

Diasporic Feminism and Benevolent Sexism in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake"

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Abstract: "Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools", as Salman Rushdie believes and is truly applicable to "The Namesake" of Jhumpa Lahiri who corresponds her native Indian culture, specifically her Bengali heritage 13,316 km away in the distant land of the USA. Locating and analysing the interior fabrication of the oppressed and unheard female voice, the prominently expressed internalized sexism and benevolent sexism related to culture, tradition and language is the summum bonum of this study. The cumulative patriarchal pattern to subdue the resonant uniqueness of female identity and familial expectations is an age old conspiracy. "The Namesake" succeeds to project the inner catastrophes of the noticeable characters like Ashima Ganguly and Moushumi Mazoomdar along with the characters like Sonia Ganguly, Maxine Ratliff, Ruth, Lydia Ratliff and Judy. Regarding rootlessness and cultural identity, the conflict between two terms, gender and sex are more prominent in the character of Ashima as she belongs to a conservative Bengali family where she learns from the household chores like cooking, stitching to Wordsworth. But Moushumi, the wife of Gogol and Ashima's daughter -in-law is radical. This critical study is a conscious attempt to hear the unheard voices of the women characters against the hostile sexism in the diasporic domain of English literature.

Keywords: Suppressed, native, patriarchal, identity, gender, sex, internalized, benevolent, hostile, sexism, rootlessness, cultural, familial, expectations, conspiracy, diasporic, fabrication, otherness, cumulative.

1. INTRODUCTION

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet."¹ The famous soliloquy from William Shakespeare's tragedy "Romeo and Juliet" stands in favour of the meaninglessness of name and emphasises on the significance of quality. But in reality a person's name is her/his primary identity.

It speaks about her/his gender, sex, caste, creed, religion, origin, educational qualification (e.g. using the prefix "Dr." before name), region etc. The name Ashima Ganguly in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel "The Namesake" depicts that she is a woman, Brahmin by caste, Hindu as per her personal belief and religious identity, Bengali by origin and region wise she belongs to the eastern part of India. Although the educational qualification is not revealed in name, still from the text we come to know that before marriage "she was working toward a college degree" (The Namesake: Lahiri 7) and "English had been her subject" (The Namesake: Lahiri 7).

In contrast to Ashima, the first appearance of her would be daughter-in-law, Moushumi is not at all eye-catching. From the name only her Indian Bengali origin is revealed and her English accent is the proof that she spends her early childhood in England before her family shifts to Massachusetts.

2. THE SENSE OF OTHERNESS

The quality of being different is known as otherness. The materialistic self and the biological characteristic of a human being are the sources of her/his differences. But the tyranny of misogynistic society implements the pseudo identity difference between a male and a female.

As per the significance of the term namesake, Ashima's son is named after famous Russian author Nikolai Gogol. But the discrimination is prominent when this attempt is not there for the name of Ashima. Even the significance of her name is also not pronounced for a single time. She is supposed to act as per the gender biased Bengali society where she is suddenly told "to go straight to the bedroom and prepare herself" (The Namesake: Lahiri 7) as Ashoke and his parents are waiting to see her. Ashima does not have the independence to choose her bride for marriage. The sense of otherness is more prolific when it is also mentioned that a widower and a newspaper cartoonist reject her already.

3. CONTRASTING BENEVOLENT SEXISM IN INDIA AND THE USA

Benevolent sexism is a superior feeling that arises out of men's ego. This idea gives birth to the assumption that women need protection from men to remain safe and secure by all means. Ashima "was nineteen, in the middle of her studies, in no rush to be a bride" (The Namesake: Lahiri 7), still her mother, as a representative of the benevolent sexism wants her marriage desperately. The term "salesmanship" (The Namesake: Lahiri 7) directly points towards Ashima as a commodity of the male-dominated society. On the other hand, the first meeting of Ashima's son Gogol and her would be daughter-in-law, Moushumi is insignificant and a mere formality as two children sit side by side. Still in the free environment of America, the straight-forward nature of Moushumi is prominent as she declares directly, "I detest American television" (The Namesake: Lahiri 73) without any hesitation. Another girl character, Kim whom Gogol meets in party is also like Moushumi and as a true representative of liberated American society, she does not hesitate to play the controlling role in their first meeting and frankly says that Nikhil (the good name of Gogol) is a "lovely name" (The Namesake: Lahiri 96). This contrast of Ashima with Moushumi or Kim clearly reveals that the next generation girls are beyond benevolent sexism.

