

Diasporic Identity and Journey in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Barnali Dutta

In the present era of transnational migration, the flow of the people among the different countries, convergence of the heterogeneous cultures, creolization of languages and hybridization of identities have broken the concept of fixity or absolute territoriality. The intersection between the territorialization and deterritorialization creates the 'third space' or liminality where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' occurs. Therefore, the concepts of homeland and identity in this age of global migration form a complex framework. According to the critics like Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah and Stuart Hall, the floating nature of home and fluid identity have replaced the age-old concepts of fixed 'home' and identity as well. The idea of 'home' evokes the spatial politics of home, the sense of self, its displacement, intimacy, exclusion and inclusion. The flow of the people across different countries breaks the concept of true home. The notion of home not only construes the sense of self, but also ties with the human emotion, feelings, sentiments, proximity and intimacy. Beyond the spatial territory, 'home' is associated with emotional territory.

The hybrid identity that the immigrants carry creates a tumultuous situation regarding the belongingness. In the opinion of Bhabha, hybridity is the 'third space' which makes the other positions to emerge. The identity as suggested by Bhabha, indicates the impure identity rather than fixed identity. Dual or hybrid identity construct an identity crisis in one's creating home of familiarity in the overseas countries. The second generation immigrants find it hardly possible to adhere to the identity of the parental land. The national identity of the first generation may be changed politically, but they are able to fasten with their original homeland culturally, linguistically and ethnically. In the contemporary era, immigration, exile and expatriation are related to home, identity, nostalgia, memory and isolation. These are the recurrent theme in the diasporic writings of the post-colonial writers like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukkerjee, Agha Shahid Ali, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and many others.

This present article focuses on the first-generation and second-generation immigrants' adherence

to the old and new lands as can be found in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). In this novel, Lahiri has explored the psychic condition of the first generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke and the second generation immigrants, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi. The novel critically demonstrates how the concept of homeland creates an atmosphere to construct home and identity of proximity. In this age of transmigration, 'home' signifies its impermanence, displacement, and dispossession. For many critics, the idea of home is more conveyed as a sense of being between the two places instead of rooted one. In the novel, Ashima's sense of being at home is connected with the original homeland, i.e. India. And the selves of Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi are supposed to be attached with the USA, their birth place. The questions however arise as – is this land for which they seem to negate the Indian ideological values and principles? And how far they are able to create the true home?

In an unknown city of Massachusetts, Ashima's pang for abandoning the home country is emphasized through imagining the picture of the family in Calcutta. And the feeling of nostalgia seems to mitigate the pang and anguish of Ashima. When she is about to give birth a child, her Indian ethnicity reminds her of the conventional social code and customs of the Indian Bengali culture: "...women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares..." (p.4). Again the solitary atmosphere in the hospital makes her recapture the particular moment of the domestic life of the Calcutta. The reference of the 'fractures of memory' can aptly be mentioned in this context. Ashima's anxiety over giving birth and rearing up the child in the alien land is poignantly revealed: "... it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still" (p.6). Regarding the immigrants' situation abroad, scholars like Rayaprol quotes Gupta and Ferguson as follows:

"... Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world" (Gupta and Ferguson (1992: 10-11).

Similarly Ashima's recollection of the lullaby from the Bengali songs, remembrance of 'dida I'm coming' for 'good bye' are intimately associated with the Bengali social conventions which is hardly evadable for the first generation immigrants like Ashima. Her recollection of the past and

imagination of the present Calcuttan family life are encapsulated within the tapestry of the isolated life in the USA. Her feeling of nostalgia captures the very moment of the far away Calcuttan life where “a servant is pouring after-dinner tea ... arranging Marie biscuits on a tray” (p.5).

In comparison to Ashima's nostalgia, Gogol's apathetic attitude to Indian culture is critically examined in the novel. The lack of tie with the Indian family makes Gogol seldom recognize the photos of the family members of Ashima. Ashima endeavors to transmit in Gogol the convention of the Bengal by introducing him with the Bengali rhyme, names of Gods and Goddesses and prevalent Bengali tradition of calling every child by two names.

