Vol. 6 No. 1 December 2017 ISSN: 2320-2645 UGC Approval No: 44248 Impact Factor: 3.125

TRANSNATIONAL BELONGING TO "THE NAMESAKE"

Article Particulars

Received: 14.12.2017 Accepted: 19.12.2017 Published: 23.12.2017

M.C.SUBHASHINI
Ph.D. Research Scholar (External)
Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr.K.N.SHARMILA
Assisstant Professor of English, FEAT
Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

The Namesake depicts the life and struggles of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, two first-generation immigrants from West Bengal (Kolkata), India to the United States, and their American-born children Gogol and Sonia. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, immigrants in America, welcome their first baby boy into the world. They require giving their son an official name to be on the birth certificate and to release from their hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts. So they must break with Bengali custom, and Ashoke has got this one covered. He names their son Gogol, after the Russian novelist. Apparently, Gogol saved Ashoke's life when he was injured in a train crash in India, back in 1961. Gogol for him means books of the author and not the man himself. Gangulis eventually move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where they raise Gogol and, a few years later, their daughter Sonia. Growing up, Gogol gradually realizes that his name is quite unusual, and he doesn't like that. Annoyed by the Bengali customs of his parents, Gogol embraces American popular culture. Gogol Ganguli knows that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name. Lahiri brings great empathy to Gogol as he stumbles along the first-generation path, scattered with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs. She reveals the defining power of the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents and the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves. The summer before he leaves to attend college at Yale, he officially changes his name to Nikhil. Gogol is no more.

Keywords: *immigration, assimilation, family relations, travelling.*

In the past five decades, numerous literary works by Indian-born writers have placed issues connected to immigration at the centre of their narratives. Internationally acclaimed authors like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh or Salman Rushdie,

To mention only a few, have drawn attention to the experience of migration and the traumas often associated with leaving one's homeland and coming in contact with another culture. However, Sanjukta Dasgupta has pointed out that male migrant writers

engage more with concerns regarding 'imaginary homelands' (Rushdie, Ghosh, or Rohinton Mistry) whereas female writers of the diaspora (including Jhumpa Lahiri) focus on the quest for home as a secure.

Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), takes up many of the topics like immigration, assimilation, family relations, travelling, and an abiding tension while translating between Indian/Bengali and American cultures leading to troubled identity-formation processes. *The Namesake* tells the coming-of-age story of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son of Indian immigrants, spanning from his birth in 1968 to adulthood in the year 2000. Lahiri examines the social and, most of all, the psychological stages he goes through while dealing with his hyphenated status and eventually developing a transnational identity. In fact, all the main characters overlap nations - spaces and cultures, blending elements from past and present in their efforts to create a sense of identity. This identity is fractured, but by denying a single, homogeneous notion of self, acknowledges "the individual's affiliations to multiple nations and cultures".

The Namesake also features four generations of the Ganguli family, in different corners of the world. The first generation represent Gogol's great-grandparents: his great-grandfather teaches Ashoke (his grandson) how important it is to read, and his great-grandmother sends Ashima (her granddaughter) a letter containing what was supposed to be Gogol's 'good name'. Although the letter never reaches the American continent and Gogol never meets his great-grandparents, their influence stretches from India to the United States. Gogol's grandparents never leave India either and equally play a role in their grandchildren's development. Lahiri's focus is on the third and fourth generations of Gangulis. The immigrant couple, Ashima and Ashoke, transfers back and forth between India and the United States, struggling to keep in close contact with their Indian background and insisting their children to do the same. At the same time, they work towards building a good, prosperous life in the adoptive country. The fourth generation represents Sonia and Gogol who are born in the United States but are often taken by their parents on long trips to India. As they mature, they also travel across the United States and to cities in Europe.

