

Growing up as an individual: Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake*

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Abstract: This article analyses the character of Ashima Ganguli of the novel *The Namesake* in two different ways. First it shows how she, as a woman, designs her life combining her traditional beliefs and individual improvisations needed for surviving in a foreign land. Second it also shows how she, as a diaspora mother, adjusts herself to the new way of life in America without effacing her former self completely. The analysis leads to the conclusion that Ashima changes herself in more than one way to mature as an individual with a new personality.

Apart from being the story of Gogol, *The Namesake* is also very essentially the story of Ashima Ganguli, whose presence in the novel is never loud but all pervasive. Though feminism is not the first thing discernible in the character of this homesick housewife of the scholar Ashoke, in the progress of her life we can trace some phases enabling her to change from her former self into a new independent individual. Her transformation to a certain extent conforms to feminism because it reflects how she creates her own pattern of life using her female experience as a wife and mother.

This article interprets the development of Ashima's character basically in two ways: in the first place from a feminist viewpoint and secondly from the transnational angle that brings forth the idea of diaspora. Ashima is a woman who, though unconsciously, is successful in shaping her identity as a *female*, as defined by Elaine Showalter. She is also a diaspora Indian woman in the novel who is struggling to create a pattern for her life. The analysis of her character encompasses the entire phase of her maturity, the beginning of her emancipation as a mother and, finally, as motherhood gives her strength to achieve self reliance. This journey of hers is realized through a series of accommodations and adoptions. We see her embracing changes at many phases of her life, but yet obstinately retaining some traditional values to a mentionable extent. This fascinating paradox is a unique feature of her character which will be explored in the article.

The Namesake is about the immigrant life of an Indian couple Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli. Ashoke returns to Kolkata from New York where he has been pursuing his PhD in electrical engineering at MIT. After his arranged marriage to

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Ashima they go back to New York as immigrants. The novel then extends its realm to issues like bridging generations as Ashoke and Ashima become parents of a son and a daughter. Cultural conflicts take over the narrative with the progress of the story where Gogol remains under the spotlight for most of the time. However the subtle but pervasive presence of Ashima is going to be the central issue of the novel.

As the evolution of feminism shows, the first wave feminism basically links itself with traditional female properties--that is, qualities like softness, delicacy, innocence, etc. In reality, this wave was all about distorting and silencing women's original voices. However, this wave was gradually replaced by a movement seeking equal rights for women, based on the idea of equality of the sexes in education, in the workplace and at home. The third wave of feminism is cross-cultural in nature as it extends its horizon to include the issues related to all women irrespective of their race, class, nationality, and religion and so on and so forth.

Elain Showalter, in her essay, "Towards a Feminist Poetics," summarizes the three phases of feminism in the following way:

In the female phase, ongoing since 1920, women reject both imitation and protest--two forms of dependency--and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature. (154)

In Ashima's character we see the culminating point of the female phase--the creation of an autonomous art by using the female experience. She is not a protester in the novel. She never questions her position in the family or the society. Yet in her life the phases of feminism explained above can be traced. Her life is a continual process of adaptation and adjustment. Through all these alterations she recreates herself over and over again to reach the final stage of 'autonomous art' based on the 'female experience'.

The feminism I discovered in Ashima Ganguli doesn't have much to do with struggling for certain rights. Rather it has to do with the unfolding of the individual self within her. She combines two aspects of feminism within her, namely, the "constructionist" and the "essentialist" feminism.

French feminism initiated a conflict between "constructionist" and "essentialist" feminism. The former being the idea of accepting the notion that gender is made by culture in history whereas the latter is more inclined to the idea that gender reflects a natural difference between men and women that is as much psychological, even linguistic, as it is biological.

