

Crossing Border in Search of “Home”: Gender and Empowerment in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*

SHRIMOYEE CHATTOPADHYAY

“At the heart of the notion of diasporas is the image of a journey. Yet not every journey can be understood as diaspora” (Brah 1996, 182). This journey lies in the heart of Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel, *The Namesake* (2003). Several critics such as David Kipen, Gail Caldwell and Stephen Metcalf considered the novel to be a richly detailed exploration of the immigrant family (Friedman 2008, 111–128), the Ganguli family. Ashoke Ganguli, father of Lahiri’s protagonist, Gogol, leaves India and moves to the U.S.A. and, his wife, Ashima, joins his new family in Massachusetts. Michiko Kakutani argues that Lahiri’s novel is “[...] about exile and its discontents, a novel that is as affecting in its Chekhovian exploration of fathers and sons, parents and children, as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of the American Dream” (Friedman 2008, 111–128). This is a common dilemma that all diasporas suffer from. Appadurai suggests that we live in a world in which “deterritorialisation” and the “breaking-down of existing territorial connection” have major significances (Robinson 2011). In my paper, I claim that *The Namesake* problematises Masao Miyoshi’s idea of transnationalism and Arjun Appadurai’s notion of fluid cultural flows since although Lahiri’s characters, especially first generation immigrants, leave their homeland in search of better lives in the U.S.A., this border crossing does not prove fruitful for them. In fact they need to face the dilemma between “home” and “exile”. Even though the characters move away from their homeland, they are tied to their roots, which in my reading is mostly through the trope of cooking and food, as they are significant signifiers of cultural identity. I further argue that Lahiri’s women characters are also entangled within the space and place struggle and they problematise Deborah Parsons’ idea of New Woman, since these women characters transcend the limits set by the conventional Bengali society and become empowered but they remain confined within their cultural norms.

Through her protagonist Gogol, Lahiri presents the identity crisis, which she herself faced acutely. Tim Coles and Dallen Timothy use the term “hyphenated community” as an alternative to diasporic community, implying “the resolution of the contemporary act of ‘being’ with the historical process of ‘becoming’” (Coles and Timothy 2002, 8). Born in the U.S.A. to Indian parents, Gogol acknowledges

his transnational identity. Even though he tries to escape from the clutches of the Indian cultural trap, he keeps returning to his roots. John McLeod points out that hybrid or even hyphenated identities are “perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription” (Nyman 2009, 215). Like the mythological king Trishanku, they stand suspended between two worlds, unable to enter either and make a haven of their own. Though they are physically and geographically de-localized, old memories still maintain the umbilical bonding with the old country. Cultural roots do have an important function in the novel despite this fluidity and transnational condition.

Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Amitav Ghosh, commonly referred to as the new diaspora writers, have resided in various parts of the U.K. and the U.S.A. and their writings reflect their experiences in a new culture. The hyphen emphasises that diaspora is a “byword for compromise, negotiation and differentiation, even instability and metamorphosis” (Coles and Timothy 2002, 9). Ashoke Ganguli moves to the U.S.A. and continues to stay there against the wish of his wife. Jopi Nyman writes that according to Masao Miyoshi, transnational corporations are “no longer tied to any home nation: they are ‘adrift and mobile, ready to settle anywhere and exploit any state including its own, as long as the affiliation serves its own interest’” (Nyman 2009, 214). This is true with Ashoke. After his nearly fatal train accident he decides to leave Calcutta for good: he applies to American universities without the knowledge of his parents. Ashoke is a truly transnational character, he is mobile but at the same time cultural roots play a significant role in his life. As Reshmi Lahiri-Roy puts it “many of the post-1965 generation of white-collar Asian migrants to the U.S.A. made the very difficult move due to economic reasons. This is why Ashoke refused to return to Calcutta as he knew it would be beneficial for him and his future generations. While they were well-qualified they also sought the economic benefits associated with a move to the U.S.A. In Ashima’s reluctant compliance with Ashoke’s planning, the same rationale is observed” (Lahiri-Roy 2015). While Ashoke has become well-settled in America, taking classes at MIT and embracing his new life, Ashima, after all these years “still does not feel fully at home...on Pemberton road” (Lahiri 2003, 280). For her, India, particularly Calcutta, is a very special place, definitely a home while America is just a host country for her.

