

Foregrounding Ashima's Liminality: A Feminist Perspective

Dr. Leanora Pereira Madeira

Assistant Professor
Specialization in Diasporic Studies
St. Xavier's College, Mapusa, Goa

Abstract

The growth of Jhumpa Lahiri as a Diasporic writer is a journey of a woman across borders. In this journey across decades of time, she confronts various cultures. She finds meaning by piecing together her life fragmented by multiple uprooting and migrations.

Jhumpa Lahiri's women characters offer a complex study of adjusting to their liminalities, positioned on the threshold of alien societies.

This paper studies the status and path, the rite de passage of Ashima. How does she progress in a foreign land? Jhumpa Lahiri hones in on Ashima's dilemma of child birth in an alien land. It is a position made of ambiguity and disorientation. Is Ashima able to create her space? A transcultural identity? and find a new meaning to her existence?

The Namesake offers a poignant portrayal of an Indian Women traversing the third Space.

Key Words: Diaspora, migration, Liminality, trans-cultural Identity, displacement

Did you wonder why the novel *The Namesake* does not begin with Gogol who is the central character in the novel; he is after all the 'namesake' of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol?

This paper studies the status and path, the *rite de passage* of Ashima. How does she progress in a foreign land? The novel begins with Ashima- in her last throes of pregnancy. On that sticky August evening of 1968 in a Central Square apartment we are introduced to Ashima. She is alone, in the kitchen, fending for herself.

What more gripping for a reader than the onset of labour pains?

Jhumpa Lahiri hones in on Ashima's dilemma of child birth in an alien land for the opening of this Diasporic saga. A nameless Gogol is present, in the womb, but only to emphasize his mother's loneliness' during her labour. During her labour, she cries out in pain, "No one hears her, no nurse rushes to her side" (4) Lahiri has undoubtedly created a poignant moment at the onset of the novel. One wonders at this alienated but brave woman.

Though she is assured she is going to have a normal delivery, “nothing feels normal to Ashima” (5) She knows she will survive the pain. “It’s the consequence: mother hood in a foreign land... But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (6)

The Indian woman’s resilience and ability to create life cannot be doubted. “Throughout the experience [pregnancy], in spite of her growing discomfort, she’d been astonished by her body’s ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great grandmothers had done” (6)

Her experience on her labour bed, alone in a foreign land, is impressionable. She is told she is three centimetres dilated. She has no idea of the term ‘dilated’. Ashoke not understanding her dilemma leaves her alone disappears. Ashima can hear another father professing love to his wife undergoing the pangs of labour. In the west husbands do not leave their wives alone at labour. Bringing the child into the world is a shared experience. Moreover, the reader is further informed that it was the first time in her life she has slept alone in her life. In India, especially during child birth, the whole family offers comfort and support. A complete ‘U’ turn for poor Ashima. From familial security in India, she is alienated in a foreign country. Her in-betweenity between two contrasting worlds is foregrounded in this chapter.

Without rhetoric or circumlocution Ashima’s journey into Diaspora, exposes the trans-migrant’s journey across the unknown and conquering the unknown. Ashima’s life is a product of Indian tradition, where a woman is tied in fantastic knots. She is also forced to live with and to untangle these knots of complexities in Diaspora

Un-surprisingly the novel begins with introducing a pregnant Ashima, alone in her apartment, is concocting ‘a humble approximation’ (1) of her usual snack enjoyed on the sidewalks in Calcutta. Here the author again through the *bhel* snack, is foregrounding her alienation from home and her craving for anything native. “Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing [*bhel*] she craves.” We all know pregnancy is a time of illogical craving for women, so how can we explain the logical craving for home together with the illogical hormonal cravings?? – In short Ashima has gone through an up-rootedness. In this new space she is trying to connect to the past. But like all Indian women of that generation she knows she has to overcome her own longings and be the perfect wife and mother.

The Peripheries and the silent wife

Like most traditional Indian women, even in 20th century liberal America, Ashima does not address her husband by his name. We are told, “She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety’s sake to utter his first.” (2) Like the Bengali wives in India she maintains the tradition

of respect and propriety. “And so, instead of saying Ashoke’s name, she utters the interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as “Are you listening to me?” (2) My guess is it is *Suniye Ji*. “It is not the thing Bengali wives do”, (2) the narrator emphasizes. Daring to address the husband by his first name is not the thing an Indian wife did in the past centuries.

When the Gangulis move to a university town of Boston and Ashoke has the job he dreamt of, “For Ashima, migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been.” (49)

Bhel has become her comfort food. In Boston she realizes that “Being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an on-going responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.” (49-50)

From Liminality to the Centre

The mother constitutes the epicentres of the child’s growing up life. And Ashima is ever present for Gogol. At the same time, she continues to competently complete the housework. All this time her husband is locked in the bedroom studying for his doctoral candidature. No academic accolades for Ashima, in Diapora. So true was Virginia Wolf, in “A Room of her own”. That is the privilege of the man.