4. THE PRESENCE OF INTERNALIZED SEXISM

Internalized sexism refers to woman's own belief of inferiority which is deep rooted in her inner self. The age old patriarchal practices make woman a victim of male gaze. Ashima's attempt to step into the shoes of Ashoke is quite symbolic as it inculcates a woman's sudden and overwhelming desire to fit her in the norms, primarily fabricated by the males. It may be a co-incidence but the abbreviation of both Ashima Ganguly and Ashoke Ganguly is "A.G." (The Namesake: Lahiri 4) and indirectly it is an indication to the provocation of Indian tradition for the wife to become a prototype of her husband. The bigotry of the second sex is more visible when Ashima does not utter her husband's name, adopts his surname and uses "interrogatives" (The Namesake: Lahiri 2) to call Ashoke. Her hesitation in removing Murshidabad silk sari and wearing a knee long gown amplifies the diasporic tone of rootlessness. But the other side of the coin is also true. This fabrication of her native oriental culture is not present in her daughter Sonia, as an exemplar of the occidental society is comfortable with her asymmetrical hair, additional holes in her earlobes. Even Sonia is ready to argue with her mother, Ashima in a crude fashion. Another American girl Ruth, the first girl friend of Ashima's son, Gogol is also independent enough to speak in first person like "I imagine", "I Suppose" (The Namesake: Lahiri 120) and ready to depart as her interest in English literature does not match with the calculative architecture study of Gogol. The remarkable presence of Maxine, the second girl friend of Gogol in New York is so contradictory to the Indian life style of Ashima. Maxine is a warm, open-minded girl who never bothers to tell about her past relations, likes to make love with Gogol aka Nikhil in her own house and does not like to close door while going to bathroom. The gender constructions in the USA and the inculcation of internalized sexism are different to their Indian prototypes. The dissimilarities between Ashima and Maxine are prominent to Nikhil also and he likes the life style of Maxine more. Even after the breakup Maxine and Gogol, his second meeting with Moushumi is quite fascinating. Being an upshot of American culture, Moushumi does enjoy the blind date with her would be or to call him by name only.

5. CONTEXT AND CONTRAST TO ABLEISM

Ableism is the literary term for gender related discrimination of our society. Generally it's evident against women in the name of physical, intellectual and psychiatric differences. The failure of an American nurse to fold an Indian saree is an example of ableism. Ashima thinks folding is not the cup of tea for an American and the nurse thinks that Indian dresses are so complex. Both contexts meet together when Dr. Ashley refers to the "unimaginable thing her body must do in order for the baby to pass" (The Namesake: Lahiri 3) means to say that the expected role and sufferings of a woman remains same in oriental culture or in occidental culture. Another patient of the same cabin, Carol shouts, "Goddamn it, goddamn you, this is hell" (The Namesake: Lahiri 3) and her husband says, "I love you, sweetheart" (The Namesake: Lahiri 3), it sounds sympathetic without any touch of empathy. In contrast, Ashima never hears anything like this from her husband as oriental culture does not allow Ashoke to say so. Benevolent sexism is prominent as it is revealed that Ashima is not habituated to sleep alone without parents or her husband. Indian tradition of going to the parental home before child birth is contradicted with the foreign culture as per diaspora phenomenon but the socially constructed gender identity is revealed as Ashima cries out, pressing her head against the pillow in violent pain but "No one hears her, no nurse rushes to her side" (The Namesake: Lahiri 4) as oriental patriarchy teaches her to absorb pain silently. On the opposite side, Ashima's would be daughter-in-law, Moushumi is pursuing Ph.D. in French literature at New York University. As a protagonist of unprejudiced American society, she is free enough to declare the reason to pursue this course from NYU for her love, previous relation and the prenuptial disaster, all the natives of east coast of The USA used to know. "Shall we have a bottle?" (The Namesake: Lahiri 198), is the obvious question Moushumi asks as malt is not available there and this attempt reflects the easiness and oriental confidence to challenge the patriarchal conspiracy of internalized sexism.

6. CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Cultural appropriation is an attempt to accept any cultural practice from a foreign culture and use it out of context. The calculation of Indian time by lying on the bed of the American hospital bed refers Ashima's Indian identity at heart. The symbolic presence of after-dinner tea, Marie biscuit, dressing table, waist-length hair, ink-stained table, Voice of America, studying physics on bed, grey cement floor, pink plaster wall, watercolour tins incorporates the inner craving of a women to go back to her mother land and touch the known signs and symbols once again. This crisis is related to psychological and cultural aspects of Ashima who is uprooted from her homeland. Jhumpa Lahiri is unique as the writer of this novel as in her refined, empathetic prose style, internalized sexism is not constructed on the view of any particular character but the cultures are the embodiments of women's inferiority and the characters are nothing but the agent to act as per the anticipation of their respective societies. That's why it's not accurate to say that Ashima and her would be daughter-in-law, Moushumi is the victim of their contemporary system but they are the representatives to carry forward the norms and regulations of patriarchy. Only difference is that Ashima is behaving as per Indian patriarchy and Moushumi personifies occidental pattern of patriarchy. "Motherhood in a foreign land" (The Namesake: Lahiri 6) along with Ashima's sufferings in bed, the sleepless nights and her countless visits to the bathroom alludes the struggle of a mother on her own due to Ashoke's indifference. In contrast to this, in her expression, "Give me a call" (The Namesake: Lahiri 198), Moushumi is more demanding than a requesting Gogol on their first date. She is bold enough to invite Gogol in kitchen, a place where Ashima even cannot expect Ashoke's help during her normalcy. The difference of culture in terms of chastity and womanliness is evident when Lahiri describes the pre-marriage love making of Moushumi and Gogol in a contrast to Ashima and Ashoke. Gogol "unties the knot at the back of her dress" (The Namesake: Lahiri 210) in time of love making and after the satisfying session "they examine each other, quietly discovering moles and marks and ribs" (The Namesake: Lahiri 210). In opposition to this, we may remember that even Ashoke does not look at Ashima during their first meeting.

7. ROOTLESSNESS AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN BENEVOLENT SEXISM

Rootlessness is a strong feeling that comes out of economic, social, cultural and linguistic change. When Ashima states, "As long as there are ten finger and ten tow," (The Namesake: Lahiri 7) it not only depicts grammatical mistake but it's also the cultural difference between Calcutta and the USA. The smile of the American nurse upon Ashima's mistake is a metaphor to the sense of American superiority over India. Intersectionality or many different aspects of female identities and the maltreatment of the male counterpart used to vary in the social hegemony of India and abroad. Indian societal norms appear to be brutal as the bride is unaware of the name of her would be husband and the knowledge of it dawns on her only after the wedding cards are put into her hands. The pity of the American women on Ashima proves this intersectionality. The juncture to change from the parental surname Bhaduri to post-marriage surname Ganguli is synonymous to materialistic identity crisis. Familial expectations are the family oriented in-house expectations from a bride and these typical female jobs are ascribed for Ashima in Cambridge also. "In the evenings she cooks for him, hoping to please" (The Namesake: Lahiri 10) her husband. The definition of happiness and pleasure is different for their next generation. For Gogol and Moushumi, it means to "have cloths and toothbrushes at each other's apartment" (The Namesake: Lahiri 211) and to see her without make-up and to see the hair that grows on her legs between "waxings" (The Namesake: Lahiri 211). Just opposite to Ashima, Moushumi used to talk to Gogol endlessly on "how they know and do not know each other" (The Namesake: Lahiri 211). This cumulative advancement towards equality is actually Lahiri's protest against the patriarchal pattern to subdue the resonant uniqueness of female identity through the character of Moushumi.

