



NAMESAKE OF ASHIMA IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THE NAMESAKE": COMPARISONS FROM THE BOOK AND THE MOVIE

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ABSTRACT

A story mostly interpreted as the description of cross-cultures and identity struggle therein what has usually been sidelined in case studies is the analysis of the names of the characters - The Namesakes of the several names in the novel. *The Namesake*, as a novel, journeys through several experiences of the characters present therein bringing out the several *namesakes* in the course of action. This paper intends to focus on the representation of the character of Ashima from a feminist point of view drawing examples from both the movie and the novel. The paper brings out the namesake of Ashima's character, who truly attains the limitless stature of her life.

Keywords: Ashima; The Namesake; novel & movie; feminism; character analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Every analyzed version of *The Namesake* seems to be confined within the boundaries of identity crisis and cross-cultural differences, The Namesake as novel always tend to find the namesake in the character of Gogol. But the thread of namesake also connects other characters in the novel that truly stand out as what the meaning of their name stands for. Talking of the namesakes of the names in the story I would specifically like to draw the attention to the character of Ashima - the wife of Prof. Ashok Ganguly, and later the mother of the protagonist Gogol/Nikhil and Sonia Ganguly.

An amazing writer herself it is always been emphasized that Lahiri draws most of her characters from real life inspirations. But what outstands in this repetitive reflection of the complex urban yet rurally-nostalgic lifestyle is the refreshing narrating technique that weaves the thread of emotions towards the story.

And amidst this complex lifestyle and the struggle of finding and establishing an identity all the characters in the story, more or less, go on a transformation through their life experiences. After all it is all about the cross-cultural experiences that the characters undertake stretching their wings from the east to west. But the character which evolves the most, justifying the meaning of her name, is undoubtedly Ashima. This paper intends to explore the character of Ashima who is defined as either wife or the mother even though she and her journey of experiences occupy a significant space in the novel. And since there has already been a successful screenplay adaptation of the book I intend to draw parallels, and at times compare both the versions of the story in the context of Ashima's character. The themes that have widely dealt with in context of this novel are either cross-cultural identity crisis like in (Sharma) or (Das). This paper intends to draw a feminist point of view of the novel drawing instances from the movie as well as from the book.

Journey of Ashima: The Movie and The Novel

About adaptation of a novel/text into a film version, P. Torop writes: "The main difference between film and literary work lies in the fact that literature is fixed in a written form, while in a film the image (representation) is supported by the sound, in form of music or words" (300). Torop's concern here is the transfer of the word into the image. In film adaptation, the former is used rarely and dialogue is given much space. (Das)

This surely comes true in the screenplay adaptation of the novel where Mira Nair not only skillfully deals with the cross-cultural theme and identity crisis but gives Ashima the much needed space. It is the movie where we actually see the relationship between Ashok and Ashima blooming with love and trust - the blossoming of relationship between two people who were estranged till few minutes back. It is as if the affectionate angle between Ashok and Ashima as a couple gets overpowered by Ashok & Ashima as parents in the novel. And of course, then there is the cross-cultural identity crisis through which Ashima struggles through on her arrival upon this estranged land. With the movie it is as if the unsaid and unspoken love of Ashok and Ashima gets words to be displayed. A kind of recognition is portrayed, though in quite a subtle way, through the visual representation of this love. One of the most just examples would be the family visit to Calcutta when Ashok & Ashima takes stroll in the romantic evenings in Victoria's gardens. It is quite an apt situation to exemplify the matured yet naïve love between these two individuals who were arranged to spend life together by their parents. The paper from here onwards will analyze the namesake of Ashima drawing parallels from both the screenplay adaptation as well as the novel.

