

Performing masculinity amid their identity crisis: A study of the protagonists in Jhumpa Lahiri's the namesake

K Jaya

Assistant Professor, SVS College of Engineering, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is a prominent and leading literary figure on the horizon of Indian English literature. She is an expatriate writer, who has connected with homeland through her writings. She is one of the most outstanding novelists. 'Search for identity' plays a key role in her novels. Her novels are concerned mainly with social and political themes of the East-West Encounter. Her serious concern is with the cross-cultural consciousness of her characters. The keen observation of the life of immigrants and the interest in the study of their inner mind are proved by the portrayal of her characters. She gives a graphic picture of the theme of immigration and alienation of the uprooted individuals in her novel *The Namesake* (2003). The novel is based on the theme of immigration of native Indians who went to America; it deals with the theme of coloured immigrants in USA and presents their difficulties of adjustment there. This paper tries to focus the vision of masculinity and their dilemma such as search for identity, displacement, cultural dislocation, isolation and alienation in the novel.

Keywords: the namesake, immigration, Indians, America, cultural differences, uprooted individuals

Introduction

A Diaspora is a large group of people with a similar heritage or homeland who have since moved out to places all over the world. Diaspora writing has created a great significant place between countries and cultures. The quest for identity marks the Diaspora writing. Writers of the Indian Diaspora wrote about the loss of identity, feelings of alienation, sense of adjustments, adaptability and mobility of the migrants on a foreign land. Literature of the Indian Diaspora constitutes a major study of the literature and other cultural texts of the Indian Diaspora. This literature works as a channel to strengthen the bonds between India in relation with the other countries.

Many Indian writers contributed to the diasporas' writing among them Jhumpa Lahiri gain a predominant place. Immigration occupies an important theme in her novels. Her fiction is thus structured on historical and cultural dislocation. This paper showcases the sufferings of male characters such as Ashoke and Gogol, the Son of Ashoke in the patriarchal society.

The term 'patriarchy' was introduced into feminist scholarship in the 1970s by the radical feminist Kate Millett (Whitehead 2002, 86). Feminists see patriarchy as a society in which men hold power, but also, furthermore, as a society "reflecting the values underlying the traditional male ideal" (Ruth 1998, 57). The feature of a patriarchal society is male identification. This means that the cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable and normal are connected to the culture's ideas about masculinity. The criteria used to define an ideal man also represent the most important values of society. These male-identified qualities include rationality, autonomy, strength, coolness, toughness, competitiveness and control over emotions. These kinds of qualities are also associated with professions that are most highly valued in patriarchal societies – professions within law, medicine, business and so on. On the contrary, other qualities are associated with femininity and thus devalued: cooperation,

mutuality, equality, compassion, emotional expressiveness and intuitive thinking, to mention some (Johnson 2005, 6–7). In this novel the protagonist find a little difficult initially to adapt to the way of life of the host country, they lead a sophisticated life which makes their stay in the alien land more comfortable. They earn as much as possible and are contented with their income. Lahiri has explicated in *The Namesake* the enthusiastic life, some of her characters lead. They get slowly adapted to the alien culture. In the beginning, Ashima prepares her favourite Indian food and at the end of the novel she has learnt to prepare Christmas cake. As an immigrant in the USA, Ashoke enhances his educational qualification by pursuing Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering at MIT, and as a result he gets employment in a University. He fulfilled the expectation and also paradigm in a patriarchal society.

In course of time even he purchases a house on Pemberton road which helps his family lead a comfortable and sophisticated life. His immigrant status has helped him to promote his academic and professional pursuits, resulting in intellectual and economic gain. When compared to Ashoke, the other characters have experienced loneliness and alienation. While Ashoke is pursuing his studies at MIT, most of the days, Ashima is alone in her apartment feeling lonely. And then again she feels the pangs of loneliness when she is admitted at the maternity ward, with no known persons around her either to comfort or to console. She is exceedingly afraid of raising a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so burdensome and worrisome that she fumes with indignation: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back"(33). Ashima has language barrier which needs critical attention. Ashima finds difficult to cope up with the nurse and doctor in the maternity ward. Ashima and Ashoke send their children, Gogol and Sonia, to learn the Bengali language and also to attend culture classes every Saturday. It shows their parents "fails to unsettle them

that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them in accents they are accustomed not to trust”(65).

