

“Family” in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*: A Gendered Perspective

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Abstract

The concept of family is deeply associated with South Asian cultural ethos. Yet, with the arrival of the British in Bengal in the later decades of the eighteenth century the concept of the family began to change. The new class of the Bengali élite began to be influenced by the Victorian moral principles and feudal patriarchy notions of family and womanhood. Governed by the sense of “high” morality, these elite men vouched for a kind of woman who could provide them with marital bliss and a good family life. Jhumpa Lahiri, I argue, constructs a perfect middle-class woman called Ashima in her acclaimed novel ‘The Namesake’ (2003) to comment upon the manner in which Bengal reforms and subsequent nationalist phase have shaped a class of Bengali women that remains ingrained to the idea of marriage and domesticity.

Keywords: family, South Asia, woman, nation, politics

Introduction

The concept of family is deeply associated with the South Asian cultural ethos. Family as a basic unit of society has influenced the lives of people of this region for generations (Kapadia 1966). The idea of collectivism and of living together in cultural harmony is common in many parts of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. This idea of family (barring some areas) is, however, patrifocal and patrilinear.² The concept of joint family assigns the traditional tasks of nurturing a family to a woman. In this set up, a woman is expected to sacrifice her desires and retrain her sexuality in order to create an idea of an ideal home. Towards the beginning of the nineteenth-century, the social elites of the period, though began to envision a new concept of family. The cross

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² Usually the concept of joint families prevails in India, Pakistan and other nations of the region. In this set up man and woman live with their entire family members and even extended family members in a close compact shared space.

cultural contact with the British particularly led to the rise of the concept of the nuclear family where man and his wife shared closed knit relationship bereft of any seclusion.³ Pointing at the status of woman in an extended family *bhadralok* men set out to devise new roles for the woman in the society. Growing nationalism in Bengal, too, contributed to this change. Partha Chatterjee argues that the discourse of nationalism constructed a dichotomy between an inner and an outer world in the later decades of the nineteenth century (1989: 239). The outer one was material whereas the inner one (the home) came to be identified with the spiritual realm of the self. For the nationalists, therefore, the outer world, governed by the British, was contaminated while the home remained something internal, a space that they could still claim as their own. The woman was integral to that space, thus, she alone stood to signify the veracity of the Indian/Bengali culture and tradition. Such representation of the feminine, however, has led to the creation of a new type of patriarchy that allowed women certain liberties which were nevertheless confined to their gendered role of nurturing the family.

Some of the writings produced during this period too confirmed to the representation of woman as asexual, self-sacrificing individual. Analysing the journals devoted to the Muslim woman published during the early twentieth century, Rekha Pande, K. C. Bindu and Viqar Atiya rightly conclude that these writings, along with social institutions such as “the family” have been continuously enforcing the concept of “the good woman”. “The good woman”, as she was portrayed in the literature/fiction/journals of the time, “was supposed to be educated in affairs to do with home, her children’ (Pande, Bindu, and Viqay, 2007: 150).

In many ways, Lahiri, too, I argue, continues this tradition of portraying “the good woman” in her acclaimed novel *The Namesake* (2007). The paper highlights the making of the perfect middle-class Bengali women in Ashima and how this making is complicated by the act of migration. How a journey does impact the life of an ordinary Bengali woman? Also, I will examine the novel as to show that how the concept of womanhood is centrally linked to the idea of family in South Asia and how

³ Some societies in India are matriarchal.

this has changed with cross-cultural encounters and transnational experiences.

1. Woman and Family in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

With the establishment of Bengal as the centre of British Colonialism in India, in 1757 the lives of thousands of people belonging to the Bengali community began to change. The establishment of the Hindoo College (now Presidency University) led to the creation of a new Bengali élite affected by the British culture and education. Thomas Babington Macaulay's passage of the Bill in favour of the English education in India in 1837 further contributed to the making the Bengali élite, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste. Also, continuous attacks of Christian missionaries upon the condition of the Hindu woman and upon the condition of lower caste men and women enraged some of the liberal Hindus who began to reform the status of the woman of their society.

