

DIASPORIC LITERATURE AND PREDICAMENTS OF HUMAN MIND

Dr. Rajeshvari

Assistant Professor
Shyamlal College
University of Delhi

Abstract- Marginalisation across the border might be very common. But its forms are always unique and very individual. How a person feels and faces is something that others can empathize and sympathize with but what a person goes through no one can share. For that matter, I have chosen the very first and most popular novel of Jhumpa Lahiri 'The Namesake'. This novel is based upon the diasporic experience of Ashima and her husband Ashoke Ganguly. Focus of this paper is mainly the character of Ashima Ganguly, whose journey from India to an unfamiliar country begins when her marriage takes place with Ashoke. Although, primarily she does not think much about her prospective journey but when she actually moves, it seems that she is altogether on another planet. The novel is about her day to day life in an unknown country and how she tries to take up and adapt herself according to that culture and society. An eponymous movie was also made by Meera Nair. The Namesake was published in Bengali by Ananda Publishers in Calcutta, India, by the name Samanami.

Key Words: Cultural differences, Generation gap, Indian traditions, Predicaments, Marriage.

Crossing the border for a number of reasons is a common practice. But how a particular person feels and goes through on a foreign land is completely individual. Some people enjoy and many people suffer, especially when going to an unknown country is not a choice but rather an obligation. A similar predicament exudes from the life experience of Ashima, who is a Bengali woman. Ashima has to move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her husband Ashoke Ganguly, who is doing his studies in electrical engineering at MIT. Ashima is the protagonist of the novel who did her Post Graduate in English Literature. She did not deliberate deeply as she was not a decision maker. According to her husband's choice she simply moves in with him. There she gives birth to a son Gogol and a daughter Sonia. After that life unfolded with many canvasses and colours which brings a continuous terrain of thoughts. Ashima could never come to a clear thinking that whether her arrival in an unknown territory was right or not. But it is not tough for readers to understand the mental state of Ashima. Colour gray and white are prominent in the story of this novel which are symbols of a dull and colourless life of Ashima. And throughout the novel Ashima feels loneliness and banality engulfs her. Novel describes the Indian culture and value of old traditions in the context of two generations and how they take them up from different points of view. Novel portrays beautifully the struggle of the first generation and the positive perspective of the second generation on a foreign land. Many people who have to leave their roots due to some reasons find it very difficult to plant and grow themselves in another country. They comprehend it very well that coming back home permanently is a far cry. The novel makes several sojourns from India to America and vice versa to unfold the various happenings that constructs and deconstructs the numerous faith humans carry as a part of the individual and societal needs and expectations. In this novel, various characters namely Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol, Sonia and Moushmi come into contact with many other characters and incidents, which prompt to explore new knowledge and create in them a global outlook. The novel begins with Ashima Ganguli, wife of Ashoke Ganguli and mother of Gogol and Sonia. Ashima by every inch is an Indian woman stuck in her native culture and tradition. She faces the cultural clash due to her rigidity or resistance to change. She feels alienated as she is unable to adjust herself to the changed environment on a foreign land. She chose to cling to her traditional customs which do not allow Indian wives to call their husbands by their names. According to her culture the husband's name is sacred and never to be uttered by his wife. Being a woman or rather a Bengali woman it is too intimate to call her husband by his name. It reveals the cultural impact one upon him/her and it resists her to adopt or adapt to a different culture, where spouse are like friend to each other. This is something Bengali wives don't do. Ashima is unable to imitate the financial trait of couples treating each other as friends and darling. Hearing a word like 'sweetheart' is extremely intimate for Ashima when it was called by a person to his wife in the hospital.

It appears quite paradoxical that the man she lives with and whose children she is going to beget, cannot be called by his name. An ambivalence and uneasiness is a part and parcel of her routine. In America, there is no hustle bustle of the city, no relatives, no errands and vivacity that she used to experience in home country.