The character of Ashima, which literally means limitless, or the one without any *seema* or borders, in my views, is probably the strongest character of the story. It is not only because she is one of the lead characters but also because she is probably the only character in the entire story who stands and remains as the epitome of courage, strength, serenity, and adaptable - all at the same time. Unlike all the other characters in the story who either out rightly reject whatsoever their life

experiences has to offer or succumb to the situation Ashima stands throughout the story despite her vulnerable position. She swims through the tides making her way to the final destination where she has attained the limitless stature of her life by returning back to what she wishes for at the time.

Transcending Boundaries

Starting her life in the close-knitted Kolkata home Ashima graduates from Calcutta University in all the philosophical and psychological dimensions of English literature. But no matter how much a girl is provided with western education her life has to be defined by the only factor of marriage. She is shown to be the obedient daughter of her parents who unquestioningly slips into a *saree* when asked to by her mother out of the blue one day while returning from college. She obediently stands and sits in front of the parents of Ashok when and as asked to. Her unquestioning obedience further extends up to reciting Wordsworth's Daffodils as a proof of what she has acquired so far in her academics of English literature.

Even though much is said about the female characters being on the fore front in such cross-cultural and identity crisis thematic novels what is also noteworthy here is how their lives being portrayed as being subjective of others' decisions and actions to a major extent. In this episode the women of both the families be it Ashok's or Ashima's mother, both are shown to be silent in their respective state relying completely on what their husbands' conversation. While in the book Lahiri does not clearly state the presence the screenplay adaptation does make sure to show them in the scene but as the silent audience of whatever happening in front of them. They might be having some say in choosing their daughter-in-laws but the main decision lies on the shoulders of their husbands. The conventional notion of a "male guardian" being the decision maker or rather the more "able" to take the decision for family is very much evident here.

The women in this context are somewhat completely sidelined. Even Ashima - young, vibrant and educated Bengali girl is pretty cautiously presented in the marriage market. The concept of arranged marriage and the marriage market are

weaved together here where the matches are made not in heaven on the basis of love but in a market on the basis of fair bargain. Ashima is described as tall and having sharp features - something quite unusual among typical Bengali girls - "*Ashima was five feet four inches tall for a Bengali woman.*" (5, pp 9) But she possesses those unusual features. Further, being well-versed in the western language especially in the literature, which, according to the bourgeois Bengali, is a sign of intellectual personality, acts as an add-on to her credibility in the marriage market. And of course she can cook and knit well as her mother skillfully places her daughter's expertise in front of the Ashok's family, "*She is fond of cooking, and she can knit extremely well. Within a week she finished this cardigan I am wearing.*" (32, pp7) Even Ashima feels amused by the salesmanship of her mother who is determined to keep no stones unturned in front of the boy's family, "*Ashima smiled, amused by her mother's salesmanship.*" (32, pp7) With all the mentioned potentials Ashima could have been easily portrayed as the self-dependent headstrong girl who is well aware of her strengths and limitations. Instead she is framed with the conventional Bengali feminine geography where her character was not provided with the choice of standing on her own feet rather than her husband's. In a way she conveys the typical bourgeois Bengali household who, even though proud of their cultural intellect, are still stuck somewhere in between the web of absolute freedom and orthodoxy of their cultural heritage. The conventional notion of women being the nurturer and not the ambitious one is what evidently gets reflected here. The episode firmly asserts the cultural legacy where the identity of a woman is defined by who and what the husband is rather than what she herself is.

In the same episode Ashima is asked by her future father-in-law if she would be able to adjust to the American ways of living which his son has skillfully acquired. "*My son has been living abroad for two years, earning a Ph.D in Boston, researching in the field of fiber optics.*" (12, pp 9) A little lump of pride does surely jump in the father's voice which is not so much highlighted in the scene. Rather the scene ends with Ashima's dialogue "*uni toh thakben*" ("*won't he be there?*", 18, pp 9) coupled