The major tasks ahead for these male reformers were the abolishment of *Sati Pratha*, of child marriage, and of polygamy. Many of these reformers, including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, participated effectively in this difficult task. In collaboration with the colonial government, he sought to abolish *Sati pratha* in 1829 (Chatterjee 1989: 233). Later on, in Bengal province, the lead was taken by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Born in 1820 in the Midnapur District of West Bengal, Pundit Vidyasagar was the champion of widow remarriage and girl education. Affected by the condition of his friend's sister, Vidyasagar took on the challenge of changing the society's attitude towards women's seclusion and widowhood (Forbes 1996). In his tract on widow remarriage published in 1855, Vidyasagar boldly argued for the sanctity of widow remarriage, claiming this practice was permissible in *Kali Yuga* ("The Dark Age"). Finally *The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act* was passed in 1856. Apart from widow remarriage, Vidyasagar also campaigned for the abolishment of polygamy rampant in the élite Bengali families of the period. He wrote tracts against this practice in 1871 and 1873. This great man is also particularly known for his efforts to encourage girl education. With the help of the British civil servant J. E. D. Bethune, he was able to set up a school especially for girls in 1849.

From Raja Ram Mohun Roy's crusade against *sati* to Vidyasagar's push to sanction widow remarriage and nullify Kulin polygamy, women

stayed at the centre of the reformist discourse (Chatterjee 1989: 233). The feminist history of Bengal took a turn with the foundation of Victoria girls' school. With the opening of the school and later Bethune College, the image of a traditional woman began to change amid the 1870s. Men who had previously been against the education of women started to send their young daughters to school. A large number of educated men declared their support for the full freedom of women. For example, W. C. Bonerji, the founder of the Indian National Congress, promptly after his arrival from England began teaching his wife, Hemangini Devi. Many of the first generation of educated women started criticizing the long established patriarchal traditions. At the same time, they began to participate in the nationalist movement (Sarkar 1999: 1). Geraldine Forbes argues that "the assimilation of the women within the national politics was an effective strategy as it questioned the British and its civilising mission" (Forbes 1996: 21). In spite of Gandhi's highly dubious gender politics, his emergence as a political leader in the 1920s strengthened the position of women within nationalist politics, and the non-cooperation movement of 1921-22 recorded the large participation of women. The 'Quit India' movement of 1942 also saw a massive outpouring of female support.

Nevertheless, the question of femininity and women's issues during the period remained problematically attached to patriarchal conventions. For example, Sumit Sarkar has contended that the Bengali middle-class idea of the liberation drew upon the English education and modernity, yet tenaciously clung to the patriarchal notions of traditional society (Sarkar 1985: 165). Many nationalist reformers, for example, Keshab Chandra Sen, contended for less difficult subjects for women. They considered subjects like Geometry and Philosophy as "masculine" subjects. In 1878, Dwarkanath Tagore proclaimed that "we are not against female education...we believe women should read only those books that will help them to become better wives and a better mother" (Murshid 1983: 154-55). Earlier in 1872, the magazine *Tattvabodhini Patrika* had vouched for a "natural division of labour", by which men work outside while the women stay within the home (Sarkar 1985: 165). Henceforth, from multiple points of view, contends Partha Chatterjee, this was another type of patriarchy (Chatterjee 1989: 622-33). In this new social framework, women were trained, ordered and socially made "better" than traditional women who were viewed as coarse, loud and vulgar. Thus, much debated women reform movement in the early nineteenth century Bengal was not a

movement to liberate women, but rather part of the patriarchal project to modernise men's world.