From the time of her arrival in America and then her getting pregnant, a fear keeps lingering in Ashima's mind. Everything seems abnormal in this country. The extremity of this feeling was so intense that even the pain of pregnancy does not scare her to such an extent as to raise her child in a country where she does not feel the connection with anyone. Everything and every person is an alien where she is skeptical about values she has inculcated in her children. During her labour pain in the hospital when a gown was given to her, she feels quite uncomfortable in that cotton gown as it reaches only to her knees. Everything is humiliating for her. She is not able to adjust herself to the changed situation and these are offending moments. Ashima feels very lonely when she is admitted in the hospital for the delivery of her first child - *"It is the first time in her life she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents or Ashoke at her side."* On one hand, Americans are very open and frank in the matter of dress and kissing publicly but paradoxically they are very private in initiating the conversation with unfamiliar people. Due to this reason, although she wishes the curtains in the hospital were open so that she could talk to American women, she is aware that it appears awkward due to their cultural differences and is also devoid of Americans' idea of their privacy. *"Americans in spite of public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts bikinis, in spite of their hand holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge common, prefer their privacy."*

For Ashima, everything is valuable and beautiful that belongs to India and this is the reason that she is not able to appreciate anything about Massachusetts. Although her husband, children and a few friends too have been living there, nothing makes her heart cheerful. All the time a persistent hollowness engulfs her. The depth of her pain is so profound that even her labour pain seems less than the pain of her loneliness and incompleteness in an alien country. This is the reason that once she said to Ashoke that she does not want to raise Gogol in a lonely country. "This too is a truth that to live away from your own country makes you nostalgic. Owing to this banality and emptiness became a way of life in America for Ashima. Even after the childbirth, she considers even Indian acquaintances as substitutes of her own people. She rather faces the cultural shock and feels deprived and dejected. Her baby's birth comes to her like everything else in America, it feels somehow haphazard, only half true. Long standing Indian conventions have a deep impact on Ashima's mind.. Thinking out of the box seems next to impossible to her. Owing to this faith, she does not name her son on her own and waits for her grandmother's letter that will bring the new child's name. She wants to dispense with the proud practice of pet names that reminds her of old times. A good name, according to the set belief was nothing but identification in the outside world. The way she attaches importance to the name being decided after the arrival of a letter reveals her blindness to her confined native as well as community culture. Initially she was reluctant to name her child because she wants to wait for her grandmother's letter which will bring a name for her newborn child. But doctors delayed and held the baby's discharge without naming him. Finally she agrees with Ashoke to give the child pet name 'Gogol'. Unlike Ashoke, Ashima is not able to enjoy her life. As Ashoke wanted to make his career abroad. Although Ashima continuously tries to find her feet, which is a choice of her husband. She feels pride to discover a routine for herself. She is flanked by American's smiles showing their appreciation for the child in the pram. Though Ashima does not return their candid gesture yet she realizes for the first time that it is not a foreign country but her own isolation and closed nature that binds her.

Ashima lacks the qualities of adjustment. Ashoke, on the other contrary is a forward looking person, attracted towards the foreignness. He is not the typical Indian stuck to traditional beliefs rather he loves making adventures. This reminds Ghosh a co-passenger of Ashoke when the major accident took place. Ghosh advice him to see and experience the outside world. Ghosh' instruction may be considered as a link to connect east and the west. Ghosh says to Ashpke "Do yourself a favor .Before it is too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and blanket and see much of the world as you can. You will never regret it. Ones it will be too late ." Ashoke is a person of broad thinking and treats the whole world as a home. He braves all emotional chords that pull him homewards and packs up for his studies. For Ashoke knowledge and exposure to the outside world is a medium to groom one's personality. Reasoning is more significant than in emotional outpourings for him. He keeps himself updated by reading international news and tries to associate himself with the happenings around. As Ashoke grows in stature, Ashima's anguish also increases. Ashoke is open to new challenges which Ashima often dodge and instead invites unnecessary worries. The feeling of being in a foreign land is so deep in her psyche that she considers it a 'lifelong pregnancy.' Although, the reason to face this situation lies in her upbringing also. Unlike Ashoke she never had been to a cross border country. Her upbringing is different from Ashoke. For her relations keep a special place in her heart, which no one can erase. Influence of these values and traditions is easily perceivable in the nurturing of her two children. Ashima loves both her children extremely, but she reacts when she feels her own cultural beliefs hurt. She did not like the idea of visiting the cemetery as it is

considered a bad omen in Indian culture. She has some deep embedded fear in her mind. Ashoke is undoubtedly a practical person. Although keeps respect to his Indian roots and loves his motherland. Though, Ashima feels disconcerted but she yields to Ashoke's insistence. For the sake of her children Ashoke and Ashima celebrate Christmas as they know that Gogol and Sonia love to celebrate the festival. It displays their nature to accept if something is positive and makes no harm for them. It is the result of Ashoke's persuasion that Ashima sometimes makes American dishes and also cakes for Sonia and Gogol. Sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. Ashoke knows well that their children might be the victim of not only their rigidity but also the problem of those children who oscillate between the regions of two cultures and strife because their identities are at stake. Ashoke tries his best to counterbalance these conflicts of children, keeping himself on the margin to allow the progeny more space.