Both the first generation immigrants, Ashoke and Ashima and the second generation, Gogol, his sister Sonia and his ex-wife Moushumi, are discontented from their positions in the new land. They are reluctant to accept the diasporic cultural identity. As Vijay Mishra points out, “all diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (Mishra 2005, 1). This provides an insight into Lahiri’s diasporic characters. Ashima, the new mother, who after marrying

Ashoke and moving to cold Massachusetts, longs for her family and does not want to bring her child up alone in a foreign country:

'I won't', she insists thickly, '[...] Not here. Not like this.'
'[...] I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right.
I want to go back' (Lahiri 2003, 33).

It was miserable for Ashima or Monu, a pet name by which she is known at home, to think that she gave birth to her baby without any grandparents or parents or uncles or aunts at her side. She has empathy for her son for he is "entering the world so alone, so deprived" (Lahiri 2003, 25). But she has to surrender when Ashoke refuses to return to India, citing the future opportunities and progress that their son can enjoy in the U.S.A. Nevertheless, in order to overcome her grief and to feel at home, Ashima recreates a smaller Calcutta in her new town. She always socialises within a peer group of other Bengali migrants who are located within a specific class and have a specific cultural status:- "they all come from Calcutta and for this reason alone they are friends" (Lahiri 2003, 38). Gogol observes that every weekend they visit other Bengali families and this creates the network that Ashima requires. It is a network that substitutes for her family, the people she longs for in Massachusetts.

In Lahiri's novel, not only the first generation immigrants suffer from the dilemma between "home" and "exile": the second generation is also affected by hyphenated identities, in some way or the other, since their "roots" are from elsewhere. They inhabit today's globalised world, which is, as Mahmut Mutman puts it, "in today's globalized world, the transnational flow of cultures, finance, people, and commodities disrupts the borders of even the most 'closed' and 'detached' societies. The nature of this transnationalism and globalism is often considered in terms of an increasingly decentralized or multicentered, hybridized, and complex world of multiple encounters" (Mutman 2013, 2386). Gogol struggles to find his identity as an American living in an Indian household. He shuns his family mostly because of their cultural ties to India. He desires to fit into the American society around him and fears that if he embraces his Indian culture, Americans will reject him. He is an "American Born Confused Desi" (ABCD), "a derogatory nomenclature often used for second generation South Asian migrants" (Lahiri-Roy 2015). Struggling to escape the traditions perpetuated by the diasporic Indian community, he prefers to eat hamburgers over traditional Indian dishes cooked by his mother.

Like Jhumpa Lahiri, Moushumi was born in London and later migrated to the U.S.A. Born to Indian parents, Moushumi's migration to the U.S.A. is similar to James Clifford's claim that diasporas "follow and express distinct maps/histories

– linking first and third worlds...national or transnational margins or centers” (Lahiri-Roy 2015). Like Gogol, Moushumi too dislikes her Bengali parents, the culture and traditions they tried to teach her. She also prefers American food over the Indian ones. Moushumi is defying both Bengali and American tradition. By rejecting America, she also rejects her parents’ authority. It is a rejection especially of the Bengali American identity of her mother; a woman who “even after thirty-two years abroad, in England and now in America,[...] does not know how to drive, does not have a job, does not know the difference between a checking and savings account” (Lahiri 2003, 247). As Lahiri-Roy puts it, Moushumi is the “twice displaced” (Lahiri-Roy 2015): she too struggles with her identity. She is not satisfied with her Indian, Bengali and American identities and craves for a fourth one – the European one. Her yearning for a fourth one exhibits identity as a transnational feature and this multi-layered identity formation is related to Appadurai’s concept of transnational flows.

Andrew Robinson rightly claims, “Appadurai believes that it is the disjuncture between the ‘spaces’ which provide the conditions for global flows. Money, commodities and people chase each other all over the world seeking new combinations” (Robinson 2011). Gogol’s name is Russian: he was named by his father, Ashoke, after his favourite author, Nikolai Gogol. Moushumi moves in to stay with her French boyfriend after her divorce with Gogol and Sonia marries Ben, who is half-Jewish and half-Chinese. This transnational flow of identities is similar to Miyoshi’s “vision of a world in which transnational corporations operate globally, unattached, independent of the nation-state” (Nyman 2009, 214). However, for Miyoshi, transnationalism is mainly “negative, replacing national rootedness with corporate identity, increasing thus homogeneity and devaluing the local” (Nyman 2009, 214), which is mainly portrayed through the characters of Ashoke, Gogol and Moushumi who are constantly trying to shed their national rootedness in search of transnational identities.

