her white bag and rereads them often. But the most terrifying experience for her is 'motherhood in a foreign land' 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.... Throughout the experience, in spite of her growing discomfort, she'd been astonished by her body's ability to make life exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great grandmothers had done. 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" (*The Namesake* 6).

Through, her traumatic labour pain, her acute feeling of isolation and her memories of Calcutta, Lahiri presents her at two levels: as a 'woman' and as a 'mother' the former is naturally linked with the latter, particularly in the Indian cultural context where a woman accomplishes full womanhood after attaining motherhood. Such a feeling also endows her with a mysterious strength to endure the intensely painful period of delivery. It is this strength, which supports Ashima during her period of delivery. She is determined to bear the pain of giving birth to a new life in an unknown land and to survive.

After the birth of her son Gogol, she wants to go back to Calcutta and raise her child there in the company of the caring and loving ones but decides to stay back for Ashoke's sake- and brings up the baby in the Bengali way: "To put him to sleep, she sings him the Bengali songs her mother had sung to her" (*The Namesake* 35). She keeps all her emotional hazards and disappointments to herself and not intending to worry her parents, she presents in her letters a good picture of the domestic facilities and cleanliness here. By and by she comes on her own, takes pride in rearing up the

child, moves out alone in the market with her baby in the pram, and communicates with the passers-by who smile at her baby and goes to meet her husband in the campus: "For the first time, she pushes him through in the balmy streets of Cambridge.....The errand takes longer than usual; for now she is repeatedly stopped on the street and in the aisles of the supermarket by perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done. They look curiously, appreciatively into the pram" (The Namesake 34).

Like immigrants of other communities Ashima and Ashoke too make their circle of Bengali acquaintances, getting known, through one another. They know Maya and Dilip Nandi, "meet the Mitras, through the Mitras, the Banerjees" (The Namesake 38) and then the young Bengali bachelors in the market who return from Calcutta with 'wives' who become friends only 'for the reason' that "they all come from Calcutta" (The Namesake 38). These Bengali families gather together on different occasions like the rice and name ceremonies of their children, their birthdays, marriages, deaths and Bengali festivals like navratras and pujas. Ashima celebrates all these as per Bengali customs, "a silvery sari a wedding gift worn for the first time" (The Namesake 39) wearing the best traditional attires, thus trying to preserve her culture in a new land. John McLeod remarks here that infact, their (immigrants) 'beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours, and values' along with their "possessions and belongings are carried by migrants with them to new places" (McLeod 211).

Ashima's reaction at Gogol's "annaprasan," (The Namesake 38) his rice ceremony is also noticeable. She starts accepting the American ways of living but Indianness in her is kept intact by adhering to the Indian culture and rituals. Thus, throughout the novel it is by hosting elaborate parties for the Bengali friends that she and Ashoke accumulate in New England. These gatherings – the first of which is hosted when Gogol turns six months old in honor of his annaprasan, a ceremony that celebrates an infant's consumption of solid food – grow larger each year as this circle of friends grows. Ashoke asks Dilip Nandi to play the part of Ashima's brother, 'to hold the child and feed him rice, the Bengali stuff of life, for the very first time' (The Namesake 39). On this occasion, Ashima's eyes fill with tears as "Gogol's mouth eagerly invites the spoon. She can't help wishing her own brother were here to feed him, her own parents to bless him with their hands on his head" (The Namesake 40).

Then, after Gogol's rice ceremony Ashoke and Ashima plan their first trip to Calcutta, in December during Ashoke's winter break. Ashima starts her preparation for trip "knits sweater, vests for her father, her father-in-law, her brother, her three favourite uncles" (The Namesake 41). She goes for shopping in downtown Boston with Gogol, in his stroller.

Although she is not totally attached with the country but a miraculous incident which happens with her on the station

makes it so: "When she opens her eyes she sees that the train is standing still, the doors open at her to The Namesake.