As the time passes Ashima keeps trying to maintain the balance between Indian and American culture, she could never adapt to American society. Even when Gogol grows up she prepares all Indian dishes on Gogol's birthday. While the mother does everything very carefully, Ashoke, who has known much about American life by now, does not show any protest. There are examples when signs of adjustment with a new culture can be noticed in Ashima's behavior. She does not question her son when he leaves with Maxine to spend her holidays with her and her family without marrying Maxine. She does not even react when Maxine addresses Ashima by her name. Moreover, she maintained her Indian ethos of calling Ashoke as Nikhil's father. After the passing of her husband Ashima takes a job in the library to maintain it and to shake off his feeling of alienation.

Ashima grows lonely and tries to be independent, especially after Ashoke accepts the proposal of visiting professorship in Ohio. This is the first time for Ashima, when she is living all by herself in the house at Pemberton road. Gogol, her son, is on summer vacation with his American girlfriend, Maxine. Sonia, her daughter, is in California for her job. Now, when her children are away from her and she is growing old, it is her relationship and love of her husband Ashoke, a strong support at a place where each and everything is unfamiliar and unknown for her. But the news of his unexpected death is more tragic for Ashima. The time when she is all by herself. Ashoke's death moved her extremely. She has no shoulder to cry on, no one her own or other who can even console her. She cannot share her sorrow of this huge loss. For readers this is something heartrending. This is very expected from Ashima but those moments are particularly moving. There was not a single soul to share his grief. As an Indian and knowing the value of relations in our culture, it is completely, comprehensible how difficult it is for a woman to take the grief of her husband's death when she is all alone and dealing with the situation all by herself. Ashima's pain is really deep and moving:

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband. After watching the movie, readers can identify more with the irrevocable loss that Ashima made. But after her Husband's death Ashima tries to accept the reality and behave more maturely. She happily accepts Ben, an American boy for Sonia as her fiancé. Moreover, it is Ashima who asks Gogol to patch up with Maxine. She tries to adjust with American society. She takes the decision by herself to sell her house at Pemberton Road and decides to spend six months in India and six months in the USA alternatively. Along with this, to make her more confident and live an American way of life, she takes a job in a library. Although the feeling of loneliness is prevalent throughout the novel, if we empathize and sympathize with Ashima, we can understand her plight, how a woman feels living alone without her parents at an unknown place, in a house all by herself and then sudden, unexpected and unfortunate death of her husband. But to an extent, Ashima touches many dimensions of life. For instance, she is a post graduate in English Literature, journey from India to America, learning driving, living alone, doing a job in the library and finally the strength to make decisions herself. All these things are sufficient to say that she is Ashima (limitless).

Ashima does not complain much for anything. She lives quite. This too is a reason that she feels very lonely. Above all losing a husband at an alien land is losing your entire world, where you have no extended family. Her plight can be felt and understood easily by any Indian woman. Despite not adapting to the culture of America she understands it very well. She knows very well that she cannot expect much from her children because they are born and raised according to American culture. They cannot understand and assimilate Indian values on a foreign land which is their own now. Ashima understands that is why she never asks her children to live with her or vice versa. Gradually she accepts every change. She accepts her daughter's boyfriend Ben, she asks Gogol to bring back Maxine in his life, she takes the job of a library, she sells her flat and decides to stay six months in India and six in America alternatively. It displays that she is trying to accept all changes. It is not necessary that all women feel the same as Ashima feels in the novel. But this too is true that her pain is the pain of several women who go abroad due to obligation. Sometimes due to marital ties and sometimes due to their children. Through the journey of Ashima, the novel gives a silent message that all should have freedom to choose.

Through her novel, Jhumpa Lahiri establishes that to adopt and adapt to a different culture is not always comfortable. Despite everything, she conveys that one has to look forward to fresher possibilities and accept the differences. In fact we need to negotiate the differences. The Ganguly's, especially Ashima's, skeptics at times, try to merge in the new world albeit the pull of their native culture often appears heavy. After Ashoke passed away she made the decision to stay both in India and America showing her acceptability of two homes. Ashima's acceptance of Sonia's marriage with Ben again is her acceptance of multicultural characteristics of postcolonial, third world reality. Thus, for Ashoke boundaries are superficial and they do not exist in reality. But for Ashima, India is India and America is America. Two worlds cannot be alike and this is why from the outset to the end she keeps searching grounds for her to keep his feet firmly.

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