

## “Audacious Ashima in Inevitable America: Narration of Indian Migrant’s Mindset in *The Namesake*”

### Andoju Srinivasulu

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, JNTUA,  
Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University,  
Anantapuramu, A.P. India  
[andoju.research@gmail.com](mailto:andoju.research@gmail.com)

### Dr. Suneetha Yadav

Professor, Dept. of English, RGM CET  
Rajiv Gandhi Memorial College of Engineering &  
Technology, Nandyal, Kurnool, A.P. India  
[yadavsuneetha@gmail.com](mailto:yadavsuneetha@gmail.com)

### Abstract:

Ashima Ganguli a silent yet catalytic character in the novel, “The Namesake” written by Jhumpa Lahiri and adapted to screen by Mira Nair with the same name. She is portrayed like any girl next-door demeanor in India without an individualistic nor with any independent motif but her spectatorial perspective, with which the novel begins and the film ends, does most of the fulfillment in the narrative that has a soul full of India. Ashima when goes to America does not know to drive a car, not used to going alone in the streets, she despises the way shared laundry works in America so washes clothes by herself but for Ashoke Ganguli her husband’s disapproval. Ashima takes a lot of time to adjust in America but gains independence increasingly in that new land than how much she had it in her homeland, India.

This paper intends to look at that journey of Ashima Ganguli and her transformation from a low identity to a strong personality in the novel and in its adapted film, “The Namesake”.

**Key words:** *Migration, Narration, Woman Character, Transformation, Adaptation*

### Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian American thinking woman writer, was born in London on 11th July, 1967 and was later brought up in South Kingston, Rhode Island in the USA. She came into popularity, gaining acclaim with her debut collection, “*Interpreter of Maladies*”, which won the Pulitzer Prize 2000 for fiction. The book was then translated into twenty nine languages and became a bestseller in the United States and other countries as well. She then went on to write a novel, “*The Namesake*” in 2003 which was adapted to screen by another greatly acclaimed popular expatriate film maker Meera Nair the film now is a major motion picture across the globe. Her novel *The Namesake* focuses on the contrasting experiences of the two generations of expatriate Ashoke and Ashima who are not inclined towards getting Americanized, while Gogol and Sonia, their children face the need to belong. The writing by Lahiri hints a saga of Ganguli family in Calcutta and Boston portrays the struggle involved in the family, the psychological disturbance and uprooting they live with, revealing the experiences and perceptions, their hopes and aspirations traumatizing their psyche, their growing up, the circle of life and one’s identity.

### Ashima: from Calcutta to Cambridge (America)

The novel as a tribute to Indian women who leave their country and spent best years of their lives in home for their children and husband. This paper deals with the diasporic women in the novel especially Ashima Ganguli who was born in Calcutta and migrates due to her marriage to Ashoke who is a researcher in Cambridge in America. Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, a cross cultural multi generational story examines the cultural conflicts, pangs, aspirations and dilemmas of the Indian immigrants who find themselves in between the native and host cultures. *Namesake* is the story of Ashima Bhaduri, a student in degree class who becomes Ashima Ganguli after her betrothal to Ashoke Ganguli of Alipre. After marriage they shift to Boston. The book opens with Ashima Ganguly who is upset, homesick, spatially and emotionally alienated from her ancestral home, trying to recreate the taste of her favorite Indian snack, thereby trying to reconstruct her past. She thinks of her past with nostalgia of her home and spends her leisure in reading Bengali poems, stories and articles.

Ashima Ganguly, true to her traditional upbringing, submitted to an arranged marriage, decided by her parents. Not only did she not see the face of her husband until the appointed time, but also didn’t know his name

until after the betrothal. For Ashima, her husband's name is sacred, not something for casual utterance, which is why she refrains from using his name either in his presence or absence. As narrated in the novel: When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name, when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is . . . a husband's name is something intimate, and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. Ashima's relationship with her husband is not influenced by his name. For her, he is the person into whose shoes she put her feet into, whose sweat mingled with hers, who lies beside her listening to her recount the day's events. "At nights, lying beside her in bed, he listens to her describe the events of the day". Just as the relationship between Ashoke and Ashima can be summed up in Ashima's attitude to her husband's name. Her pregnancy is an experience without her own people around. Pregnancy was a hard time for her as there was no one to soothe her in the alien land. Motherhood is a glorious stage for a woman but for a migrant in a foreign alien land, loneliness and strange surroundings nearly kill such feelings. She was the only Indian in the hospital with three other American women in the adjoining room. Ashima "is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one ,where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare".