At the end of the novel we see Ashima occupying the centre of not only her husband’s life but also a strong pillar for her children.

Ashima the House wife

Ashima does not forget her Bengali traditions. She meticulously plans the *Annaprasan*, the Rice Ceremony when Gogol is six months old.

Her heart aches when she hears her brother address her as DIDI meaning older sister, across so many miles and spaces. (44) She is unable to attend the funeral of her father.

For Ashima the idea of migrating emerged when Ashoke and his father visited her family with a proposal of marriage. “Ashima had never heard of Boston, or of fiber optics. She was asked whether she was willing to fly on a plane and then if she was capable of living in a city characterized by severe, snowy winters, alone.” (9)

Ashoke had been living abroad two years then pursuing a PH. D and researching in a field of fiber optics.

Rearing a child away in a distant land takes its toll on Ashima. The home work soon after child birth seems unbearable to Ashima. “As she walks through the rooms it irks her that there are dirty dishes stacked in the kitchen, that the bed has not been made. Until now Ashima had accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash cloths, or shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on the days she is tired or homesick or cross.” (32)

Ashima had resigned herself to this reality in America. “She has accepted that the very lack of such amenities is the American way. But now, with the baby crying in her arms, her breasts swollen with milk, her body coated with sweat, her groin still so sore she can scarcely sit, it is suddenly unbearable.” (32)

Ashoke keeps encouraging her. He assures her she will get used to doing the work, Ashima wished to return to India. An important reason is the presence of family in India. Impulsively she admits to Ashoke, “I ‘m saying I‘m don‘t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right”(33). Then adamantly she adds, “I want to go back”. (33)

Ashoke being a sensitive man was always aware of the way Ashima missed her home and her home land. The strain of life in America showed on her visage. Her features became leaner and sharper. On his return from university Ashok often found her “[morose], in bed, rereading her parent’s letters.” (33)Ashoke also often found her crying in bed, missing home.

Seeing her maladjustment, Ashoke blamed himself for marrying her and making her leave behind all that was familiar.

But Ashoke had no intention to return to India. More over her remembers Ghosh’s confession on the train before the fateful accident. Ghosh had returned from England for the sake of his wife. Before Ghosh died in the train accident he admitted to Ashok, “It was my greatest regret, coming back” (33).

Ashima is forced to cope with the unknown American life. When Ashok goes back to MIT, she is alone with the child. The first time she runs out of rice and unable to find help, she decides to brave the unknown and makes her maiden trip to the supermarket.

In her home she begins to run her house on American lines. She commences using Melamine in the absence of brass, silver and even stainless steel. She along with Ashok celebrates Gogol’s *annaprasan* , his rice ceremony, when Gogol is six months old.

She longs for calls from home. The invincible bonding with her family is very conspicuous. “She feels her chest ache, moved after all this time to hear her brother call her Didi” (44)

When relocating the Gangulis have to move to a university town outside Boston. Here they are the only Bengali residents. Ashok was thrilled to be included in the university faculty, but for Ashima a house wife in America, the relocation implies complex readjustments. “For Ashim, migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been” (49)

In the new university town she is shocked to face a town without sidewalks, no street lights, no public transportation, no stores for miles. Living in an alien land, her life seemed to be one of transitions from one plane to another. The moment she is able to relax she is thrown into a new experience. She has to overcome unending hurdles. “It is an on-going responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding” (50) Her respite comes when Gogol begins school. Ashima begins to spend her time reading in the public library.

Owning a home is a big achievement for a migrant. This ownership however small is a significant implication. Ownership signifies something permanent for the migrant amidst a changing incomprehensible life. It is the first step toward permanency. For the Gangulis too, acquisition of a shingled two storey colonial house is a victory. “This is the small patch of America to which they lay claim” (51)

Conclusion

Liminality is a position on the thresholds. It is a position made of ambiguity and disorientation. Is Ashima able to create her space, her identity and find a new meaning to her existence?

Diasporic Displacement is an important theme in Lahiri’s novels. While Gauri in the *The Lowland* remains displaced, Ashima is able to competently embrace her diasporic transformation. Her heritage and resilience helps her rise above the geographical abyss to overcome the sociocultural schisms.

Lahiri with her Indian sensitivity and Diasporic perceptions has ably sketched the journey of this Indian woman in Diaspora. Ashima would be considered by many fortunate of having the chance to pursue the American dream, but Ashima provides support for her husband and kids to successfully embrace the American dream. It is through this selfless aim, she is able to rise above her own liminality.

Works Cited

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