It is apparent from the very first scene that Ashima defines her status as emigrant wife and (future) mother. Married off to a doctoral student in electrical engineering at MIT, she follows him to the United States, but after eighteen months she is still terribly homesick and slow to accustom to American ways. Throughout her pregnancy, she craves for a strange combination of Rice Kris pies, peanuts, and onion, to which she adds salt, lemon juice and green chilli pepper. This 'concoction', in Lahiri's term, reminds Ashima of a snack she used to Buy on Calcutta sidewalks, but it is a "self-effacing estimate" a savorless replacement, because in the American version, "as usual, there's something misplaced". Although she is desperately trying to replicate parts of India in her kitchen(s) in America, she has to combine ingredients at hand here to prepare

Indian dishes. Immigrants usually preserve their cookery ways in an attempt to articulate their difference and to maintain connection with the homeland.

As Ashima approximates her favourite snack, she reaches for an additional onion and goes into labour earlier than expected. She calls out to her husband who is studying in the bedroom but does not address him by his name, Ashoke, because tradition requires a Bengali wife not to do that. In fact,

Ashima never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first. It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. (*Namesake* 2)

So instead of saying his name, which is so intimate that it has to remain unuttered, she uses an Interrogative which "translates roughly as 'Are you listening to me?'Lahiri does not mention what this interrogative is, but her metaphor informs the reader of the difficulties she, as an Indian writing in English, probably has to overcome while narrating her story. Words and their meanings are sometimes 'untranslatable', just like the food Ashima is trying to prepare.

If Ashima can somehow replicate elements of the home culture in her apartment, she can hardly do that in the space of the hospital. She shares the maternity ward with three American women and registers some essential differences between their relationship with their husbands and hers with Ashoke. The American men tell their wives 'I love you' and these are words she has never heard, nor does she expect to hear from her husband because "This is not how they are". She is scared and wishes she could talk to the other women, but by now "she has gathered that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy". Their community is inaccessible to Ashima metaphorically, but also literally, she is separated from them. There is nothing comforting in the whiteness of the room either, so her mind wanders to India again, where tradition says the woman should go back to her parents' house to give birth. She is told by the doctor to time the contractions herself, and she does so on her watch, a bon voyage gift from her parents. This inevitably sends her thoughts to India and her family, so she calculates Indian time on her hands - nine hours and a half ahead in Calcutta. Going through a crisis in the unfamiliar, impersonal space of the hospital, Ashima calculates the time lag on her Indian watch which enables her to travel mentally to a familiar space of utmost intimacy – her parents' residence in Calcutta.

In Massachusetts, it is eleven in the morning, and Ashima is reassured with the American doctor, who looks "gauntly handsome in a Lord Mountbatten sort of way", that they are "expecting a perfectly normal delivery". The satirical reference to India's colonial past (the former British immigrant symbolically helps an Indian woman deliver an

American baby), might partially explain why nothing feels normal to Ashima in the United States. In addition, she cannot accommodate the idea of motherhood in a foreign land, and is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, and "where life seems so tentative and spare". Family members should be at her side and in their absence "the baby's birth, like most everything in America, feels somehow confused, only half true". She pities her son for entering the world already deprived of the extended family's affection, his birth occurring in a place most people enter to suffer or die. Thus, Ashima is "astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great-grandmothers had done. That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still". Children of immigrants represent continuity with ancestors, but discontinuity and renewal as well. The immigrant woman bears a double burden: that of giving birth and that of making sure the link between past and future has not lost. Ashima undergoes all the stages women before she had undergone, yet she has to go through them alone in a faraway country. Therefore, what is perfectly natural for women worldwide becomes 'nothing normal' for lonely, uprooted Ashima Ganguli.

After the baby boy is born, Ashima and Ashoke decide to let the maternal grandmother choose the name of the family's first sahib (which means 'Englishman'). Trying their best not to cut the umbilical cord with the motherland, they are confidently waiting for a letter she has mailed, containing two names: one for a boy and one for a girl. Ashima has always had a special relationship with her grandmother, the only person who encouraged her to be brave and enjoy the adventure of migrating across continents. Before leaving, she advises her granddaughter: "Do what I will never do. It will all be for the best. Remember that. Now go". She optimistically reassures Ashima that a new life, full of joy and happiness is waiting for her. But her letter gets lost in the mail, exposing the limits of transnational communication, and symbolize that the community at home can hardly influence life in the country of destination. The immigrant cannot continue to live in the imaginary space of the motherland, and the place where they live gradually pulls him or her in. The letter is forever suspended in-between continents, foretelling the baby's complicated identity quest. An 'original' name does exist, but it has not disclosed, so it is both a presence and an absence at the same time.

