



## Feminist Discourse in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'

### Abstract

Social control of female under patriarchy has been effectively presented by Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel *The Namesake*. How women acclimatise themselves as willing partners ready to sacrifice their career and personal choices and accept subordination has been projected through the character of Ashima. Female identity is pushed under carpet and their preferences are skipped with an obvious purpose to preserve the stereotypical structure of society which is considered to be crucial. Jhumpa Lahiri shows how projection of a woman in an idealistic frame, who is an image of self-sacrifice and is capable of multi-tasking, robs her of individuality and selfhood. This paper analyses how politics of power channelises the institution of patriarchy in the household of Ashima and her husband and confirms male dominance. The hierarchy is not only in the larger structure of society but in the

family unit itself. The author presents the way in which Ashima Ganguli emerges strong and dignified amidst all the exploitation and marginalisation and chooses to leave behind the iniquitous system of institutionalised oppression and move forward towards a desirable state of self-existence.

### Keywords

**Stereotypical, Institutionalised Oppression, Marginalisation.**

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* discusses multifarious themes such as culture clash, immigration, displacement, identity, marriage, roles, diasporic life and many more. However, one theme that encompasses others with it is that of identity. Identity is the fact of who or what a person is. It is an unavoidable part of our lives. It is shaped by external variables like learning, environment and conditioning. Lahiri, herself a child to immigrant parents, realises the pangs and hardships of displacement and this first-hand experience is reflected in her novels. Apart from all these ordeals the society denies women a personhood. The author describes the problematic situation where female internally questions the society and the accepted notions of masculinity but then willingly accepts the accretion of these values in the cultural domain for the welfare of the family particularly the children. After disposing off her duties Ashima chooses to ingratiate herself and moves forward to live the rest of her life on her own terms.

Ashima is omnipresent in the novel. Her presence never fades away in the novel. She plays different roles of a mother, sister, daughter, wife and daughter-in-law at the same time. She is a Bengali Indian woman

who is an introvert and submissive girl by temperament. She receives different treatments at different levels. Since childhood she is groomed into the image of a homemaker and a caretaker of the family. It is taught to her that the well-being of a family and the maintenance of familial bond depends on the behaviour of a woman. In spite of being tied to a busy schedule Ashima considers her family as her first priority. The demands of the family leave no time to think about her own likes and dislikes. But she never complains. She accepts it as her role and her destiny. She does not feel anxious about her arranged format of marriage.

Jhumpa Lahiri presents how marriage is a bedrock of patriarchal structure. It is primarily through this secret means that woman or a signed customary roles and ascribed cultural values. Although marriage is a joint venture which enables both husband and wife to live together with love and compatibility in a traditional society. But pragmatically in the given social setup the relationship between husband and wife and between mother and son exposes the problematic correlation between the two sexes with all its complexities. Jhumpa Lahiri graphically presents the inequality and oppression of women in a wedlock, but that they still believe in conformity and compromise in order to safeguard domestic harmony. Ashima, a good student and a tutor of English before marriage, is not annoyed by the way men treat women as an object or commodity. It is her parents who decide without caring for her opinion that she should marry Ashok, who was a potential suitor and an engineer. They consider Ashok a suitable match for their daughter. Without giving Ashima sufficient time to think over it the two are married within two weeks' time. The virtues of Ashima which are mentioned by her parents when Ashok's parents come to see her are also stereotypical. We do not find any mention of her intellect or academics before her in-laws but what is highlighted is:

*"She is fond of cooking and she can knit extremely well".*

Ashima just smiled at her mother's prowess and her excellent salesmanship. Her mother could have presented her as a confident and a self-dependent girl, but she knew well that those qualities were not considered important for a wife or a daughter-in-law. A girl is expected to be naive and shy when it comes to her marriage. Ashima is even asked by her father-in-law whether she would be able to mould herself to American lifestyle in accordance with her husband. She shows no reluctance to marriage as she is well bred with the thought of preserving the established hierarchy. She does not even think of preserving some part of her self for herself alone. After marriage, she quite satisfactorily plays the role of a dutiful wife. She does laundry for her husband, cooks, takes care of the household and is a good host for the guests. While Ashok keeps busy with his professional life Ashima's academic interest are subdued by the demands of the family. Ashok spends time at the University when all the day the problem of adjustment of the new settlement in America has to be faced by Ashima. She sometimes even cries to herself but never complains or bothers her husband. It is an altogether new environment and culture that she has to face and accept so that her husband may progress professionally. We feel sympathy for her as she is lonely inside in a foreign land. Ashima then becomes pregnant and her responsibilities are increased. Her condition is pathetic before the birth of the child. She passed most of the time alone without her husband besides her. It was really depressing for her as she had no one to share her feelings and thoughts to someone in a foreign land. She craves for someone's attention and care but fails to get it. Her life is mundane and programmed. She has no time to think about her personal growth. But well weaved into the texture of society Ashima accepts her assigned roles and perpetuates the tendencies of male domination. She becomes a part of social stratification and patriarchal sovereignty.