She leaps up, her heart racing. "Excuse me, please", she says pushing the stroller and herself through the tightly packed bodies. "madam," someone says as she struggles past, about to step onto the platform, "your things," the doors of the subway clamp shut as she realizes her mistake, and the train rolls slowly away.....she pushes the stroller back down Massachusetts Avenue, weeping freely, knowing that she can't possibly afford to go back and buy it all again.....she is furious with herself, humiliated at the prospect of arriving in Calcutta empty-handed..... But when Ashoke comes home he calls the MBTA lost and found the following day the bags are returned, not a teaspoon missing. Somehow, this small miracle causes Ashima to feel connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible, affiliated with its exceptions as well as its rules. She has a story to tell at dinner parties. Friends listen, amazed at her luck.

"Only in this country," Maya Nandi says (The Namesake 42-43).

But the displacement is felt more by her, after their migration from the University of Boston when Ashoke is "hired as an Assistant Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University" (The Namesake 48).

The shift to this suburban area with no "street lights, no public transportation, no stores for miles" (The Namesake 49) makes Ashima feel "more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been" (The Namesake 49). Feeling lonely and displaced in a foreign land, Ashima though not pregnant now, begins to realize that: "For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feelings of sorts.

It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect (The Namesake 49-50).

After two years in an "overheated university-subsidized apartment" (The Namesake 50), Ashoke and Ashima are ready to purchase a home, "67 Pemberton Road" (The Namesake 51) in the locality where "All the houses belong to Americans, shoes are worn inside, trays of cat litter are placed in the kitchen" (The Namesake 51) is initially disgusting to a Bengal born and bred-Ashima, but it is this house which becomes for her 'home' in America by and by, though the memories of her parents keep haunting her.

How these immigrants keep alive the memories of their homeland in some other ways is shown by Lahiri by giving us peep into Ashima's Bengali home. Ashima hangs on her living room wall "a water colour painting" (The Namesake 52) made by her father "of a caravan of camels in a desert of Rajasthan, is framed at the local print shop" (The Namesake 52) and she is very touchy about it.

While making efforts to preserve their home culture in their new homes, in a foreign country, the first generation immigrants train their children in Bengali language, literature and history at home and through Bengali classes, and expose them to their own family lineage, religious customs, rites, beliefs, food tastes, habits and mannerisms.

Though they also groom them to cope with the way of life in America but they prioritize and prefer Indianness in them Ashima teaches Gogol:

To memorize a four-line children's poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adorning the ten-handed Durga during pujo, Saraswati with her swan and Kartik with his peacock to her left, Lakshmi with her owl and Ganesh with his mouse to her right. Every afternoon Ashima sleeps, but before nodding off she switches the television to 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. (The Namesake 54)

Not confined to American life style only, Ashoke and Ashima also want to train Gogol in Bengali language and customs: "When Gogol is in third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday, held in the home of one of their friends. For when Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust" (The Namesake 65).

Although Ashoke and Ashima try their best to train their children according to Indian customs and values by sending them to their Bengali friends for Bengali lessons, but they fail to do so because they are watching that their children are going in an atmosphere which is totally American whether it is accent or lifestyle. On one of the fieldtrips in school, Gogol and his class mates are assigned a project-to rub the surfaces of the gravestones and find out the name of the dead person. But Ashima, as a mother, is horrified at the prospect of the type of fieldtrip: "it was enough that they applied lipstick to their corpses and buried them in silk-lined boxes. Only in America (a phrase she has begun to resort to these days), only in America are children taken to cemeteries in the name of art. What's next, she demands to know, a trip to the morgue?" (The Namesake 70). Ashima's opinion is totally different as compared to American schools because she has grown up under the thinking that burning ghats are not meant for children. According to her, "death is not a pastime.....not a place to make paintings," (The Namesake 70) that is why she refuses to put the paintings of her son in the kitchen

because how could she cook a meal for her family remembering the "names of dead people" (The Namesake 70). The first generation Diaspora wants to retain their homeland culture and transfer it to the second generation, it is through the eyes of the older generation that the younger generation perceives and learns about homeland culture. This is clear from Ashima's reaction on sending a child to cemeteries and its comparison with her homeland.

Ashima is deeply sentimental about the letters of her parents long after they died. She used to read those letters once a year and cried a lot, as she is hallucinated by their love and affection: "she revisits their affection and concern conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continents- all the bits of news that had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless" (The Namesake 160).