So they must break with Bengali custom, and Ashoke has got this one covered. He names their son Gogol, after the Russian novelist. Apparently, Gogol saved Ashoke's life when he was injured in a train crash in India, back in 1961. Gogol for him means books of the author and not the man himself. After returning to the apartment as a mother, Ashima feels overwhelmed by the responsibility of taking care of the baby and the house and urges Ashoke to finish his degree so that they could return to their homeland. He feels guilty for having brought her here, aware that she is lonely and often cries while rereading old letters from her parents. She is depressed for days on end until one afternoon she pulls herself together and takes her son out for the first time,

On a 'trip' to Purity Supreme to buy a bag of rice. To her surprise, she is stopped on the street and in the aisle of the supermarket by perfect strangers, all Americans, "suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done". They ask about the baby's age, sex and name. They do not comment on the boy's rather peculiar first name, Gogol, chosen by Ashoke. So unlike the Indian woman from "The Third and Final Continent" who attacked on the street of an American's dog, Ashima is complimented on her baby and begins to take pride in devising a daily routine of raising her child without the family's help.

Every morning she gets dinner out of the way, and then wanders up and down the streets which have become familiar by now, running household tasks, or merely sitting with Gogol in Harvard Yard. Of course, she still cooks Indian food, sings Bengali songs to her son, and sees pieces of her family on his face: her mother's eyes, her father's lips, or her brother's smile. But readers get the feeling that motherhood facilitates her gradual translation into the host culture, and that she is starting to live on 'American time'.

Her initial impossibility to communicate with the other women in the maternity ward slowly overturned as she settles into a comfortable familiarity, starts interacting with people from the American neighbourhood, and goes in and out of the house at will. One day she even goes shopping in downtown Boston, pushing Gogol's stroller for hours in the basement of Jordan Mash, and buying presents for her loved ones in India. Busy with the pram, and in the panic that she will miss the station where she has to get off, Ashima forgets the presents on the train. But her stuff is returned the next day, connecting her to America in a way she has not thought possible.

In 1971, the Gangulis moved to an unnamed university town outside Boston where apparently they are the only Bengali residents. Ashoke now has his dream job: assistant professor of electrical engineering at the university, while Ashima is lonely once more, and the relocation to the suburbs feels more brutal than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been.

She is shocked to discover the 'unfriendly' features of this town: the fact that it has no sidewalks, street lights, or means of public transportation. She does not want to learn how to drive the new Toyota they now own, so she is stuck in the house again. Since there are no stores nearby, she cannot even go shopping anymore. When she does venture outside, her walks restricted to the university campus where on rainy days there is nothing to do but watch television in the student Lounge. She sometimes roams the town's historic district, "a brief strip of colonial architecture visited by tourists on summer weekends". But all these landmarks of New England history and culture mean nothing to Ashima who struggles with the foreignness of the setting, alone and depressed because there are no other Bengali residents in the area. The quotation above is a direct reference to the country's history of immigration, and the Gangulis are the first Indian 'colonizers' to reach this site.

Meanwhile, Ashoke is not bothered by the precarious living conditions in either apartment. Spending more time at work than at home, he enjoys the sweeping view from his fourth-floor office overlooking the courtyard surrounded by vine-covered brick buildings. On pleasant days he takes his lunch on a bench, and listens "to the melody of bells chiming from the campus clock tower". Immigration is not such a painful process for a man, and the distinct way in which the husbands perceive the same setting proves it. Thus, a combination of factors plays out differently for men and women in the migration cycle.

