

## **A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Feminism**

**Shaik Mohimood\*, & K. G. B. Gowri\*\***

*\*Assistant Professor of English, Nalanda Institute of Engineering & Technology, Guntur, A.P. India*

*\*\*Assistant Professor of English, Nalanda Institute of Engineering & Technology, Guntur, A.P. India*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Fiction is the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression. During recent years standard of English has rapidly gone down in India. Female writers have rarely been the subjects of serious scholarly inquiry. Usually novels and short stories do not catch my attention but seeing as Jhumpa Lahiri and her Literary Collection, I gave it a try and was thoroughly surprised. The writer has so much depth, emotion and attachment with India and Indian traditions and writers.*

**Key words:** - *Feminism and Identity.*

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London, England in 1967. She is the daughter of parents who emigrated from India. She was then raised in Rhode Island where her father worked as a librarian and her mother as a teacher. Lahiri received a B.A in English Literature at Barnard College, and later received her M.A in English, Creative writing, and Comparative Studies in Literature and the Arts, as well as a Ph.D in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. Her debut work, Interpreter of Maladies, won several awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000.

Her second publication, The Namesake, was her first novel and spent several weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. In addition to receiving the 2000 Pulitzer Prize, she has also received a PEN/Hemingway Award, an O. Henry Award, The New Yorker's best debut of the year award, and an Addison Metcalf award from the American academy of arts and letters. Her books have also been recognized as the New York Times Notable Book, Publishers Weekly Best Books of the Year, a New England book show selection, Los Angeles Times best book, and Los Angeles Times book prize Finalist. Currently, Lahiri lives in New York City with her husband and son and is working hard on her second novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri well manifests the womanist conceptions of male-female cooperation and maternity of Clenora Hudson-Weems, Chikweyne Okonjo Ogunyemi and Layli Phillips in her fictional works The Namesake and Unaccustomed Earth. And, although she inexplicitly refutes and suggests other womanist tenets, working toward an Indian-Bengali-American womanism, the full articulation of such a theory will necessitate further textual exploration.

That being said, Lahiri's fictional examples well support the need for a womanism independent of current womanism's Afrocentricity. However, a cautionary word against the pluralistic theory of Phillips, who well introduces but poorly articulates, global womanist theory, is needed and Lahiri, in her local-global, male-female, maternal, cross-cultural and intergenerational womanistic fiction, well articulates examples for a new Bengali- Indian-American exploration of womanism.

It all started in 1999 when Jhumpa Lahiri quietly exploded onto the literary scene and it appears her short career has shown no signs of slowing down. Readers seem to be mesmerized by Jhumpa Lahiri's writing, and their curiosity brings her audience together.

As author Jay deep Sarangi explains,

“Jhumpa Lahiri's stories are the gateways into the large submerged territory of ‘cross-cultureless’. (1)

It is a metaphor to share culture..... Something that will allow them/us to share, instead of dividing, what is on either side: (117)? As a popular young writer of Indian background, Lahiri is a sort of represented it means to straddle the line between two cultures. Figure for non-immigrant American s who does not fully understand what.2

The novel *The Namesake* is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into America, over thirty years (from 1968 to 2000); the cultural dilemmas experienced by them-and their America born children in different ways; the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle "home" in the new land. This is a novel

"As affecting in its Chekhovian exploration of fathers and sons, parents and children, as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of the American dream. “Writes the New York Times. (3)

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 nature his intercultural identity growth.

In the beginning, Lahiri; s unnamed, third person-omniscient narrator writes of Ashima's maternity:

As the baby grows, so, too, does their circle of Bengali acquaintances.... They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends. Most of them live within walking distance of one another in Cambridge. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for ecipes and advice, and tells them about the carp that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat. (Lahiri, *Namesake* p. 38; ch.2)

In this quote, Lahiri interweaves Ashima's physical maternity of Gogol with the communal maternity, here Bengali – American identity nurturing and translation. She shares with her Bengali-American friends. In helping others, Ashima's ability to mother herself culturally is laid forth, and she exemplifies both autonomous and communal growth, which are both necessary to womanist ideas of maternity.