The injustice that she suffers is more at the hands of the society than at the hands of any particular individual. The novelist presents the established theories of family bones and questions them and their validity. She presents the global feminist concerns as well as the different ethos of Indian society which gave feminism its native version. An illustration of how a girl becomes wrapped in the conventional framework of gendered construction is given by Jhumpa Lahiri in the way Ashima does not call her husband by his first name:

*"When she calls out to Ashok she doesn't take his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband. Even though she knows perfectly well, what it is".*

Thus, Ashima does not think of her husband's name even in her subconscious as according to Bengali tradition it is not the way a wife addresses a husband. This is what she had seen her mother and her grandmother doing and the customary usage was instilled deep into her heart. Her personality relies completely on cultural expectations. She accepts the privileged position of men as compared to women. She raises no objections or questions to it as it is not the type of thing Bengali wives do. It is baffling that a wife changes her last name and accepts the surname of a husband but cannot take his first name according to societal traditions.

Ashima sometimes feels that it is difficult for her to raise her children in the absence of Ashok when he is at work. But he has no choice except giving in to the situation. She is estranged completely from her family in Calcutta as she moved to America with Ashok and is broken by the news of her father's death. All this emotional trauma becomes a part of her life which she bears in an unsupported manner. Some time later Ashima follows her husband to cold and desolate, Boston. She feels her journey of being displeased again and again is incessant just like a lifelong pregnancy. But with time she grows to love her husband, her son Gogol and her daughter Sonia. The romantic love between the couple blossoms as they visit their hometown Calcutta and take long walks along the long-left lanes.

Jhumpa Lahiri is convinced that the modern, educated woman has the capacity to maintain the familial harmony in a totally selfless manner. Ashima's character is presented as a strong woman who despite all odds, inconveniences and emotional can bring up her children in a way that can illuminate the home as well as the society. Her character is quite convincing and substantial. She has overshadowed her personal ambitions but that is for a reason. Her fervour and vigour are unwithered and unsinkable. She does not accuse her children or her husband for anything although she senses an alienation from them. This dissatisfaction and distraction of children from their mother grows with time:

*"Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, they need to keep the distance from her, is something she will never understand".*

The children not only start staying away from the Bengali culture but also from their mother. Her whole family gets departed from each other to different places but she keeps herself intact. She even starts a part-time job at a library and becomes friendly with the other women who work there. Yet she adapts to this situation also as she always does. She is in contact with her husband mostly only on phone after 8pm. Her love for her family is unflinching and deep inside her. But her adjustment and growing friendship is a sign that she was starting to get used to the subtle ways to find a place in the society. Ashok's sudden death comes as a shock to her. Her husband was no more and her children no more needed her. At this point realisation comes to her that it was the time to assert her individuality and realise her freedom. She decides to exhibit the courage to do what she believed was the right thing to do. Ashima shines as an independent woman and feels:

*"Everyone should live on their own at some point".*

Amidst her ordinary existence she takes this extraordinary decision to spend six months in India. Though she is very depressed, horribly lonely and laments for her husband but now she wishes to emerge as an autonomous being and return to the city that was once her home. She is under no social or moral compulsion and obligation anymore. All her life she had learnt to manage things alone so it was not a problem for her when she was finally on her own. Now her life was finally uncomplicated. She could follow her wishes:

*"True to the meaning of name, she will be without borders. Without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere".*

She feels free like a bird. She has time to do things without anyone to face or entertain or please. She is overwhelmed by this thought and feels an indifference towards others without being guilty. She comes out as a self-dependent and a powerful individual who can handle the entire situation alone efficiently. Her instincts and experiences tell her that she is going to survive all these trials and carve her identity as an empowered woman. Jhumpa Lahiri, thus, with a powerful narrative reveals how a modern woman starts a crusade towards

an identity reconstruction with an aptitude and confidence that was lying latent within her. What her protagonist chooses is a limitless, endless, formless and graceful life leading it on her own conditions.

## Conclusion

The novel sheds a brilliant light on the awareness of the new woman about her individuality, who can take her feministic stance and explore herself crossing all the boundaries of human existence. The novel shifts between the present and past events which gives Ashima a chance to have a better understanding of herself and emerge as a strong and dignified woman. The author's feminine sensibility, consciousness and power are well reflected here.

## References

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