I further argue that Lahiri’s novel cannot be classified only as a transnational novel but it is woven with the tales of the “stereotypical representations of Indian women”, objectifying the female characters as “materialistic consumers, victims of brown male oppression, and repositories of ethnic tradition” (Bhalla 2012, 110). According to Bengali custom, children have no rights to choose their life partners. The brides and grooms are to be decided by their parents. However, the condition is more pathetic for the female child:

It had been after tutoring one day that Ashima’s mother had met her at the door, told her to go straight to the bedroom and prepare herself; a man was waiting to see her. He was the third in as many months [...] She

was nineteen, in the middle of her studies, in no rush to be a bride. And so, obediently but without expectation, she had untangled and rebraided her hair, wiped away the kohl that had smudged below her eyes, patted some Cuticura powder from a velvet puff onto her skin (Lahiri 2003, 14).

Like an obedient daughter, Ashima has to submit to her parents' decision. She hardly has any say in this matter and is bound to accept the "suitable man" that has been chosen for her:

Ashima could hear her mother saying, 'She is fond of cooking, and she can knit extremely well. Within a week she finished this cardigan I am wearing'. Ashima smiled, amused by her mother's salesmanship; it had taken her the better part of a year to finish the cardigan, and still her mother had had to do the sleeves. (Lahiri 2003, 14)

In order to be presentable in the marriage market, an Indian woman has to have several qualities: she should know cooking, sewing, knitting and at the same time she should have some extracurricular activities like singing, recitation, etc. This is similar to the portrayal of the accomplished Victorian lady.

However, Lahiri does not only portray her women characters as victims of patriarchal oppressions but she provides them with opportunities to cross the threshold of conventional norms. I read the characters of Ashima, Moushumi and Sonia as a problem to Deborah Parsons' idea of New Woman. Parsons redraws the gendered map of urban modernism. Lahiri's women characters try to transcend the limits as set by the conventional society but at the same time they are conscious of their cultural boundaries. However, Parsons' "New Woman" is the member of a white and privileged class in London as opposed to Lahiri's women characters. While Ashima undergoes negotiations to mould into the new identity, oscillating between her homeland and the new town, strictly following her own culture but fulfilling her husband's "American Dream", Moushumi and Sonia are more confident about their own positions. This problematises Parsons' notion as Ashima transforms herself from the shy Indian lady to a confident woman in America but she still wears sarees and puts her hair in a bun. Although Moushumi escapes from the identities of her parents, she is not satisfied and still searches for a new identity to fit into. Again, Sonia, who was too reluctant as a child to eat the Bengali dishes cooked by her mother, learns to cook them.

Reshmi Lahiri-Roy rightly points out that the transformation in Ashima's bodily features "mirrors the transformations she experiences at an emotional and socio-cultural level" (Lahiri-Roy 2015):

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realise, 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 an 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 elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect (Lahiri-Roy 2015).

Ashima negotiates her identity from a Bengali middle-class to a middle-class Bengali-American one: “for the first time, she pushes him through the balmy streets of Cambridge, to Purity Supreme, to buy a bag of white long-grain rice” (Lahiri 2003, 34). In my opinion this is a major step taken by Ashima where she transcends the limits of a typical Bengali housewife who is expected to depend on her husband in almost everything and forces herself to create an independent identity. From the shy girl who accompanied her husband to the U.S.A., Ashima transforms herself gaining confidence with each passing day. Even after the death of her husband, she does not feel bound to stay in America, nor does she feel nostalgically driven to return to India. Rather, seeks to divide her time between the two countries:

For the first time since her flight to meet her husband in Cambridge, in the winter of 1967, she will make the journey entirely on her own. The prospect no longer terrifies her. She has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta (Lahiri 2003, 276).

It is my contention that Lahiri’s first generation immigrant, Ashima, who had cocooned herself in the protective care, at first of her parents and then her husband, undergoes compromises and negotiations to achieve a firm ground, which she can claim as her own, where she would not be dolled upon like Nora Helmer in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Ashima, as her name suggests in Bengali, the one who crosses all limits and transcends all borders, creates an empowered identity for herself in the fluid, transnational, diasporic world.