The nationalist politics of the early twentieth century embarked on a similar narrow view of femininity. In spite of the boost that Mahatma Gandhi's encouragement had given to the participation of women within the nationalist movement, his response towards 'the woman question' was yet parochial and conservative (Chatterjee 1989: 237). With the arrival of Gandhi in 1915, the women's participation in the national movement gained momentum. Women participated in huge numbers in the non-cooperation movement (1929) and the subsequent Quit India movement (1942) led by Gandhi and his co-workers. A large number of feminist organizations were made to fight the issues relating to women's cause. Still, in early twentieth century women were denied sexual freedom and were encouraged to lead a life of restraint. Reform as well as later nationalist movement, thus, constructed a pervert model of Indian femininity and were aimed at controlling a woman's body. While meeting women social workers, Gandhi often reiterated that 'India needed women leaders who were pure, firm and self-controlled like the ancient heroines: Sita, Draupadi, and Danyanti' (Gandhi, M. K, 1954: 4-5). As an example, during his stay in prison from 1922-28, Gandhi held meetings with women's social groups to emphasise the traditional image of Sita as a perfect wife (Gandhi, M. K., 1927: 148). Such participation, therefore, did not liberate women from the inner household but rather promoted a traditional ideology wherein female sexuality was legitimately embodied only in marriage, wifehood, motherhood, domesticity—all forms of controlling women's bodies (Katrak, Ketu H, 1997: 395).

Jhumpa Lahiri, in her novel *The Namesake*, constructs the image of a perfect Indian/Bengali woman in Ashima, but as I argue, this construction is further complicated by the experiences of travel and migration. The novel travels between India and America, tracing the manner in which the concept of family changes with time. Lahiri treats the concept of family with dramatic irony, intelligently discovering the changing landscape.

2. Woman, Family and Migration

Jhumpa Lahiri's famous novel *The Namesake* was first published in 2003 in *The New Yorker*. It revolves around the Ganguly family and describes the various ways a Bengal couple, Ashoke and Ashima, create

their own space in a land (USA) foreign to them. The novel captures the emotions of the immigrants who migrate from one part of the world to another in search of a better life and opportunities. The practice of migration for better opportunity from India to Britain and other parts of the world began with the cross cultural contact with the British. Also, the mass migration of the peasants to other British colonies led to the settlement of Indian Diaspora in these lands. As a consequence, a number of travel narratives, most notably Dean Mohammad's *The Travels of Dean Mohammed* (1794), have appeared in English. While the early accounts of travel glorify colonial experience, the travel narratives of young Indians who went to West to educate themselves in the nineteenth century and later became nationalist throw light on the complexity of the journey. Javed Majeed, in his *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity* (2007), rightly argues that the travel experiences of Gandhi, Nehru, and Iqbal show a departure from their predecessors as they 'form a counter-discourse to colonial ethnology's fixing of the "native"' (Majeed, Javed, 2007:80).

Lahiri focuses in this particular novel on the hardships of migration. If examined from the point of view of Ashima, the journey becomes more complex. It is now not just a travel, but a metaphor of loss that echoes within self, reminding Ashima often that something is missing. Ashima being a traditional Bengali/Indian woman is prone to facing many difficulties when she follows her husband to the U.S.A. Unlike his wife, Ashoke has a career, a distinct identity of his own, unrestricted by the limits of the private space. In the opening pages of the novel the writer beautifully captures the emotional anxiety of a diasporic woman settled in a foreign land. In an episode where Ashima is "astonished by her body's ability to make life" (6), the author purposefully explains the difficulties of migration. Ashima finds it strange to give birth to a child "so far away from home"; one thing that troubles her the most is the idea of raising her child in a land "where she is related to no one" (Lahiri, Jhumpa, 2003, 6). The act of transition, therefore, when viewed from a gendered perspective throws up a new insight onto the novel, allowing us to peep into the diasporic Indian feminine space that remains incognito with changing landscapes.

