

Existentialism versus Traditionalism: Interrogating Jumpha Lahiri's Two Prominent Feminine Characters

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Abstract - Literature portrays different issues of society. One such issue is Feminism. Feminist literature is loyal to the cause of women and their role in society. In Diasporic Literature the study of women empowerment offers new avenues for interrogation. In context to this challenging study, Lahiri's portrayal of Gauri in The Lowland and Ashima in The Namesake are worthy of interrogation. Both women have grown up in India, married to Indians and migrated to America. Both women have completely contrasting trajectories.

When Simon De Beauvoir published her polemic *The Second Sex*, little did she know that with this work she would be considered the mother of post 1960s feminism. Her dedication to feminism was her outcry against the French society's treatment of unmarried mothers. Gauri is a widowed young mother left at the mercy of her in-laws. Her existentialism would be championed by Simone de Beauvoir fans. Posited on the opposite side of Gauri, is Ashima from *The Namesake*. Both women are on the same journey. Both Bengali women are uprooted from home and have to give a new meaning to their lives in Diaspora.

Like Ashima, Gauri too gives birth in an unknown place, married to an austere intellectual Indian. Both are without friends, family or a support network that new families need. Both women lead compelling lives amidst the challenges of Diasporic life. Both are governed by the choices they make. Without rhetoric or circumlocution both women's journey into Diaspora, exposes the transmigrants journey across the unknown and conquering the unknown. The lives of both these women are tied in fantastic knots which they are forced to live with and to untangle in Diaspora.

This paper interrogates the traditional and existential forces that govern the outcome of both women's lives.

Index Terms - Diaspora, existentialism, traditionalism, displacement, belonging.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature portrays different issues of society. Feminist literature is loyal to the cause of women and their role

in society. In Diasporic Literature the study of women empowerment offers new avenues for interrogation. In context to this challenging study, Lahiri's portrayal of Gauri in *The Lowland* and Ashima in *The Namesake* are worthy of interrogation. Both women have grown in India, married to Indians and migrated to America. Both women have completely contrasting trajectories.

II. GAURI AND HER EXISTENTIAL PURSUITS

When Simon De Beauvoir published her polemic *The Second Sex*, little did she know that with this work she would be considered the mother of post 1960s feminism. Her dedication to feminism was her outcry against the French society treatment of unmarried mothers. Gauri though married but a widowed young mother, left at the mercy of her in-laws. Her existentialism would be championed by Simone de Beauvoir fans.

Both are governed by a love for philosophy. Both refuse to settle into a married life. They could not be contained within the restrictions society ordained for them. Gauri embodies freedom and unpredictability. Gauri's temperament and intellect drives her away from the conventional and embrace the freedom in America.

Lahiri through the portrayal of Gauri has unjudgementally let the reader decide their opinion of Gauri. The choices made by Gauri and the turn her life takes are not easy to comprehend.

Gauri's past plays a major role in the path she chooses. Her lack of family life as a child hinders her as an adult. It is not surprising that Gauri fell in love with Udayan. Udayan was ferociously loyal to the radical Naxalites, who opposed Gandhiji nonviolence and embraced violence. Though young they were ready to combat the country's poverty.

Gauri sensed a wildness and rebellion in Udayan. Gauri's love for Udayan is an idealized love. They

both share a love for daring, recklessness, high intellect and love for books. Both are driven by restless forces. Gauri was different and her in-laws could sense her dissatisfaction and incompleteness. She was never accepted by them. Would this couple have a fulfilling married life? The reader would never know the answer due to Udayan's premature death. Gauri and Udayan are both radicals and misplaced in the conservative Bengali society.

Shubash, with his sense of justice and integrity, was ready to give her a new opportunity in a new land. Gauri embraces this opportunity to leave the past, her failed marriage and her memories behind. She marries Shubash and departs on a journey to a new life. The reader does know that this fragile marriage would never withstand the challenges in Diaspora. She is unable to provide a stable family life to Shubash or her daughter Bela.