with her coquettish smile. This simple line probably defines the entire situation. The line spelled from Ashima's lips clearly exposes her dependency on Ashok for her post-marriage life - something which is expected and appreciated by both the families as the vulnerable wife is more desirable rather than a self-dependent wife. But the single line also reveals the true nature of Ashima to some extent. Her answer is smart and witty reflecting both her presence of mind and also her latent vulnerability. Had she been a little more confident in her reply reflecting the strength of her western knowledge which has emancipated her in some ways or other there were chances that she might have been misunderstood by both the families, The point that a girl should be essentially shy and coy when it comes to marriage no matter how much she is familiar with the western world and its lifestyle is what gets reflected here through this one single line uttered from Ashima's lips. She is a naïve young girl who is standing on the verge of becoming a woman in every possible sense. Coming out of the cocoon she starts off her journey of achieving the boundary less state by transcending the geographical borders - by flying to west from east - from the orient to the more sophisticated and probably mechanical mannerisms of living. She takes off with strong yet nervous wings.

Encountering West

On reaching a foreign land with a stranger who is now her husband and hence a little more than a simply known person she is first confronted by the silence of the place. There is no hullabaloo in here like it used to be back in her Kolkata home. Everything is well-furnished and skillfully showcased. Her first reaction to all of these was claustrophobic. In the screenplay adaptation Ashima is shown to visit the laundry room service to wash her husband's clothes - something which is she is supposed to do as a dutiful wife. And she does take on the job pretty confidently despite Ashok's warning of not going outside as she is still not so much familiar with either the roads or the lifestyle of this strange new place. Yet as a dutiful wife she takes on the job in her hands only to return back immediately with tearful eyes filled with shock on seeing a couple making out in the laundry room. She is shocked to

encounter such liberal attitude of this new land and comes back home with her horrific memoirs. But she returns hoping to be in solace only to invite scorn (though unintentional) from Ashok who is even more taken aback to see the imprints of his wife's notion of duty on his shrink clothes.

The young couple from this episode onwards embarks on a journey of discovery unfolding each others' lives and also their life together, sometimes through such mundane encounters of daily life, and sometimes through sensualities of passion and pleasure. The relationship that gradually grows within these new geographical boundaries is what goes missing in the book but genuinely captured in the movie.

Space of One's Own: Feminism in The Namesake

What is noteworthy is that it is not only in *The Namesake* but all other works of Lahiri is that feminism is not dealt directly but it lies right there as an undercurrent wave passing through every layers of the story.

"Though she never explicitly addresses womanism by name in her fiction, the womanistic manifestations of Jhumpa Lahiri in her various works of fiction provide an insightful point of exploration." (Kasun)

The issue of womanism is addressed not directly but at each and every stage of every character's journey through their experiences. The question of why Lahiri somewhat sidelines these emotions of relationship growth between Ashima and Ashok is beautifully answered by Mira Nair in her film adaptation. In the visual interpretation of the text she takes advantage of the director's liberty to the maximum capacity to let the audience explore the nature of relationship between these two strangers pitted on an estranged land amidst cross-cultural vulnerabilities and conflicts.

"In this novel, Ashima, a young Bengali-American immigrant gives birth to, both physically and culturally, her son Gogol, whose search for identity is entirely grounded on positive family role models, who nurture his intercultural identity growth."(Kasun)

While analyzing the novel what most of the works have been sidelined with are such cross-cultural

dilemmas. The analyzing of Ashima's character seems to be confined within the cultural conflicting boundaries only and nothing beyond those boundaries.

Post marriage Ashima builds a nest of her own though relying majorly on Ashok. But slowly and gradually she seems to open up to everything that her surroundings have to offer. But the alienation returns back with the birth of her children. Even though Gogol in childhood is portrayed as a normal Bengali kid who has the mother's undivided attention for all his whims and fancies which he surely adores slowly and gradually that affection fades away leaving Ashima behind with her isolation. Even though Sonia's birth is not much highlighted neither her and Ashima's relation but as the narration takes place we as readers becomes a witness to an ambiguous relation between Sonia and her parents right from the beginning. This, of course, comes as a stark contrast to what Ashima used to share with Gogol when he was a little kid- the world of motherly warmth that Ashima was building around Gogol.