In Calcutta, Ashima had a good childhood. Before her marriage, she was eagerly trying to get a college degree. Apart from her studies, she also used to tutor school children in their homes, helping them to "memorize Tennyson and Wordsworth" (9). It was only after she had come back from tutoring that her mother announced the arrival of Ashoke Ganguly for

marriage. She was then only nineteen and 'in no rush to be bride', but being an obedient Bengali daughter she had gone to her room and dressed herself up for her new journey. Until then she had been rejected by two men: one a widower, another one a cartoonist. Surprisingly, the rejections had brought a sense of relief, but soon she met Ashoke and, in a few weeks, the landscape of her entire life changes. Before her marriage, she had never been to Boston, neither did she know that her husband-to-be was pursuing a PhD programme there; still, courageously, she decides to marry and follow Ashoke in America, satisfied at the thought he will "be there" (9).

After marriage, she slowly starts understanding her husband. In her very first letter to her mother, she narrates her love for Ashoke. The letter shows the beginning of a new companionship. Ashima, though, is unable to forget her life in India. She earnestly clings on to her past. Holding *Desh*, a popular Bengali magazine, she travels from Calcutta to Boston. While giving birth to her first child, it is this magazine that makes up for the absence of her mother and father.

In time, Ashima and Ashoke's lives in New England gradually swell with other Bengali families, but their loved ones are now slowly receding into the dark avenues of the past. Many of them die; those who used to call them by their *dak* (pet) name are now no more. The family members who are alive are almost invisible, "impossible to touch" (63).

Even if physically distanced from her original family, Ashima weaves a perfect Bengali/Indian world for her children. They are taken to Apu Trilogy plays at the Orson Welles, Kathakali dance performances and sitar recitals at the Memorial Hall. When her only son, Gogol Ganguly is in the third grade, he is sent to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday. Nevertheless, Gogol and his little sister Sonia, are not able to connect to both Indian and American cultural tradition simultaneously. In the beginning, Gogol enjoys these cultural excursions but he slowly begins to question his identity, being awry even of his name. Unlike her son/children, Ashima remains attached to her past.

While giving an account of Ramabai Ranade's participation in the national movement, Dipesh Chakravarty shows the construction of a "truly modest", "truly educated", "truly Indian" woman in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Chakravathy, Dipesh, 1997: 236-37). He argues that the idea of Indian womanhood was inevitably attached to the idea of the nation, namely of India. Lahiri herself identifies Ashima with India/Bengal. The protagonist holds her family together and makes her son memorize

Tagore's poems. She organises large parties exclusively of Bengali families in order to recreate an ambiance of Bengal. In a fit of nostalgia, she tries hard to make her children feel the essence of Bengal. She narrates her childhood memories of the Durga Puja and the importance of the festival.

Ashima, is unable to form a bridge the gap between Indian and American cultural tradition. She finds it difficult to assimilate herself in the newly discovered territory. Ashima's resistance to change in the new country is visible when Gogol decides to marry his American girlfriend. When the relationship ends and Gogol marries a Bengali/Indian girl chosen by her mother, but as this official relationship could not hold on and the divorce had to be pronounced, Ashima realises her delusion regarding her choice of bride for Gogol Maushomi, her daughter-in-law, is unable to be the perfect wife that Ashima expected. A modern woman, educated in Western Europe, the young woman is reluctant to change her surtitle from Mazumdar to Ganguli. In her attempt to weave in an Indian/Bengali family, Ashima, thus, turns out to be regressive.

3. Conclusion

Bengal reforms initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his colleagues had a deep influence on the behaviour of *bhadralok* Bengalis.⁴ However, as discussed above, these reformers "viewed women as their subjects—to be changed as a consequence of persuasive arguments, social action, education, and legislation" (Forbes 1996: 28). Women themselves seldom participated in this act of emancipation. These reformers to some extent, though, contributed to the increase of Indian women's literacy, but as Geraldine Forbes argues, "they were unwilling to relinquish the power of the patriarch or redistribute wealth" (1996: 28). Reformers devoted women to the ideals of home and family. In a way, they refashioned patriarchy. Ashima, I argue, is the product of this social change. She is strong enough to endure the hardships of immigration, but at the same time she refuses to assimilate herself in this new world.

⁴ Bhadrakok are the class of Bengali elites who were considered civilized by the British.

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