In contrast to Ashima, Moushumi, the rebellious cultural outsider, never feels satisfied in her married life. She describes meeting and marrying Gogol as a “courtship in a fishbowl” (Lahiri 2003, 250). She wants to leave behind every trace of her Bengali roots: “She wanted nothing of the brief life they’d had together” (Lahiri 2003, 283). Thereafter, Moushumi divorces Gogol and goes back to start a new life with her European boyfriend, Dimitri. “She hears Dimitri’s footsteps

on the stairs, then the clean sound of his key in the lock, slicing sharply into the apartment. She gets up to put the book away, searching for the gap in which it stood" (Lahiri 2003, 267). I believe that Lahiri uses the phrase "searching for the gap" as an ironical reference, which seems to be very true in Moushumi's life. She is never satisfied with her identity and does not "belong" anywhere (Lahiri-Roy 2015). But the readers are not certain whether this new relationship would be able to fill the "gap" that Moushumi has been trying to fill throughout her life or whether this is just the sign of another identity that Moushumi would like to develop. However, in my reading, Moushumi is a "New Woman". Though she is very different from Parsons' white, privileged woman yet she is definitely more privileged than the first generation immigrants, Ashima, as she does not compromise her emotions. While Gogol and Moushumi are in France, she does not like being photographed like a tourist. Rather, she feels at home, "she both fits in perfectly yet remains slightly novel. Here she has reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt" (Lahiri 2003, 233). I claim that Moushumi uses the language barrier, the advantage of being efficient in French, to distance herself from Gogol and assert herself. After the sacred vows of marriage even though they are now husband and wife, Moushumi maintains privacy; a space of her own. She does not entirely share her life with Gogol:

It is the day Moushumi is presenting her paper. He had offered to go with her, to sit in the audience and listen to her speak. But she told him that was silly, why sit in the middle of a roomful of people speaking a language he doesn't understand when there was still more of the city he could see? (Lahiri 2003, 233)

It is true that Gogol does not speak French and it is quite difficult for a person to sit through an entire session without understanding a word. But it is quite intriguing how Moushumi uses this inner space of the conference room to shed light on her rebellious nature. Later in the narrative the readers see Moushumi's efforts to establish her transnational identity. She knows her aims in life, how she wants to see herself and achieve her dreams:

'Hey there', she says. She smiles at him, temporarily leaning her head on his shoulder, and he realizes that she's drunk.

'What does Moushumi mean?' Oliver asks on the other side of her.

'A damp southwesterly breeze,' she says shaking her head, rolling her eyes

'Sort of like the one outside?'

'I always knew you are the force of nature,' Astrid says, laughing (Lahiri 2003, 240).

Lahiri gives her the liberty to break the norms imposed on a traditional Bengali girl who drinks and hangs out with guys. Moushumi is that “force of nature” who dares to go beyond her limits, becoming a “New Woman” who challenges established norms yet remains very conscious of her intersectional identity.

As opposed to Moushumi, Sonia, Lahiri’s youngest protagonist is the “not confused” diasporic protagonist (Lahiri-Roy 2015). As Reshmi Lahiri-Roy observes, she is also an American born to Indian parents who functions as a “signifier for the smooth transitioning and renegotiating of transnational identities without experiencing excess angst” (Lahiri-Roy 2015). Unlike her brother Gogol, Sonia does not struggle with her dual identity and at the same time she does not accept her parents’ culture either. The novel portrays a stark difference in the characters of the children of the same parents. While Gogol keeps returning to his “roots”, especially after the death of his father, Sonia is less concerned. Even though both children are American born, Sonia seems to be more relaxed and confident about her moves. From the very beginning, she knows what she desires for and does not exert herself like her brother: “She is in high school now, taking Mr. Lawson’s English class, going to the dances Gogol never went himself, already going to parties at which both boys and girls are present. Her braces have come off her teeth, revealing a confident, frequent, American smile” (Lahiri 2003, 107). Sonia has a firm standpoint of her own. To live her life comfortably she creates a space of her own. It is her comfort zone where she distances herself from her parents and her brother. They do not have a say in her life.

Unlike her parents, Ashoke and Ashima, who oscillate between “home” and “exile”, Sonia is quite at ease with her position in the U.S.A., which is as Brah claims, “clearly the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations” (Lahiri-Roy 2015). We might read Sonia as the antithesis of the supposed “ABCD” (American Born Confused Desi) (Lahiri 2003, 118). Sonia is neither confused nor at any stage worried about her position in mainstream American society. As Lahiri-Roy points out, she occupies a place of comfort within the narrative structure; maybe as an aspired self for the author herself who has confessed in an interview with Isaac Chotiner that “there is sort of a half-way feeling” of being American (Lahiri-Roy 2015). Sonia does not have a problem with dual identities. As Lahiri-Roy points out, “the transnational identity” of Sonia is strongly created by the author almost as an “ideal for a Bengali migrant child” (Lahiri-Roy 2015). As Stuart Hall observes:

Cultural identity, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture....Far from being

grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Lahiri-Roy 2015).