To me Ashima seems to be a complex mixture of these two types, though she herself is created being totally unaware of the concoction. She is the product of culture in the constructionist sense, but she retains some unique shades of

character not found in the other members of the family. For example, she continues to wear sari and Bata sandals even in the cold climate of States, though Ashoke learns to buy readymade garments. True to the tradition of culture in history she has certain innate ideas of cultural norms which she cannot overcome or never questions. She doesn't question her role in the family as a wife and mother. It never occurs to her to call her husband by name. On the other hand, she maintains some principles which neither culture nor any outside force taught her; rather she carries them within herself. That is, sometimes she goes beyond tradition to devise a new life style using her own discretion. She learns to welcome Gogol's American girlfriend Maxine. She also learns to live alone when Ashoke leaves for Ohio and make American friends at the library, her workplace. These seemingly opposite crosscurrents in her character make her more interesting than most of the other people around her. Obviously, as a stranger to America, she adjusts herself to many basic changes, but on the other hand she firmly sticks to her own beliefs in more than one way. She successfully harmonizes these contradictory traits to create her own pattern of life, her own way to sustainability. At all the critical junctures of her life she survives the challenge and finds a way out to adaptation.

At first she appears to be a woman who doesn't have much to say in the most important events of her life. Her marriage with Ashoke was arranged. After getting married her flight to New York with Ashoke was another major incident of her life in which she had almost no role to play. Reaching the new country she discovers, for the first time in life, that she is all by herself. Perhaps from this time onwards she learns to think individually, or is forced to do so, as she knows that there is no one here to help her in making decisions.

The Namesake, being a story of Diaspora, involves other complexities beyond gender. So the character of Ashima develops through layers of experiences. She is a woman, a wife and a mother. Apart from this she is a migrant—an Indian in America, a country which was completely unknown to her for the first nineteen years of her life. So she grows up here in the new land in two major ways—first as an individual in the family and secondly as an outsider learning to survive in a different culture adopting a different way of life.

The new identity of Ashima has formed in a cross cultural and transnational way. She neither remains a normative Hindu woman, nor does she become a fully westernized female. Rather she emerges as a combination of both. How she contains these seemingly paradoxical identities within herself is amazing indeed. She carefully maintains a balance between her past and present but this balancing has taken its toll on her—she suffers from a perpetual sense of dislocation. Jhumpa Lahiri talks about some similar experiences of her parents in a conversation in this way:

The way my parents explain it to me is that they have spent their immigrant lives feeling as if they are on a river with a foot in two different boats. Each boat wants to pull them in a separate direction, and my parents are always torn between the two. They are always hovering, literally straddling two worlds, and I have always thought of that idea, that metaphor, for how they feel, how they live. (Lahiri 53)

This experience, nevertheless, is worth having, as in her words:

It is an enriching experience if you look at it in positive ways. I think being an immigrant must teach you so much about the world and about human beings, things you can't understand if you are born and raised and live your whole life in one place. It must be an amazing experience in many ways, but it has a price. (Lahiri 54)

This ambivalent experience of Ashima, on the one hand, gives her an inconsolable loneliness of having to stay away from her family whereas on the other hand it gives her a complex kind of independence, a sense of liberation.

As a Diaspora woman Ashima frequently has to go through some uncomfortable experiences. Jhumpa Lahiri expresses these experiences through a brilliant metaphor:

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 the 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 50)¹

This comparison is very effective as it draws a vivid picture of the uneasiness, the feeling of being out of place—things so commonly experienced by the immigrants of a country. Does Ashima stick to this uneasiness and gets more distressed? Or does she learn to create a tolerable existence out of this constant burden? *The Namesake* shows that the answer to the second question is yes in Ashima's life. She grows up as an individual in the process of acceptance and adjustment. The next few paragraphs illustrate this gradual change in her.

Looking into Ashima's life we discover a perpetual effort on her part in assimilating the two segments of her life—one that she has left back in India, another that she is living now here in the States. At the first glimpse we see her as a morose, a would-be mother, in a land to which she feels connected in no way. Inconsolably missing her relatives back in India during the first months in America she refuses to bring up Gogol, her newborn son, all alone in a foreign country. Even before becoming a mother life wasn't easy but she somehow managed to go through it.

That she has accepted countless changes in her life-style is obvious in these lines:

Until now Ashima has accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash clothes, or shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on days she is tired or homesick or cross. She has accepted that the very lack of such amenities is the American way. (Lahiri 32)

But it doesn't necessarily mean that she is unaware of the compromises she has been making so far. She bursts out at a crucial moment of her life about the pain she has been going through all these months. Coming back from the hospital just two days after the birth of Gogol she finds herself in their small, uncomfortable and messy house that makes her feel even sicker and completely helpless. About the upbringing of Gogol we hear the first firm utterances of protest from her that even startles her husband: "I'm saying hurry up and finish your degree." And then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (Lahiri 33).