Ashima's maternity, individual, familial and communal, only grows throughout the novel as Gogol and his intercultural identity develop, and, as the novel and Gogol's narrative concludes, Ashima begins a new chapter of her life, in which she plans to travel, splitting her remaining years between Calcutta and the American homes of Gogol and her daughter, Sonia. One can only envision Ashima further materializing herself and others in this next stage of her life, as she had in the previously narrated portions which readers are permitted to glimpse. As she sells her house, no longer necessary in her retirement, she hosts a final

Bengali-American party to mark the end of her days in the home she shared with her son, daughter, and now deceased husband on Pemberton road.

The Namesake is the story of Gogol, a kid, whose father, after an improbable rescue in a train wreck in India, had decided to move to Boston in his early youth. It is a story in which characters have to reinvent themselves constantly in order to come to terms with a new country and its cultural concepts. When Lahiri began writing it, she wanted to focus on the experiences of a Bengali American Kid. (4) The unsettling ambivalence she herself has felt as an American -Indian, the feeling of somehow being "illegitimate in both cultures" has seeped into her novel also.(5) Based in a country where multiculturalism normally denotes ethnicity as well as race, the novel increasingly evolves issues related with diasporic hybridity. Williams had argued that the nationally and internationally mobile intellectuals

"Were often so in thrall to 'market and exchange relations' as to prefer legal solutions to problems of relationship of the 'rooted settlements' in which most people derive their 'communal identities.'" (6)

Lahiri begins her novel with the description of Ashima Ganguli, a Bengali newlywed girl, who has accompanied her husband to a Boston suburb after an arranged marriage and is now expecting her first child. Lahiri is careful to stamp a precise date on some of the events of her novel. Ashima is expecting her first child in 1968. The child would be the namesake of the Russian author Nikolai Gogol as a result of some bizarre incidents, would hate his name and struggle against this identity, changing it officially to that of 'Nikhil' and living through the identity crisis of an ABCD - American Born Confused Deshi- till the year 2000, when the novel ends. (7) The novel traces the struggle of its major characters, who want to settle down in a new country but continuously face the dilemma of being foreigners. Their plight is represented by Ashima's outbursts and fears when she discovers her pregnancy. She insists on continuing with her food habits and calculates the Indian time on her hands (p. 4).

Gogol's marriage with Moushumi, which has all the covetous trappings of the Indian Diaspora, does not work out well. Moushumi has always felt desperately lonely (p.213). Her relationship with Graham had whimpered out, leaving her vulnerable. Gogol is suggested to her as an anti-dote, a remedy, as she had been to him. She does not share her darkest moods with him and he feels "more apologetic than excited" (p.231). Their incompatibility is evident when Moushumi finds that her affair with Dmitri does not upset her, rather it "causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day" (p.266). Gogol and Moushumi go through the motions of married life, but both are keenly aware of their inner distance, distraction and veiled dissatisfaction with each other (p.271). Their separation comes naturally.

Lahiri like other writers writing of immigrant experiences also shows in this novel that the migrants and their children might adopt and assimilate the culture of the new country but they are not taken to be the part and parcel of the "host" country and their identity is related to the "migrant history of their parents and grandparents". The "Orientals" continue to be looked down upon by the "Occidentals." (Edward Said, Orientalism, London, 1985) This is evident from a few situations in the novel the picture drawn by Gogol of his mother with a dot on her forehead, glasses on his father's face and his new sibling standing in a row in front of their house is called: "the spitting image" by Mrs. Merton (an American neighbour) who is babysitting Gogol when his parents are away to the hospital. At the American Departmental

store his parents are not properly attended and the cashiers smirk "at his parents' accents" and the salesmen "prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf (p.68). Some miscreants in the American neighbourhood remove the letters will from the name Ganguli on the mail box leaving it "shortened to GANG with the word Green scrawled in pencil following it." "Gogol's ears burn at the sight, and he runs back into the house, sickened, certain of the insult his father will feel" (p.67). in Maxine's house during the celebration of his twenty seventh birthday, though he is born and brought up in America and is accustomed to American life, yet in a frowning tone he is made aware of his 'Indian heritage (which would be keeping him weak and sick) by Pamela-one of the American neighbours present there."(p. 157)

The above analysis of the novel reveals that Lahiri in this novel "brings alive the multiple selves constructed so painstakingly to make sense of the unknown world that is as much a land of opportunities as it is of conflict and confusion."(8)

She is a feminist and gypsy writer she was established women identity in her novels.

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