8. MANSPLAIN

Mansplaining is a part of assumptions that place men's opinion and position above women's. In reality the daily time table of Ashoke in week days or during Sundays shows his impassivity to Ashima and once again makes us bound to think that the centre of the family is Ashoke and his wife is none other than the other self of the family without any real importance as such. Understanding husband's likeness in salty food is actually taking part in the continuous process to become the weak counterpart of the male. At night after describing her day's activity to Ashoke she feels satisfied but the whole day long loneliness is completely her own struggle for survival in a faraway land as her husband is busy with his study for the day long. The extraordinary pen of Lahiri draws a parallel representation of diasporic nostalgia as "The sight of him cross-legged on newspapers spread on the floor... always reminds her of her indiscretion in her parents' corridor" (The Namesake: Lahiri 10) and diasporic feminism extends its look towards gender biased societies in India and abroad. The description of Ashima after the birth of "Baby Boy Ganguly" (The Namesake: Lahiri 22) is heart touching as it describes, "Her skin is faintly yellow, the color missing from her lips. She has circles beneath her eyes, and her hair, spilling from its braid, looks as though it has not been combed for days. Her voice is hoarse, as if she'd caught a cold." (The Namesake: Lahiri 23) It is the description of a beloved mother who sacrifices her normalcy for the well beings of the new born baby. Alike Ashima, Moushumi also faces cultural identity crisis as she was born in London in England. She needs to adjust with American lifestyle along with typical American accent. Regarding the

independence of a girl, “she had been determined not to allow her parents to have a hand in her marriage” (The Namesake: Lahiri 213). As a person she is desperately lonely as she used to avoid the Indian men whom she does not like and has attractions with her professors. One of her infatuations has come to an end in a lunch date and she accepts the bane that she does not have anyone at all. Without crying like Ashima, she accepts this fact as a brave girl.

9. TOXIC MASCULINITY

The idea toxic masculinity resets the idea that a man must be masculine in terms of aggression, competitiveness and strength. After shifting to their new apartment in New England, Ashima does not like overall appearance of the new shelter and the presence of cockroaches in cracks of bathroom tiles annoys her a lot. But she keeps her disappointment to herself as it is the decision of her husband, Ashoke. The conflict between two cultures is noticeable. Prof. Ashoke Ganguly never expresses any love and affection to wife publicly, whereas his landlord Prof. Alan Montgomery openly writes on his green Volkswagen, “GIVE A DAMN! BAN THE BRA! PEACE!” (The Namesake: Lahiri 31) etc. The lack of Indian amenities in The USA is true but the toxic masculinity of Ashoke towards dish washing, floor cleaning, cloth washing or meal preparing reveals his typical male identity which will be changed later although. This ego is gain boosted up by the constructed gender based identity of Ashima who requests her husband to complete his degree quickly and help her to raise their children. This message contains togetherness alone with the dependency of a weak wife on her husband. In the silent house during office hours Ashima’s cry is synonymous to the depression of a woman whose educational qualification, skills and proficiencies come to an abrupt end in nurturing her child and cooking delicious food for her husband or cleaning their house floors. The suppressed courage comes out of her when she comes out to buy white long grain rice from the supermarket of Cambridge and faces local Americans, instead of their curious look to her Bengali attire. Finally, “She begins to pride herself on doing it alone” (The Namesake: Lahiri 34). Familial expectation is a comprehensive design to strengthen the family relation or marital relation. But in reality it demands the sacrifices of the expectations and talents of the female counterpart of the family. The familial expectations occupies Ashima’s identity which used to read Wordsworth once and “Every afternoon she takes him up...in Harvard Yard, sometimes meeting up with Ashoke on a bench on the MIT campus, bringing him some homemade samosas and a fresh thermos of tea” (The Namesake: Lahiri 35). On the opposite side, Gogol’s wife, Moushumi is that sort of a person whose womanhood is not convicted within four walls. She falls in love with an Ivy educated investment banker, Graham and lives with him in New York, without the concern of her parents. She is even convincing enough to accept him Hindu wedding. The same woman has come out of that relation when she comes to know that actually Graham believes Indian culture “repressed” (The Namesake: Lahiri 217) and he has lots of complaints against India or Bengali culture. Basically the dignity of Moushumi is splendid and it touches that zenith which Ashima cannot think even.