The intensity and vehemence of her despair shows what she has been going through for all these months and Ashoke remembers the mornings when he would find her beside him on the bed, quietly crying. Now he realizes how she must be feeling:

He looks at Ashima, her face leaner, the features sharper than they had been at their wedding, aware that her life in Cambridge, as his wife, has already taken a toll....Early mornings, when he senses that she is quietly crying, he puts an arm around her but can think of nothing to say, feeling that it is his fault, for marrying her, for bringing her here. (Lahiri 33)

Starting from here, Ashima paves the way towards an existence which might not be very enjoyable, but tolerable. In this regard her motherhood helps her greatly. She has been suffering from a kind of perpetual depression after coming to America. But once she manages enough courage to go out with Gogol in the pram, things begin to change. People start to take notice of her, being curious and attracted to see the baby. Ashima feels proud in taking Gogol out alone through the streets of Cambridge:

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. (Lahiri 34)

Actually from this point on her journey towards emancipation and individuality starts. It is marked by the changes she makes within herself to survive in the new surroundings.

Throughout the novel we again and again recognize her capability of confronting challenges, of improvising ways of sustainability in a foreign land. Her life is a

series of revisions. What is so remarkable in all her changes is the duality, the paradox that exists in such a harmonized way in her personality. She retains, in the words of Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero:

the Indian traditions that link her to her homeland while simultaneously benefiting from the privileges afforded by American citizenship in order to ensure a successful future for her American-born children. An Indian matriarch living in the suburbs of Boston, she does so through the careful negotiations she makes for her family on a daily basis in response to the often conflicting demands of traditional Bengali culture and the pressure to become an assimilated American. (Forero 1)

On more than one occasion we see the interplay of cross-currents in her character. The way she maintains a Bengali community echoes Lahiri's own parents' obsession with creating a purely Bengali society around them. In a conversation Lahiri narrated her feelings about this obsession of her parents in these words:

My parents were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture when I was growing up. Maintaining ties to India, and preserving Indian traditions in America, meant a lot to them. They're more at home now, but it's always an issue, and they will always feel like, and be treated as, foreigners here. (Lahiri 28)

No matter what obstinacy Ashima shows about maintaining a purely Bengali community, she also keeps on making a number of forced compromises evident in her acceptance of American friends chosen by her children and, subsequently, their living away from her. She even accepts her fate of having to allow Ashoke to go to another city on a new job, who will sadly die there too. This characteristic flexibility makes Ashima emerge as an agency effecting an altogether different identity for a diaspora woman. Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero defines this as "a site of agency for negotiating a transnational identity for the postcolonial female subject in diaspora" (Forero 1).

Ashima creates a new personality out of her former self which is transnational in nature. This new woman can never be defined by some prescribed, conventional models. Her new role, like that of some other characters of Lahiri's short stories, "dismantle[s]," which, as Adriana Elena Stoican says, provides "hegemonic models of female identity" (Stoican 8).

After Ashoke leaves for Ohio she learns to live in a house all by herself at the age of forty-eight. She makes American friends at her job in the library. After the death of Ashoke she doesn't want to go back to India as that will detach her from his memories. Finally, as she plans to stay in India for six months of the year and the other six months in the States, she correctly feels to be somebody without borders, to be a resident everywhere and nowhere. The new self of Ashima is

pungently expressed in her own words: "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 276).

The Namesake in the first place is all about the lonesome journey of Gogol in search of identity. However it is also about Ashima, whose quest for identity begins and ends within the frame of the novel. She grows up through actions, by taking decisions at some crucial points of her life. Most of the happenings in the life of Ashima pose newer challenges for her which need constant adjustments. The way she receives all these is indeed surprising. The natural flair of her character enables her to accommodate all the changes without effacing her individuality. This fascinating achievement can be compared with the final phase of feminism. She, with the help of her female experiences, creates an autonomous art of living, an individual pattern of life that taught her the way to survival in unaccustomed situations.

¹ All textual references are from Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers 2007)

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