"Ashima laughs, her first genuine laugh after giving birth. The thought of her grandmother, born in the previous century, a shrunken woman in widow's white and with tawny skin that refuses to wrinkle, boarding a plane and flying to Cambridge, is inconceivable to her, a thought that, no matter how welcome, how desirable, feels entirely impossible, absurd. "No. But a letter will." (p 26, 27)

She thinks of her mother, seeking her support to be her side and helping her with all the procedures those are full of their native culture and traditions. Ashima's grandmother is supposed to send the name for the boy, that as a custom in the family but to implement it in America is a matter assimilation and impossibility due to space and communication related impediment.

### **Ashima: Alone, in a Room of Her Own**

Ashima's immigrant experience, identity problems, the tension between India and United States and between family tradition and individual freedom, the generation gap, the relationship between parents and children the uneasy status of the immigrants are the major themes dealt with in *The Namesake*. Ashima represents the majority of women expatriates who are reluctant to change or adapt to the culture of the host country and the social, cultural, religious and ideological conflicts faced by them in the host country. The apartment culture of living in cocooned shared shells was new to her.

"The apartment consists of three rooms all in a row without a corridor. There is a living room at the front with a three-sided window overlooking the street, a pass-through bedroom in the middle, a kitchen at the back. It is not at all what she had expected" (p. 30)

Ashima finds it very difficult to accustom to the host culture.. She is always nostalgic about her relatives in India. After Gogol's birth she says to Ashoke, "I am saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (p. 33). Ashoke feels guilty for bringing her to this alien land. But she is determined to bear the pain and to give birth to the infant in an alien land for the sake of the child. She wants her grandmother who is staying in India to assign a name to her new born which shows her desire to hold fast to the conventions of her culture and the resulting disappointment because of the failure to do so. She suffers from sleep deprivation in a house alone with her baby and she visits the supermarket where everyone is a stranger to her. Often recalls her paralyzed grandmother and is never able to give up her Indianness.

"To her surprise, finding herself once again in the gloomy three-room apartment, Ashima misses the hustle-bustle of the hospital, and Patty, and the Jell-O and ice cream brought at regular intervals to her side. As she walks slowly through the rooms it irks her that there are dirty dishes stacked in the kitchen, that the bed has not been made. Until now Ashima has accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash clothes, or shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on the days she is tired or homesick or cross. She has accepted that the very lack of such amenities is the American way. But now, with a baby crying in her arms, her breasts swollen with milk, her body coated with sweat, her groin still so sore she can scarcely sit, it is all suddenly unbearable. "I can't do this," she tells Ashoke when he brings her a cup of tea, the only". (p. 32)

The first generation immigrants feel proud to their cultural past and did not like to violate their cultural past while the second generation expresses its aberrations and deviations and does not demand it or demonstrate it. Ashima as per her name "...will be without borders, without a home of her, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (p. 276). The older immigrants are always reminded of the words of their family elders when they left India. Ashima like many immigrant Bengali women is not culturally immunized by America's multi culture, is a strong follower of Indian culture and gives importance to family and relationships. She does her best to perform the role of a homemaker and tries to uphold the traditional values against the materialistic values of America.

### **Ashima: A Catalyst in Feminist Perspective**

A woman is preserver of the past, survivor of the present and seeker of sustenance for the future that she can clearly envision. In line with this Ashima tries and gives her children full freedom to move out and explore the world, teaches the culture of her own country but never forces them to do or practice it. Woman in Indian English fiction is depicted as the silent sufferer and upholder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society. Born and brought up in India Ashima too upholds Indian values, traditions and culture even in America. The fear of losing her Bengali culture and of her children's neglect of their original culture secretly torments her. Through the existential struggle of Ashima, Lahiri presents the pang of a woman living in an alien land, caused by a sense of isolation. She misses her homeland and this 'trishanku' experience of being neither in Calcutta nor in America nearly kills her. She is a true representative of diasporic people living in similar hidden trauma. Like a traditional Indian wife in appearance and in ideologies, her life revolves around her husband and children and she sacrifices all her comforts for the sake of her family. She is true to her role assigned to her as a daughter, granddaughter, wife and a mother and emerges as a winner.

The Namesake's greatness lies in the presentation of a woman character with her attitude to change, becoming the other, inventing a life that's utopian, adapting or not to a culture, assimilating life to survive, and adjusting to all these and many more of new states of being and being a woman, that is , Ashima Ganguli.

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