Ashoke has his office in the university building and gives lectures to American students, thoroughly enjoying his work, while Ashima's only 'job' is to make samosas once a week and sell them at the international coffeehouse. Womanhood and motherhood in a foreign land involve exclusion for Ashima who is a mere visitor in the public areas of educational institutions and does not have access to the spaces that grant her husband many privileges. Two decades later, Ashima will have a part-time job at the local public library, will know how to drive, and will even have befriended some American women her age, most of whom also have grown-up children, some of whom live alone because they are divorced. Occasionally she invites these friends over for lunch at her house, or they go shopping to outlet stores in Maine. When Ashoke moves to Ohio on a scholarship for nine months, Ashima's small family spreads in different corners of the United States: Sonia now lives in California, Gogol in New York, and she is left all alone in her house in Massachusetts. Despite the security system her husband installed before parting, she always double-checks all the window locks and troubled with the sound she hears in the middle of the night. Her Indian-American children tell her everyone should live alone at some point in their life, but Ashima "hates returning in the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking up on another". Once again, the space of the house adequately reflects her emotional state. Since there is no one to cook for, she eats simple meals on the sofa, in front of the television. Ashoke comes home every third weekend, and on these occasions, she cook as she used to, while he does the things she still does not know how to do, namely pay the bills, or put gas into the car.

On the evening Ashima is sitting at the kitchen table, drawing Christmas cards and addressing them to their friends whose contact details she keeps in three different address books. Each entry forms a record of all the Bengalis she and Ashoke have known over the years, "all the people she has had the fortune to share rice inside a foreign land". She still remembers the day she bought the first of these address books and recalls putting down her parents' address in Calcutta, her in-laws' address in Alipore and Ashoke's extension at MIT, writing his name for the first time in her life. Once a year, she still rereads all the letters she has ever received from her parents, mailed weekly across continents.

But on that day all signs are predicting that something terrible is bound to happen: "It's one of the things she's always hated about life here: these chilly, abbreviated days of early winter, darkness descending mere hours. She expects nothing of days such as this, simply waits for them to end. She is resigned to warming dinner for herself in a little while, changing into her nightgown, switching on the electric blanket on her bed". Even the petunias in the window box "have withered to trembling brown stalks that she's been meaning, for weeks, to root from the soil". She thinks Ashoke will do that when he comes home and that very moment he calls, saying he has driven himself to a hospital in Cleveland because of some stomach problems.

A few hours later, Ashima calls the hospital and learns her husband has expired because of a heart attack. Initially, the verb 'expired' only makes her think of library cards and magazine Subscriptions, but soon the meaning sinks in, and she starts to shiver, the house feeling much colder. She gets up and walks through all the rooms, turning on all the lights. Then she switches on the lamppost on the lawn and the floodlight over the garage before returning to the kitchen. Hindu rituals for death and grief require a lamp to light the way for the departed Soul and Ashima instinctively respect this tradition. Gogol flies to Cleveland to identify the body and clean up the apartment his father had rented, but Ashima tells him not to bring home any of her dead husband's objects because "it's not our way". Upon his return to Boston, Sonia come residence too, and they mourn 'their way' together with numerous Bengali friends. Now a widow, Ashima erases the vermilion from her parted hair, puts on a white sari, and takes off her wedding bracelets. For ten days, she stops cooking fish or meat, preparing only rice and vegetables instead. Gogol and Sonia partake in this ritual of eating light dishes, the enforced absence of certain foods on their plates conjuring Ashoke's presence. On the eleventh day, they invite friends from six states to an elaborate meal cooked as he had liked it best, marking the end of the mourning period. They have a religious ceremony in the living room, with Gogol sitting in front of a picture of his father, while a priest is chanting verses in Sanskrit.

Ashima faithfully observes the traditional Indian mourning habits, but she is not a customary Indian widow. On the contrary, Ashima is an empowered woman who deliberately chooses to abandon any permanent residence and travel back and forth between her homeland and her adoptive country, countering the myth of a redeeming homecoming. Thus, at the age of 53, she sells the house to an American family, the Walkers, and decides to divide her year into six months in India with her relatives and six months in the United States with her children. These are the plans she and Ashoke had made for retirement. In Calcutta she will have a room of her own in her brother's spacious flat, the first room ever intended for her exclusive use, but not a home: "True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere".