Generally immigrants attempt to linguistically bind themselves with their original homeland. The present novel also orchestrates this. The tie of the language specially the Bengali of the indigenous land is presumed to make Ashima link with the Indian soil. The American English seems less important to Ashima than the Bengali language in which she is accustomed with the Calcuttan life. Ashima's grasping 'a tattered copy of desh magazine' in the foreign hospital indicates her temporary relief in the far-off country. Ashima seldom feels uncomfortable with any other language but the Bengali. The solitariness of Ashima in America seems to encapsulate the present and the future as well. Ashima's solicitude over rearing up the child without her family surrounding in this strange city, impels her to think of “... a person entering the world so alone, so deprived” (p.25).

The bipolarity of forging the cultural performances between the first generation and second generation Indian immigrants is viewed in the present novel. Cultural performance generally plays an instrumental role to construct immigrant's identity. The nurturing of the Bengali culture through Nazrul and Tagore songs, argument over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus Satyajit Roy, as well as debate over the political parties of the West Bengal among the Bengali immigrant community in the USA illustrate their proximity with the Indian soil. Cultural performance generally plays an instrumental role to construct immigrant's identity. In the overseas countries, native cultural activities such as dances or songs construct cultural identity of the immigrants and endeavor to negotiate with other cultures too (Aparna Rayaprol,1997). Inversely, the second

generation immigrants like Gogol gets involved with the American music than the Indian classical music: "... a cassette of classical Indian music he'd bought for Gogol months ago ... still sealed in its wrapper" (p.78). The utmost effort of Ashima and Ashoke to make him acquainted with cultural activities like *Kathakali* dance and *Apu Trilogy* plays.

Ashima's preservation of the varied Bengali rituals in the new land epitomizes the bond with native India. The celebration of Gogol's *Annaprasan* (rice ceremony) as per the Bengali convention provides Ashima a temporary relief in this foreign atmosphere. On the other hand, to perform this ritual, absence of the family members overshadows Ashima which denotes her longing to create the Bengali atmosphere in the new unknown country. Ashima, Ashoke and Bengali immigrants obey the religious festivals of Christmas and New Year celebration probably to reconcile with the culture.

Reversely, the eagerness and excitement of the second generation Bengali immigrants is observed in celebrating the American festivals than worshiping of Indian Gods and Goddesses.

The confusion regarding the names like Gogol, Sonali and Moushumi, the American born offspring of the Indian parents creates a problem defining their identities. The names like Gogol, Nikhil, Sonali and Moushumi indicate Russian and Indian identities respectively instead of the American. The 'self' of the male protagonist of the novel is embedded in the Americanization, not in Indianness. But Gogol may be considered as 'other' in this land, his birth place. Ashima is supposed to be the 'other' in the unknown American atmosphere, as she usually observes the disparity between the home and host cultures.

Similarly, ethnic food and costume act as the symbols of one's ethnic identity. Ashoke-Ashima's preference for the Indian Bengali food like rice, *dal*, *samosa* etc symbolizes their shared root. On the other hand, Gogol-Sonia's preference for the American cuisine like Shake' n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper than the Indian food is critically examined: "Gogol savors each mouthful, aware that for the next eight months nothing will taste quite the same" (p.81). Ashima's maintenance of wearing traditional sari than any other western dresses conveys the preservation of the old ancestral culture.

The dichotomy between Ashima's sense of alienation and solitariness in the USA, despite the prolonged staying and Gogol-Sonia's disinclination and monotonous sojourn in India, is pointed out in the novel. Hence, Gogol's returning from India to Boston symbolizes his escaping the loneliness of India which usually projects his reluctance to negotiate with the Indian environment: "... for Gogol, relief quickly replaces a lingering sadness" (p.87). In the new atmosphere, Ashima's inability to adopt with the social rules and systems and sense of embarrassment and anguish comes out regarding raising baby-son Gogol. Her yearning to move back to India is embedded in this solitary atmosphere: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (p.33).

