

GENDER ROLE OF ‘SHE’ IN THE DIASPORIC WORLD OF *THE NAMESAKE*

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Abstract

There is a rapid growth of diaspora literature in the recent decades. My paper tries to explore in Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* the gender role of 'She' amid the tension of nostalgia, pain, loss and cultural clash in the wake of postmodernism. This paper propagates female role in unifying the conflicts of cultures, creation of global environment with an emphasis on the biological role of 'she'. *The Namesake* provides a fertile ground to study that not only the identity but entity of a woman is local and hence connected directly to the global issues and how they sustain a life in contributing their part in the problematic process of assimilation holding tightly their conventional role and traditional values.

Keywords: diaspora, gender, assimilation, culture, entity.

Migration is an indispensable part of human history as well as of human nature. It is a strong and vital force to encourage human mind to be involved in a unique pursuit of utopia. Even some birds and animals migrate from one place to another in search of desirable climate, better abode and survival. In the recent decades there is a rapid growth of diasporic literature which offers a fertile ground to study changing human psyche, its dilemma, search for identity and problem of assimilation in the new culture. It is not an easy task to relocate oneself to a foreign land and culture. It is also more difficult to acculturate reluctantly strange and new things in life and living. Creation of literature gives an insight to the historical connection in the context of contemporary social, political and cultural structure. Diasporic sensibility can be clearly felt in Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* which is a much studied fictional work among the literary and cultural circles. It is an obvious product of multicultural society and of the process of assimilation, in swirling waves of alienation as well. It has episodes of loss, suffering, nostalgia and a perpetual sense of homelessness.

Jhumpa Lahiri is regarded as an Indian American author. She is an Indian by ancestry, an English by birth and an American by citizenship. She is well known strong female voice in the gamut of immigrant fiction and diaspora writings. She has authentically and wonderfully articulated a plethora of immigrant experience brimming in her fictional narrative with embellishment of facts as well. Her first literary work is a collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* published in 1999 and awarded Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. Her debut novel

The Namesake, published in 2003, has been a bestseller. The Namesake presents a pivotal study of man's crisis of identity, clash of cultures, and issue of assimilation in the multicultural land of America. Needless to mention that the novel mirrors the autobiographical shades, (which work is not) but necessary to point that it has sensitive dilemma of immigrant minds and constant sense of pain and nostalgia.

“Diaspora studies can try to be an antidote to the reductive instrumentalization of the social, cultural and affective complexity of diasporas. As scholars of diaspora studies, we need to foreground, to remind ourselves and others of that amazing complexity, which is the product of diasporic efforts to construct, represent and discuss the quotidian life of local diaspora communities while also attending to the demands of engagement with other diaspora communities and the homeland.”(Khachig Tölölyan)

‘She’ is a pronoun which designates female gender in English language. The study of the female role becomes pivotal when it comes to diaspora which is an automatic generated notification due to cultural clash. The feeling of diaspora unveils interesting episodes of cultural juxtaposition and conflicts. Women are considered to be an integral part of any culture. She is the bearer of culture and she is the representative of culture. Therefore when it comes to study several shades of diasporic sensibilities, a study of she emerges as a necessarily tool in presenting the outspoken and exemplified ways in assimilation and unifying two different waves. She is the status who provides creative energy to the society and culture and humankind as a whole. She gives birth and creates life that significantly indicates her biological role to propel the mankind anywhere irrespective of space and time.

Jhumpa Lahiri, as a female author, has not missed the opportunity to present authentically a strong and powerful image of she in the character of Ashima who possesses a an autonomous selfhood. ‘She’ is ever present throughout the novel The Namesake in first person in the second person and in the third person as well. She is textual, intertextual and intratextual as well. The novel starts with an image of a pregnant woman, with the critical biological role of female gender, and displays the pain in bearing a child and moreover throws light on bearing a child in the diasporic world in the foreign land. Undoubtedly, the novel progresses in developing a narrative for its central -figure Gogol for who his name becomes a big problem.