Leaving India, Gauri's uncontainability becomes profound in America. She is not able to sustain her traditional role of an Indian mother and wife. She has a love for books and a career. Quoting the narrator, "Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end" (240, *The Lowland*). Gauri herself realizes her failure to be a good mother and wife. Shockingly, she leaves her home and family, when Subhash and Bela are in India.

As Gauri leaves Shubash and her daughter, she sows the seeds of insecurity in Bela's life. Bela takes time to reconcile herself to her mother's flight and the true circumstances of her birth. Though she is able to connect with the truth of her past and her roots, she is not able to condone or connect with Gauri. Gauri was able to lead the life she wanted but lost her daughter in the process. Even the birth of her own daughter, could not make Bela accept the abandonment her biological mother subjected her to.

At the end of the novel the reader wonders if Gauri has been able to rise above the felling of Nationality, tradition and belonging.

III. ASHIMA THE TRADITIONALIST

Like Gauri, Ashima too gives birth in an unknown place, married to an austere intellectual Indian. Both are without friends, family or a support network, that new families need. But while Gauri abandoned her husband and daughter to pursue her own dreams, Ashima lived to fulfil her husband's and then her

children's dreams. She is a pillar of strength, always, for her family. While her children grew and discovered themselves, Ashima always was a silent support. The country she has migrated to, is not able to influence her native consciousness.

No non-Indian woman nor male could have created these characters. But Lahiri with her Indian sensitivity and Diasporic perception has ably sketched the journey of these Indian women in Diaspora. Ashima would be considered by many fortunate given the chance to pursue the American dream, but Ashima is the support for her husband and kids to successfully embrace the American dream.

Ashima and Ashok represent the first-generation migrants, while Gogol represents the second-generation migrants. Tracing the journeys of Ashima, Ashok and Gogol, brings to question various issues of the first and second generation of Indian migrants

Jumpha Lahiri hones in on Ashima's dilemma of child birth in an alien land for the opening of this Diasporic saga. A nameless Gogol is present too. But only to emphasize his mother's loneliness during her labour. In her child birth bed when she cries out in labour pain, "No one hears her, no nurse rushes to her side" (4, *The Namesake*)

Though she is assured she is going to have a normal delivery, "nothing feels normal to Ashima" (5) She knows she will survive the pain. "It's the consequence: mother hood in a foreign land... But she 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" (6)

The Indian woman's resilience and ability to create life cannot be doubted. "Throughout the experience [pregnancy], in spite of her growing discomfort, she'd been astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great grandmothers had done" (6)

Without rhetoric or circumlocution Ashima's journey into Diaspora, exposes the trans-migrant's journey across the unknown and conquering the unknown. Ashima's life is a product of Indian tradition, where a woman is tied in fantastic knots which she is forced to live with / to untangle in Diaspora. The moment she is able to relax she is thrown into a new experience. She has to overcome unending hurdles. "It is an on-going responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life

had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding” (50)

Un-surprisingly the novel begins with introducing a pregnant Ashima in her Central Square apartment in....., concocting ‘a humble approximation’ (1) of her usual snack enjoyed on the sidewalks in Calcutta. Here the author again through the bhel snack, is foregrounding her alienation from home and her craving for anything native. “Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing [bhel] she craves.” We all know pregnancy is a time of illogical craving for women, so how can we explain the logical craving for home together with the illogical hormonal cravings?? – In short Ashima has gone through an unexplainable torture.

But like all Indian women of that generation she knows she has to overcome her own longings and be the perfect wife and mother.

Surprisingly, both novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* establish Lahiri as a stalwart in Diasporic narrative. In both the novel she adeptly explores the concepts of identity versus cultural transformations, rootlessness versus homing instincts (setting up home), tradition versus Americanism, liberalism versus Bengali familial expectations etcetera.

III. CONCLUSION

While addressing various issues Jumpha Lahiri more that adroitly captures the joie de vivre of a Bengali migrant. Like a social chronicler she eloquently spins a migrant saga encompassing two generations. Both novels portray the quintessential Bengali family, unsuspectingly set adrift in the Diasporic Wilderness (Selma Carvaloh), with each character trying to comprehend the various twists and turns in their migrant trajectory.

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