Similarly, Gogol-Sonia's apathetic attitude to accept the Bengali customs and rituals seems to evade his Indian identity. Their hyphenated position, Indian-American, within two different ethnic identities gives them no specific identity for the preservation of the particular ideological value of any country. The seeming manner of their adherence to the American customs makes them to impart less significance of the Indian one. Another situation can be observed through Gogol-Sonia's changed behavior of endeavoring to obey the rules and regulations of the Indian religious ceremony after their father's death: "... it was a Bengali son's duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent's death" (p.179). Hence, the inability of the second-generation immigrants to create the true home of familiarity and bond in America or in India generally can be analyzed due to the pendulumic situation.

Moushumi, the British born off-spring of the Bengali parents can be viewed from the point of transnationalism. Her continuous moving from one country to another seldom makes her to adhere to any particular cultural ideological values of the countries like Britain, America and France. Hence, her belongingness is moving among different countries instead of a fixed country. Moushumi's preference for the French literature, food and feeling of oneness with the French friends usually signify her reconciliation with the French environment instead of the Bengali. Maintaining the distance from the Bengali assembly denotes her aloofness in this unknown atmosphere: "always with a book in her hand at parties" (p.192). Her fragile married relationship with Gogol symbolizes her negation to cling to the holy bond of the marriage institution. Again her reluctant acceptance the surname 'Ganguli' of the spouse in the codes and conducts of the

Bengali marriage institution, pinpoints her willingness to enjoy liberty and independence by being not confined under this particular or fixed system: “When relatives from India continue to address letters and cards to 'Mrs. Moushumi Ganguli,' “she will shake her head and sigh”(p.227). Her escape from the Bengali convention and culture to cling to the French culture does not explicit her feeling at home with the later one. Moushumi's fluid identity belongs with the varied ethnic identities like the Bengali, the British, the American and the French. Her continuous moving from one country to another is supposed to re-create the home in France: “Here Moushumi had reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt (p.233).

The floating nature of home and fluid identity are explicated in her lack of feeling with the previous bond with native Calcutta, which she used to nourish in Calcutta and the USA. It seems to be emerges as foreign, a new land. Moreover, she is presumed to be connected with the USA through the rumination over the past days across boundary after returning to Calcutta: “... to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign” (p.278). Hence, she would be sandwiched between the dual cultures and identities as well. The portrayal of Ashima by Jhumpa Lahiri reminds us of the female protagonist Taralata, the Bengali immigrant in the USA. The city of San Francisco never emerges as the sweet old home in Calcutta but is only the place of residence without any attachment: “I'm feeling just a little alien and uncomfortable, a tinge of not-belonging, in the midst of such welcoming comfort ...”(p.75).

The vacillating condition of the first-generation and second generation Bengali immigrants, their vain endeavors to tie with the particular tradition and to carry the pure identity coalesce with the vain attempt of creating the true home elsewhere. Due to the effect of global migration and cross-cultural networks the first-generation immigrants generally try to be attached with the indigenous land through the recapitulation and the feeling of nostalgia. And the second generations seem to build any connection of the unknown parental land. The second generations usually adhere to their birth land. The national identities get eroded and replaced by the hybrid identities in which both the first and the second generation immigrants are wavered. Hence, the belongingness of the immigrants hardly clings to any singular place than the multi-places. In the contemporary age, all these issues like global migration, the intersection between the different territories, impure identity and cross-cultural elements seem to disavow the popular hearsay 'Home is where the heart lies'.

References

- Blunt, Alison. *Domicile and Diaspora: Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home*, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Huddart, David. *Homi K Bhabha*, London. Routledge, 2006.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*, Great Britain: Flamingo, 2003.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Desirable Daughters*, the USA: Theia, 2002.
- Parker, Kenneth. *Home is Where the Heart ...Lies*. Transition, No. 59 (1993), pp.65-77
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2934872>
- Rayaprol, Aparna. *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Diaspora*, Delhi. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*, Great Britain. Granta Books, 1991.
- Stefano, John Di. *Moving Images of Home*. Art Journal, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Winter, 2002), pp. 38-51
<http://www.Jstor.org/stable/778150>



Barnali Dutta, Research Scholar, Department of English, Banaras Hindu University,
E-mail: brnl.dutta@gmail.com