“This is certainly a novel that explores the concepts of cultural identity, of rootlessness, of tradition and familial expectation-as well as the way that names subtly (not so subtly) alter our perception of Ourselves ”
(Myerson)

The Namesake is generally studied for its characters experience of diaspora and for dispersion consequences. Diaspora is primarily a kind of dispersion which is caused as a result of desire to a better opportunities, better life, for security and for a better living over all. Diaspora is a term which describes in literature and art man's relocation in a foreign land and dispersion from his original homeland.oftenly caused by a trauma and leads toward the pursuit of better materialistic goal and opportunities. It describes man's unflinching faith in the possibility of finding a kind of utopic state which hopefully enrich his life. It displays a state of mind which is pendulating in a hybrid situation where he is neither totally regarded as a habitant of his homeland nor acceptable by the host location. He is vaguely treated as an outsiders. The question from where does he belong irritates him. Swinging between the undying and un defying love for home and a better opportunity in the host location-there emerges a section of immigrants who

face the pangs of psychic battle where they have an ideal picture of the homeland and a temptation to embrace the new world which offers a gala of freedom and abundance of materialistic growth.

Literature is said to be an honest representation of society and life in society. Jhumpa Lahiri also as a female author has performed her responsibility honestly. Though the degree of honesty varies from person to person. She has depicted an honest picture of female world, female mind and its inner working in the realm of diaspora because men and women experience diaspora differently. Their experience and their attempt to establish a harmony between two worlds may be different, may present different prospective and hence should be studied from different perspectives. She plays an important role in the relocation and assimilation and reproduction of a new one. She may contribute in creating a global environment irrespective of geographical boundaries.

“Globalisation has put paid to that possibility and in so doing enhanced the practical, economic and affective roles of diasporas, showing them to be particularly adaptive forms of social organisation. Some diasporas appear to have mutated across several phases and assumed different forms, refurbishing themselves as they go along. Seen as a forms of social organisation, diasporas have pre-dated the nation-state, lived uneasily within it and now may, in significant respects, transcend and succeed it.”

The Namesake is a story of a family, of a Bengali couple Ashima and Ashoke, of their children, of their love suffering and pain. But it acquires diasporic significance when their identities are being eclipsed in the host location with a traumatic experience of nostalgia and displacement. It is interesting to note that Jhumpa Lahiri opens her novel with the introduction of her strong epitome of traditional Indian woman in the foreign scenario. Ashima is pregnant when we meet her and she is longing for her family support system. She wants to have her entire family and relatives so that she can share the moments of her motherhood with them. We can not ignore the beautiful and pathetic image of pregnancy in delineating immigrant's life long homesickness and a psychic battle. Lahiri enunciates:

“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 that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner Ashima believes, is something that elicit the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.”(49-50, Lahiri)

Woman is generally considered to be the representative of culture. Ashima never changes herself in the host cultural milieu. She always wears sari, speaks and teaches her children her mother tongue, cooks and serves her native food. She manages her life after the marriage in a foreign land and feels proud as well:

“She begins to pride herself on doing it alone, in devising a routine. Like Ashoke, busy with his teaching and research and dissertation seven days a week, she, too now has something to occupy her fully, to demand her utmost devotion, her last ounce of strength.”(34-35, Lahiri)

In the later part of the novel she starts working in the library, drives car and lives alone in the house embracing the new modern role of her gender expressing the strength of her character. She never hesitates to play her role in unifying two opposite cultures. In the beginning she has to live in the foreign land alone but gradually she invent her own way of life as a true creator. She teaches her children their mother language and let them watch English channel as well to cope with the new challenging cultural situations. Apart from this she never misses to perform the rituals of her culture on the birth of her son and even on the death of her husband as well. She follows those customs properly on the death of her relatives also no matter how far they are. She always dignifies the status of a married Indian woman by wearing bangles and vermilion. On the other hand she never creates hurdles on the way of her children by providing them their immense individual freedom. If there is a family unit in *The Namesake* there is a individual freedom as well. The gender role of she may be well explained in the meaning of Ashima "...will be without borders, without a home of her, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276, Lahiri).