She will make the journey all alone, but this no longer terrifies her, as she has learned to do so many things on her own. Although she still wears saris and puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once left Calcutta. Her documents (American passport, Massachusetts driving license, social security card) prove her official belonging, but they cannot capture what a long journey it has been for Ashima, and they do not tell the whole story of the changes she has undergone. Unlike other Indian women, she has not resisted driving or getting a job but has tried her best to raise her children in a balance between India and America. She has used the experience of living abroad to her advantage, having gained access to things unavailable to women in her traditionalist home country and having become a transnational character par excellence.

Hence, in the final scene of the book, she is throwing a farewell party in the house on Pemberton Road. On the day before Christmas, in the year 2000, Ashima is making mincemeat croquettes, one of her specialities. However, "after all these years she has still not quite managed, to her entire satisfaction, to replicate" the exact taste of Indian foods. The novel ends as it began: with Ashima cooking in her kitchen, doing her best to give her dishes a genuine Indian flavour. But, as the cycle is closed, readers know she is no longer the uprooted, miserable character she had been at the beginning. Lahiri uses another culinary analogy to show her character's radical transformation. On the whole cooking for parties leaves Ashima without an appetite, but on this night she is looking forward to serve herself and to sit among her guests. For the past twenty-seven years, she has lived and cooked in this house, a symbol of fixity and stability in the United States.

Ashima realize that for decades she has missed her life and family in India, but from now on she will fail to see the house, her job at the library, and the women she has bonded amid. Over time she has acquired financial independence and access to different spaces. Consequently, she will miss driving, going to movies with Sonia, and other pleasant moments of the 'unexpected' life Ashoke had given her in America. She has found a perfect balance between retention of core Bengali components and integration of new cultural elements, and she has done so on her terms. Though she is virtually homeless, Ashima only now starts living according to the meaning of her name "she who is limitless, without borders", a transnational citizen without a permanent home, a resident nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Her mobility has increased throughout the novel until space and real borders have collapsed completely. She has constantly and consciously negotiated her identity from the interstices. She is now all too aware that Calcutta, "the city that was once home and is now in its way foreign", is not home anymore. And that after missing her relatives and her life in India for thirty-three years, from now on she is going to overlook throwing parties for Bengalis in the Boston area. Most of all, she will miss the opportunity to drive by the engineering building where her husband once worked, like she still does at times.

Relationships and marriage are also sensitive subjects. The Ganguli's disapprove of Indian-American marriages. They do not want an American wife for Gogol, but after him and Moushumi (his Indian-American wife) separate, Ashima feels guilty for having set them up. At the same time, she is also glad that they have not considered it their duty to stay in an unhappy marriage, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation had sometimes done. Representatives of the second generation "are not willing to accept, to adjust, and to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense". Ashima admits the unbreakable bond between individuals from the same country is just an illusion. In this way, she adheres to a more fluid pattern of ethnic affiliation. Gogol and Moushumi's divorce becomes an example of 'common sense', progress from restrictive Eastern mores to Western freedom and individuality. Therefore, Ashima does not oppose Sonia's decision to marry an American because she knows Ben (who is half-Jewish and half-Chinese) has brought happiness to her daughter, in a way Moushumi (despite her Indian descent) has never done to her son. Ben is willing to meet Sonia halfway and be marital into their culture. Their wedding takes place in Calcutta (a city Sonia hated as a little girl), on a day in January, just as Ashima and her husband married nearly thirty-four years before. In the end, Ashima is totally free and has evolved in many aspects. For her, happiness in no way connected to a place, nevertheless keeping in close touch with children, relatives, and friends from and in different spaces bring her pleasure.

References

1. Brennan, Sue. "Time, Space, and National Belonging to *The Namesake*: Redrawing South Asian American Citizenship in the Shadow of 9/11." *The Journal of Transnational American Studies*. Vol. 3, No. 1 (2011): 1-22.
2. Caesar, Judith. "American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri". *English Studies in Canada*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2005): 50-68.
3. "Gogol's Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Atenea*. Vol. 27, No. 1 (June 2007): 103- 119.
4. Lahiri, Himadri. "Individual-Family Interface in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake". *Americana*, vol. 4, No. 2 (2008), Available at http://americanaejournal.hu/vol4no2/lahiri.
5. Nair, Mira. *The Namesake: A Portrait of the Film*. New York: New market Press, 2006.