Sonia, a typical South Asian American teenager in a small town in the U.S.A., easily becomes a capable young attorney in Boston. Like her life, her identity is portrayed as transnational fluid "running along a smooth track" (Lahiri-Roy 2015):

Sonia is sitting in the driver's seat, waving. Ben is next to her. This is the first time he's seeing Sonia since she and Ben have announced their engagement...She is an attorney now, working in an office in the Hancock building. Her hair is cut to her jaw. She's wearing an old blue jacket that Gogol had worn back in high school. And yet there is a new maturity in her face; he can easily imagine her now, with two children in the back seat (Lahiri 2003, 284).

Among Lahiri's diasporic protagonists, Sonia emerges as the most successful one. She marries the man of her choice, Ben, a mixed race American, breaking all the limitations set by her Indian parents.

Unlike the main women characters in the novel, who suffer from dual identities, Lahiri introduces another female character, Maxine Ratcliff, who is a beautiful, wealthy American woman, with whom Gogol had a brief relationship. I believe Maxine offers a contrast to the other three women, Ashima, Moushumi and Sonia. Gogol observes that Maxine's family are very distinct from his parents:- "There is an astonishing camaraderie between the couple; they are rich, elitist and open with their daughter" (Puttaiah 2012, 84-94). They accept him into their household gladly. Gogol begins to feel bitter about the way his parents live. As he spends more time with Maxine and her parents and shares with them many light-hearted moments, he experiences a new sense of freedom, something he never experienced at home, "...yet for some reason it is dependence, not adulthood, he feels" (Lahiri 2003, 142). Through his relationship with Maxine, Gogol could distance himself from his past in the hope of a positive future where he can fit into the mainstream American society:

The American girl [Gogol] was dating in New York was the epitome of what he wanted. [She] was everything that he wasn't: total upper-class, very cultured, very worldly, in a European sense...I saw [their relationship] like him just going after what he didn't have and what he

wasn't, because that is what he thought he wanted to be and ... could become by being with her (Lahiri-Roy 2015).

Gogol and Maxine's relationship is similar to what critics such as Bandana Purkayastha characterizes as "an assimilative strategy for South Asians in the United States where in the group asserts an upwardly mobile ethnic identity in the symbolic realm and sites of political coalition in order to avoid being 'incorporated into the U.S. racial system'" (Lahiri-Roy 2015). Maxine does not have to struggle with her identity like Gogol. She is an American and perfectly comfortable in her own skin. She does not fluctuate between "home" and "exile".

However, at the end of Lahiri's narrative, the dilemma between "home" and "exile" still prevails within the characters. Ashima, who was earlier hesitant about Maxine's presence in the Ganguli household, now seems to accept Sonia's decision of marrying Ben. After the death of Ashoke, Gogol seems to go back to his "roots" as he develops a mature understanding of Ashoke's life. The novel comes to a full circle with Gogol reading *The Overcoat*, a long forgotten gift that he had received from his father on his fourteenth birthday. Sonia has learnt to cook the food she had refused to eat as a child. Both Ashima and Sonia "reach out and negotiate newer identities and closer bonds using the bridges provided by the culture embedded in Bengali cuisine" (Lahiri-Roy 2015). Ashima decides to balance her stay, six months in the U.S.A. and the remaining six months at her native place. On the other hand, the readers are yet uncertain about Moushumi's "Anglo-Bengali American Francophile" relationship (Lahiri-Roy 2015): whether she will be contented in the present relation or will reach out for some other identities.

Therefore, in conclusion, I assert that all the characters in Lahiri's *The Namesake* are affected by displacement – be it the displacement of the self or the movement from one space to another. Territorial boundaries lose significance when the characters – first generation immigrants, such as, Ashoke and Ashima, migrate from their homeland to the U.S.A., while Gogol, Moushumi and Sonia, who are the second generation migrants, move within the U.S.A., in search of their roots. Lahiri's novel highlights that apart from the border-crossing between two places, there is always a constant struggle between the inner and the outer spaces, that is, between the home country and the host country. The idea of transnationalism and cultural flows is a significant theme in this diaspora fiction. Although the characters acquire transnational identities, they are conscious of their cultural roots. Lahiri's novel offers a stereotypical representation of Indian women who are constantly constrained by traditional and cultural norms. However, these women characters successfully defy the traditional dogmas and standards of the society. They have chiselled the heroic characters by outdoing the male counterparts, each of them

having a firm standpoint and a space of their own. They do not restrict themselves to the rigid traditional norms and try to create a space for themselves. They are proud to evolve themselves out in the image of the New Woman and the new abilities that they now possess. This insight rewrites Parsons’ notion since these women have successfully resolved the duality of “home” and “exile” by creating a place of their own but at the same time they abide by their cultural norms.

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