What again comes across as a notable point here is the gender roles within Ashok-Ashima relationship. Here the question quite obviously arises that is it Ashok & Ashima or is it Ashok v/s Ashima? Right from the beginning Ashima's life has been subjective of the decisions taken by others around her even though as the story proceeds we begin to perceive Ashima as the potential self-dependent woman. This potentiality is witnessed time and again on various occasions in the story. One example for this would be the first time Ashima makes a move to the outside world with little Gogol completely on her own. Even as a mother Ashima undergoes her own transformation when she one day decides to stop crying for Ashok not giving her attention and wipes her tears and goes out to the grocery market all alone with little Gogol in hand. She is apprehensive but at the same time frustrated for her essential continuous dependency on her husband. But this potentiality never comes to any fulfillment as her life continues to be governed by

and revolved around others, the near and dear ones to her throughout the novel.

Later in the novel Ashima is shown to be getting quite used to and adaptive to the western lifestyle of her surroundings and making a space of her own. What we appreciate in her is her sticking to her own identity unlike Ashok who goes on to change his habits with time and surroundings. *Ashima flips through the pages of Indian Bengali magazines while Ashok reads English newspapers...* one might interpret it as one of the many cross-cultural crises but the other way in which it can be interpreted as it is her will to stick to the grounds, to her own identity even though she has flown above transcending her geographical boundaries. An identity which she has chosen for herself and not the one which has been chose for her. Ashok, on the other hand goes on with the better career opportunity that he comes through. Ashok feels the sense of pride throughout his body to see his name typed in the university Faculty list. The sense of gratification delves deep into him thinking that he has been able to "achieve" what others in his family could not be it surviving through a foreign land with extreme cold or making a space of his own in this estranged land - something his relatives back at Calcutta could not even think of. We, as readers too, feel proud of Ashok's "achievements" in life. But another perception peeks through with the commentary of Gogol where he highlights the *ABCD (American born confused deshis)* factor of Ashok's life. It is through Gogol that we get to know how other Americans look upon his father but we never get a glimpse of how those others think of his mother. Do they actually make fun of her accent too..?? We never get to know. And probably they don't as later in the novel we see Ashima taking up part-time job in the library and also driving a car which of course is a result of Ashok's concern of how she will manage when he has moved away in Ohio. The another point which is noteworthy here is that it is Ashok who is not apprehensive about moving out for a better career opportunity and he later on feels proud of his achievements. Even though he has concerns for Ashima and take appropriate measures for his family's safety, Ashima's ability to tactfully handle the family and house in his absence is

nowhere finds a trace of applause which strikes strange chord in the narrating tone of the story.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the novel we actually see the real Ashima emerging above successfully of the all the difficult situations of life. She managed to survive in this strange land without even after Ashok - a stark contrast to her "*uni toh thakben*" dialogue many years back when she was vulnerable and willingly dependent on her husband. Be it his absence for a better job opportunity or his death Ashima has survived through it all. She has successfully gained the friendship of both of her children with whom she shared a strange yet motherly affection throughout their growing up stage. The sense of alienation that filled the air while Gogol and Sonia were growing up is now replaced with genuine compassion not only for a motherly figure but a true friend. Her life, which was so far decided upon, is now takes it own decision. It is completely her own decision to move to Calcutta for six months and rest of the six months in USA with her children. Ashima has done all things that have been taught to her either by her husband, parents or even children be it driving a car, or celebrating Christmas with all ritualistic fun. "*I did not know a thing back then,*" (31, pp 285) from knowing all that life has to offer to her - Ashima indeed goes through a drastic transformation in the novel. She had been feeding on others' experiences so far but by the end of the novel we actually see her acting upon her own experiences - those which her own life has taught her. The shift from being the naïve vulnerable young Bengali girl to now a self-dependent woman - Ashima truly overcomes all the limits of her life, thus, achieving the namesake of her name, A-shima, the limitless.

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