Through, the existential struggle of Ashima, Lahiri presents the pain of a woman as a wife living in diaspora; a pain caused by a sense of isolation. 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" (Sah 155). Lahiri contrasts the gradual rise up the academic ladder for Ashoke with Ashima's life which is a continuous struggle to adopt to a totally new set of circumstances and surroundings. Ashima continues with her temporary work at library, but with ever-increasing sense of being alone despite the presence of her husband and children. At the age of forty-eight when her husband goes out of Boston for nine months on a research project she finally seems to realize the enormity of solitary existence: "At forty eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter have already known and which they claim not to mind. "Its not such a big deal"; her children tell her. "Everyone should live on their own at some point." But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill. She hates returning to the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking up on another (The Namesake 161).

But we see that by this time, as she reaches the age of forty-eight, Ashima has lived in the U.S. far longer than she had lived in India before emigrating, yet she remains in so many ways a traditional Bengali mother and wife.

She has never given up wearing a sari, and when her husband leaves for Ohio to conduct research on a prestigious fellowship she lives alone for the very first time. Her husband must return home once a month to pay the bills and fill the car with gas, two tasks she has never mastered; and yet the fact that she remained behind rather than traveling to Ohio with him amazes both of her children, who are shocked at their mother's display of such American-like independence. She does so because despite having retained so many of her

Indian traditions, she has also adapted to her suburban American life in a few significant ways.

### CONCLUSION

As the present study suggests, today the term 'diaspora' has multiple layers of meaning. From the original meaning of large-scale migration of people due to religious persecution, it has now come to refer to any movement of people from one land to another. Infact, often it is used as a synonym for migration or immigration and the diasporic is equated to an expatriate. However, today it is customary to refer to the nineteenth and twentieth century as the period of Indian diaspora as Indians in large numbers went to other countries in search of job opportunities. It is largely due to the rapidly increasing pace of economic liberalization and globalization. In recent years, intellectuals and writers from within these populations have increasingly begun to utilize the term 'diaspora' to describe themselves. That this migration is made by personal choice is a fact that has to be borne in mind when the term 'diaspora' is used today.

Culture clash, the process and the resulting guilt of fleeing a restrictive background or tradition, the problem of being displaced from one's own culture and one's own homeland and finding oneself in a totally new environment, these are the problems for growing numbers of individuals in today's world. Refusing to give up his cultural roots, he still hopes for assimilation and acculturation in his new land.

The narratives of the diasporic writers can also be referred to as the narratives of 'exile.' These narratives have come a long way from nostalgia to a conscious remembering, from the 'then and there' to 'now and here' and 'beyond'. This path has never been linear nor the experiences unilateral. The inherent diversity of these narratives has endowed it much of its vigor and character. It is in this context that the works of Jhumpa Lahiri examine the issue of exile from the diasporic point of view. The issues of home/homelessness, displacement/ replacement and the consequent identity reconstruction in multiculturalist societies have been fore-grounded in the fictional works of these writers. These diasporic writers like Lahiri, and others have responded to this paradox of belonging and not belonging in their own characteristic manners, from different perspectives and positions. All the diasporic writers, thus, inherit diverse cultural backgrounds and have come across distinctive experiences evolving individualistic sensibilities and ways to relate to the worlds of longing and belonging. They try to capture in their creative writings, their experiences with a sense of alienation. In most of their works, the characteristics of diaspora can be traced. These diasporic traits separate them from the mainstream of the contemporary society where they live. In *The Namesake*, the experiences of first and second generation immigrants in their adopted country are contrasted, and it is in this vein that "intergenerational friction" (Pattanayak 20) becomes one of the most important themes in the novel. Thus, the cross-cultural

encounters, as depicted by Jhumpa Lahiri, assume that one group (usually the minority in an alien socio-cultural context) is bound to be absorbed by another.

It is clear from the discussed work of Lahiri that people belonging to this minority group modify their behavior to cope with all sorts of problems they encounter in a foreign country. Sooner or later they tend to establish a socio-cultural and socio-linguistic bond with the members of the alien society.

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