

SEARCH FOR BENGALI CULTURE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract

The present article tries to find out the impact of cross cultural conflicts, trauma, identity crisis rootlessness, alienation and marginalization, especially on Aashima Ganguly, in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake, who finds herself divided between her homeland in Calcutta and the hostland America. The internal conflict she bears to satiate their emotional and psychological needs are very painful. 'The Namesake', Lahiri's debut novel is a social document of a perplexing bicultural universe that analyses the values and norms of both the New World and the Old with kind of double consciousness. In Americas multicultural matrix her Indian protagonist of Bengali origin, Ashima Ganguli is the victim of the contamination of inter – civilizational alliance and multiculturalism. She with her husband makes occasional visits to India to enhance their cultural identity; and to maintain a fine balance, trying hard for emancipation from their dislocation, displacement and disorientation. Living a separate life from the American culture, this paper focuses on the crucial, painstricken experience of alienation, of being stranger in a foreign land, of Indian women immigrants through Ashima Ganguli, the true representative of Indian women who have a lot of love and reverence for the rich cultural heritage for their naveland India and who unwillingly changed or adapted to the culture of the host country and sacrificed their comfortable life. The present paper focuses on the Bengaliness present in The Namesake of Jhumpa Lahiri.

Keyword:
alienation, immigrants, identity crisis, trauma, multicultural matrix

Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the most renowned authors of Indian Diaspora, presents the universal human predicament of dislocation and alienation, through a powerful woman character Ashima Ganguli, who becomes the spokeswoman of Indian Bengali diaspora in her famous novel *The Namesake*. The novel is full of Bengali names, food, cooking, wardrobe, and mannerism. The novel portrays two generations of a diasporic Bengali family. Ashima Ganguli, belongs to India, a Bengali lady who is in deep love for Bengali culture and customs. Her love for her Bengali culture makes her feel lonely and nostalgic in New York. In the beginning, we are told how she mixes "*Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl, to make a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks spilling from newspaper cones.*"

The novel is replete with references to typical Bengali food that Ashima prepares for special occasions like on Gogol's birthdays or events of Bengali get-togethers. Ashima cooks Bengali food and makes her refrigerator full of Indian dishes.

Ashima who was suffering from intense nostalgia, throughout her stay in the United States she clung to typical Bengali culture. She even continued to wear saris and sandals from Bata to satiate her hunger of love towards her country and its rich culture. She used to dress up in the style of a peculiar Indian married girl with bangles of conch and signifying her blissful status as a married Hindu – Bengali woman. She like the other married Hindu women does not utter her husband's first name for according to Indian custom it should stay unspoken by her for the fear of committing a sin. She rather refers to it cleverly in an indirect and oblique manner. She is always reminded of the words of her family elders in India, "*not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family.*"

The only real associates that the Ganguli couple Ashoke and Ashima has in the US are fellow Bengali immigrants. The Nandi's, the Mitra's and the Banerjee's and the circle grows with more and more young Bengali bachelors flying back to Calcutta one by one, returning with their wives. These are the only near-ones to call them so, for the Ganguli's. The women who have migrated with their husbands, are more lonely and bewildered due to their husbands being busy in their professions. In the same way Ashima also feels much lonely and nostalgic, continuously indulged in nostalgia, remembering the sweet memories of her motherland, its rich culture and the sweet moments of her near and dear ones despite being on the American soil. These families find mutual solace and affinity in each other's company.

Ashima Ganguli as a Bengali, despite being treated as second class community in New York's high class life, tries to make every moment of life happy by enjoying their cultural rituals with fun and frolic. During Durga Puja, they become nostalgic for Calcutta and wished to visit the 'city of joy'. The diasporic Bengali community, as represented by woman protagonist Ashima Ganguli likes to board double-decker buses for the tour, purchase Bata Shoes, Cuticular powder, Margo soap for bath and prefer to eat aloo gobi, syrupy mishits and have flair for Marie biscuit and Lipton tea.

Even when in America Ashima in order to overcome the alienation and loneliness as well as to overcome the crisis of identity and to restore the dignity of her rich cultural heritage, continues with to celebrate Gogol and Sonia's 'Annaprasanna ceremony (a ceremony for consumption of solid food) and she misses her relatives.

The children are taught about their family lineage, religious customs, rites, beliefs, food, and mannerism. Ashima herself takes the charge to make Gogol learn and memorize Tagore's poems, names of Hindu deities like Saraswati, Kartik Lakshmi, and Ganesha, and adorn Goddess Durga during the puja.

It is as on Ashoka's untimely demise that Ashima as atypical Indian lady shows her deep faith in Indian culture as well as traditions and shows her power of determination to follow the Indian ways of life even in an alien land amidst a culture to which she attaches no importance

to these rites. Even at this time of grief and great loss presenting the example of a traditional Indian lady with all her power, she takes off her iron wedding bracelets she had always worn, washes off the vermilion from her forehead just like a Hindu woman does, symbolizing widowhood. This sense of attachment to one's native culture and ways of life portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri through her Bengali woman protagonist Ashima Ganguli is quite contrary to the American ways of life where they have been placed due to their migration.

Ashima Ganguli becomes the spokeswoman of all the women who due to their love towards their country and towards its rich cultural heritage continuously tried to restore its dignity despite their own trauma and agony faced by them in a foreign country. Lahiri has presented a realistic and personalized account of Indian immigrants as she herself admits about the city Calcutta as 'a city of mind' and that through her literary expressions she continuously tries to focus on her multicultural identity rather than presenting her parents' persistence towards their cultural attachment.

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