10. GENDER ROLES IN THE BENEVOLENT SEXISM

The term, gender refers to the fact or condition that belongs to the particular social group. It is no more a biological term as sex replaces it. Patriarchal norms construct the idea and concept of gender. The typical construction of gender is prominent through the attributes of Ashima who used to cry occasionally in depression or in the news of her grandmother’s stroke but Ashoke never does. The difference of confidence level is interesting in between Ashima’s parents and grandmother who is confident that Ashima will never change, even in Boston. The rootlessness of the Bengali families plays a pivotal role and Ganguli, Mitra, Nandi, Banerjee becomes friend to each other. Their husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers and the wives are homesick, bewildered and exchanging food recipes in the absence of any proper professional life. Gender biasness is reflected in Ashima’s choice for buying gifts also; Timex watch for father-in-law and embroidery thread and thimbles for her mother and aunts. The author looks through a difference between an Indian Bengali woman and an American woman. Mrs. Jones works as the secretary of Prof. Ashoke Ganguly at an elderly age when her own mother lives a lonely, humiliating life with other children and grandchildren without any professional activity. The contrast in between Ashoke and Ashima is fabricated intelligently. Ashok is mesmerized by seeing his name in the “Faculty” (The Namesake: Lahiri 49) list of the university list, on the other hand Ashima lives a distressed life in the absence of street light, public transportation, store in their new house outside Boston. The parenthesis of life, pity and curiosity of the local Americans makes her understand the otherness of her identity in family and in that foreign land. Still the enthusiastic identity comes out when she goes to sell thirty samosas at the international coffeehouse, for twenty five cents each. The character of Sonia Ganguly appears in the fabrication of the story line. But she is neither a home maker like her mother, Ashima nor an independent lady like Maxine or Moushumi. Basically she is a side character who is happy to give a gift to her elder brother Gogol in his birthday. She even manages a secret relation but does not have that courage to tell that to her parents. After the death of her father, Sonia accompanies her mother more. Thus the touch of empathy is there in the shade of her character. Being an embodiment against internalised sexism, Moushumi “doesn’t adopt Ganguli, not even with a hyphen” (The Namesake: Lahiri 227) and she used to publish her research paper under Moushumi Mazoomdar. But the letters and cards from Calcutta addressing her “Mrs. Moushumi Ganguli” (The Namesake: Lahiri 227) reminds her of the new

status. She used to accept this social intervention in her identity just by shaking her head without showing any sign of pride or disgrace. This could be her indifference to the new identity or her self-confidence as a self-dependent person which Ashima lacks. Moushumi even convinces Gogol to accompany her in “plan de Paris” (The Namesake: Lahiri 231) on the eve of her conference in France although his passion for architecture is far away from the world of French literature.

CONCLUSION

Ashima misses Gogol as he is busy at nursery school. So after fulfilling all the familial expectations of her family, this lady represents all the homemakers who end their life in loneliness and identity crisis. Her visit to Calcutta is a relief from cooking and other household works. Thus Calcutta is somewhat a metaphor for independence to her. At the age of forty eight, she comes to know about the solitude that her husband and children already know and according to them, “It’s not such a big deal” (The Namesake: Lahiri 161). The statement, Nikhil Weds Moushumi, is a simple message that is written on the wedding cake but the message contains typical hpatriarchal belief that the male’s name should come first. Amid the inculcation of age-old misogynistic mind set, the presence of Moushumi brings strength, confidence and aspiration towards the expectation of equality for all the sexes by going beyond the patriarchal concept of gender. Moushumi means “A damp southwesterly breeze” (The Namesake: Lahiri 240) and according to Astrid, she is “a force of nature” (The Namesake: Lahiri 240) who can indifferently shares her husband’s secret by disclosing Nikhil’s name related issue in front of all their friends. Even after her marriage with Gogol, she can start a fresh relation with her teenage crush, Dimitri. Truly she is such a person who is going to break hearts with the abrupt ending of her married life. On the other hand, the word Ashima means without border or limitless. In her life also Ashima really shows limitless love, affection and dedication to her family. In utmost depression, she cries but never leaves her family. Even after the death of her husband, Ashoke also she holds the rest of her family with her final strength. Each moment is still important and meaningful for her as she says, “Take some pictures tonight, please? I want to remember this Christmas. Next year at this time I’ll be so far away.” (The Namesake: Lahiri 287). At last that obvious question will arise. What is the probable way to achieve equality for the women? Is it possible through the patterned motherhood of Ashima or through the free wild spirit of Moushumi? May be the answer lies in the perception and acceptance of future generation along with their socio-cultural identity.

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