The second episode of suffering and nostalgia of her homeland comes when she fails to name her son according to the Bengali tradition. She kept on waiting eagerly for a name sent and allotted by her grandmother. In the diasporic world of *The Namesake* whether it is her grandmother or she herself, to name the coming generation is entirely the matter of female gender. Unfortunately the name is lost. She always used to put her children's drawing on her refrigerator but how reluctant she was when her son brings the names of some dead people from a cemetery as a part of his field trip. She tries to raise her voice but she has to stoop to the absurd situation in the new social and cultural milieu. As a concerned mother she keeps on enquiring about her son's living when he has to go outside for study but she never compels him to be with her and the family. She welcomes Gogol's girlfriend Maxine, an American in her home and serves her Indian food confidently. At the sudden demise of her husband due to heart attack she commands her children and performs all the rituals without losing her poise. Nostalgia becomes an integral part of her entity. She tries to make balance between her lived life in the host location and a life left in her homeland before marriage. She is now free to be with her relatives in her original homeland but she is quite unable to leave the place due to a developed new love which tucks an entire life lived with multiple role of a mother, wife, and a commanding figure.

Mousami is a girl of a Bengali origin. She was engaged with an American man but breaks her relationship with him because he looks down upon her country and culture. She raised her voice and give birth to a new role of 'she' in foreign land despite of a strong love for him. She and Ashima's son Gogol are brought together to be united through marriage but their marriage cannot sustain and fails. She avoids her educational opportunity for the sake of togetherness and she faces the same namesake as Gogol but she does not change her name. She assumes and resumes her identity. She opens every page of her life before Gogol. She has a unique sense of pride perhaps which was the cause for Gogol to fall in love with her. She is an American from outside and has global perspective within her. Indu B. C. observes in her paper:

"Though Aashima and Moushmi belong to the same culture they are entirely different. For Aashima everything related to her husband is valuable but for Moushmi the things related to Gogol are just commodities carrying no importance. Aashima stand apart from all other characters in her commitment towards marriage."

Sonia, Ashima 's daughter get the benefit of being younger in the family. She gets appropriate ready to put on name in the hospital at the time of her birth. She gets a name which can exist in the multicultural world of her land. Contrary to her brother Gogol who has to bear the burden of his heritage and burden of the life-saver of his father. She gets the benefits of being allowed happily by her mother to get married with a man of her choice. Though her character has not been explored by Lahiri in full detail and elaborately but she seems to be poised and balanced in her character and characteristics.

Ashima's nostalgia and memories create and combine both the beautiful picture of her country and a visualization of her culture as well. Perhaps, the author being herself a 'she' relieves her cultural agony and mental sense of duality through textual narrative, offering the reader to have a glimpse of her culture, tradition and homeland. Ashima being the epitome of motherhood and womanhood in the foreign land feels the duty to upload and inculcate in her children the basic human and cultural values. Jhumpa Lahiri has tried to delineate the maladies of diasporic world in the contemporary world of globalization and transformation of identities where gender role of 'she' becomes promising in sustaining a life amid the clash of cultures. Ashima may not be a highly defined woman in modern sense, she may be labeled easily as a typical Indian woman or mother India, she may not face an identity crisis of namesake but her entire entity is for husband-sake, for her children sake, for preserving her culture sake and in most importantly for appeasing the conflicts for creating a multicultural and global atmosphere for the next generation of mankind. The multiple role of gender 'she' provides a promising prospective in alleviating the tension of diasporic world and raising a strong voice for traditional women of a large section of India who are educated and has cultural values of their native and they are designated for a new role to synthesize the loopholes of clashing cultures for a better, healthier and global environment.

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