Gogol, son of Ashima and Ashoke feels alienated, especially when he realizes that no one in India or America or elsewhere in the world bears his name. Gogol is stuck between two cultures- the Indian traditions of his parents and the mainstream American culture in which he grows up. The theme of identity is mostly centered around Gogol. In the novel he has two names: Gogol and Nikhil. When he was Gogol he was confused, angry and he didn't feel like his own self. He hated that name, but that was the name that gave him his first and true identity. Around his and family and friends he will always be known as Gogol. The name Gogol represents his connection to his family and his roots. On the other hand, we have the name Nikhil.

When Gogol is fourteen he starts hating his name and he responds rudely when he is asked about his name. At the college party, Gogol is reluctant to introduce himself to Kim as Gogol, so he asserts that his name is Nikhil. Gogol considers himself an American whereas American society considers him an Indian. His name symbolizes the problem of his identity. Nikhil enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. He can now relate himself with American environment. He is a representative of masculinity.

He starts doing many activities which he wants to do. He goes on keeping girlfriends, having live in relationship but he is not satisfied from within. His character comes to life when he uses the name Nikhil. He felt courageous, brave, and more importantly, he felt like himself with the name Nikhil. He loses his virginity by using the name Nikhil, and that name has lead him to meet and have relationships with multiple women He legally changes his name to Nikhil before he moves away to college. The name Nikhil goes on to represent his individuality and separation from his parents. It also represents him accepting American culture and distancing away from Indian culture. The twist comes into play when people starting calling him Nikhil and he gets startled. He likes the name Nikhil better, but he doesn't feel like Nikhil. On the inside, he feels like Gogol, no matter how much he dislikes the name.

He lives his life in American style, away from his parents, working to sustain himself. He keeps this life secret and does not allow his parents know about it. “After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential.” (105) He hates everything that reminds him of his past and heritage. But the loss of the old name was not so easy to forget and when he visits his home on alternate weekends, “Nikhil evaporates and Gogol reenters again.” (106).

Gogol is stuck between two cultures- the Indian traditions of his parents and the mainstream American culture in which he grows up. The theme of identity is mostly centered on Gogol. In the novel he has two names: Gogol and Nikhil. When he was Gogol he was confused, angry and he didn't feel like his own self. He hated that name, but that was the name that gave him his first and true identity. Around his and family and friends he will always be known as Gogol. The name Gogol represents his connection to his family and his roots. On the other hand, we have the name Nikhil. His character comes to life when he uses the name Nikhil. He felt courageous, brave, and more importantly, he felt like himself with the name Nikhil. He loses his virginity by using the name Nikhil, and that name has lead him to meet and have relationships with

multiple women He legally changes his name to Nikhil before he moves away to college.

The name Nikhil goes on to represent his individuality and separation from his parents. It also represents him accepting American culture and distancing away from Indian culture. The twist comes into play when people starting calling him Nikhil and he gets startled. He likes the name Nikhil better, but he doesn't feel like Nikhil. On the inside, he feels like Gogol, no matter how much he dislikes the name.

The theme of identity is a very complex topic in *The Namesake*, as the characters struggle to find their true and pure identity. The characters in the novel live their lives trying to answer these questions and search for answers through their relationships, actions and dreams. Little by little, they find some answers. Their journey might lead them to finding the answers they need, as they fight to continue the search for truth.

Conclusion

The Performance of masculinity in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* shows the patriarchal nature of Indian society in a foreign land. The aim of this paper was to show that the male gender were not merely oppressors. It shows the view on patriarchy as a society in which everyone participates (whether they involve or not) is in accordance with the portrayal of society in *The Namesake*. The protagonists in 'The Namesake' who choose not to conform to the patriarchal ideology but the majority choose the easier way, the path of least resistance. In fact, most people are so strongly socialized into the dominant ideology, that they do not even recognize their alternatives. These uprooted individuals, Ashoke and Gogol symbolize two sides of the immigrant experience and also suffer from exile, alienation and humiliation.

References

1. Lahiri, Jhumpa, “The Namesake”, London: Harper Collins, 2010.
2. Said Edward W. Reflections of an Exile. Biblio: A Review of Books, Volume IV.
3. Hall, Stuart. Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, Ed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.
4. Safran, William. Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”, *Diaspora*. 1991; 1(1):83-99.
5. Fernandes, Mabel. Immigrant Angst in Transplantation of Culture: Looking at Jhumpa Lahiri's World in *The Namesake*”, *Literature of Diaspora: Cultural Dislocation*, Ed. Shaikh Samad. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2009.