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PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

Tracing the diaspora through Jhumpa Lahiri's Ashima and Gauri

Joie Bose

For being a foreigner Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy -- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been an ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same

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curiosity of from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.”

— *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri

‘Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings. The promise that she would find things where she put them, that there would be no interruption, no surprise. It greeted her at the end of each day and lay still with her at night.’

— *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri’s Ashima of *The Namesake*(2003) and Gauri of *The Lowland*(2013) have a decade in between them. The women grow and mature and present concerns a bit different in nature. Ashima is learning to acknowledge the problems, Gauri is seen trying to deal with them. It is pertinent to analyse these two women in the purview of their similarities and differences to understand pertinent issues revolving around the term ‘diaspora’.

Geweke considers Robin Cohen’s expansion of William Safrans definition of the term Diaspora and lists the basic criteria for qualifying as Diasporic to be, “the following features: forced or unforced dispersal from an original homeland; retention of a collective memory or myth about the ancestral home, which is idealized and to which the diasporic subject may wish to return; a distinct ethnic group consciousness and sense of solidarity with co-ethnic communities in other places, most often coupled with a troubled relationship to the host society.” The word ‘diaspora’ the Oxford dictionary reveals, has its roots in Greek, from *diaspeirein* meaning ‘disperse’, from *dia*, which means ‘across’ and *speirein*, which means to ‘scatter’. The term originated in the Septuagint, the most ancient translation of the Old Testament, in the phrase ‘thou shalt be a dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth’. In the present context the term brings forth to the mind

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not the ancient Jewish, Greek or Armenian diasporas but what we understand by “new diasporas” which Gewecke locates as those “resulting from the mid-20th century decolonization process and the ensuing postcolonial migrations” which in the wake of proliferation of globalization and contemporaneous mass migration could be deliberated as, quoting Tololyan, “the exemplary communities of the transnational movement.” (Tololyan, 5) The Diasporic space an important component of any Diaspora, is that space where the people set up their livelihood after leaving their homeland. The essential characteristic is that the place of domicile of the people is changed and we find the people engaging in a silent battle to sustain their cultural identity in an alien land as the host country's ethos gets thrust upon them.

The postcolonial literature happened to be a cultural upshot of the political decolonization of the colonies which were once ruled by the colonizers. In the literary sphere it is thus a space that “covers the gap between political self-rule and cultural autonomy.” (Patke, 5) In a similar manner the literature of a Diaspora came into existence following a mass exodus of people from their homeland to an alien country either by force or by choice where they find themselves subject to constant negotiations.

Taking off from Antonio Gramsci's declaration of calling the subjected underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerts its hegemonic influence as ‘subaltern’, Spivak developed it as a term applicable to the colonized people in the imperial narrative which extends to in this case, to the narrative of the diasporic Indian as well, for their violent history of colonization and subjugation has rendered in their minds an understanding of racial discrimination which the Diasporic Indian accepts twice over.

Stuart Hall takes into consideration this aspect of the Diasporic identity and defines it as “those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.”(Hall, 235) He speaks of two kinds of identity, identity as being (which offers a sense of unity and commonality) and identity as becoming (a process of identification which shows the discontinuity in our identity formation) and associates the Diasporic identity with the latter. Bhaba writes, “The theoretical recognition of the split space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*.” (Bhaba, 38) It is in this space that the people of the Diaspora make cosmetic changes such as the changes in name and attire to comply with the host societies norms and customs whereas at heart they long for their native land. They try their best to be dedicated to both the societies and according to Kivisto, are at a phase where they “manage to live at some level in two worlds at once, their homeland and their immigrant destination... increasingly attempt to define their identities in terms of both their points of origin and their destination. They are prepared to participate in social, political, and cultural life in both the host society and the sending state.” (Kivisto, 37-39) But this is somewhat superficial for at the next phase their heart, quoting Radhakrishnan, “refuses to subsume political, civil and moral revolutions under mere strategies of economic betterment. In a call for total revolution immigrants reassert ethnicity in all its autonomy.” (Radhakrishnan, 121) This leads to a third phase where they try to find a solution to culture-clashes and propagate “the hyphenated integration of ethnic identity with national identity under conditions that do not privilege the ‘national’ at the expense of the ‘ethnic’.” (121) Radhakrishnan further talks about this change and categorizes them in two groups, ‘change as default’ and ‘change as conscious’. These three phases of cataloguing the Diasporic identity

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echoes the three phases of classifying the postcolonial identity as suggested by Frantz Fanon which Boehmer explains as a process that sanctions “the process of violently seizing freedom, and asserting political power, the native intellectual learns to re-exercise agency and retrieve a self-hood that was damaged under colonial oppression” (Boehmer, 345). Thus overcoming the problem of being the subjugated minority becomes a more so for the Diasporic Indian who originates from a postcolonial setup and gradually increases in degree once the female is considered for India is largely a patriarchal society. Jeanette Garner comments that the portrayal of women has always been one where she is seen as “passive, conforming, self-subordinating and less competent than men”. They have said that despite the pro-feminist attitude they confirm to norms, drawing from Franzwa's research, where fictional portrayal of women “continued to reinforce traditional norms and attitudes about the proper role for women.” They go on to say that this happens since fiction mirrors societal change rather than cause it and this is why it becomes necessary to analyze both the texts.

Ashima's pang for leaving her home is expressed through her imaginings of Calcutta and home culture and strains of melancholy and nostalgia are felt at every stage of her life. She writes that during childbirth, “...women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws....” (Lahiri, 2003, p 4) and “...it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still...” (Lahiri, 2003, p 6). For her the English language and culture is seen as uncomfortable and in everything Bengali she seeks solace- while grasping a tattered copy of a Bengali magazine or in trying to acquaint her son with the works of Satyajit Ray or in retaining the wearing of the sari or preferring the consumption of rice, *dal* and *samosa*. She is found saying, “I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It is not right. I want to go back.” (Lahiri, 2003, p 33)

Gauri too has melancholia, but it is of a different degree. More than accepting her nostalgia she rejects it. During Gauri's first personal interaction with a fellow American student who was wearing "a skirt that stopped at her knees" which was in stark contrast to "the yards of silk material that Gauri wrapped and pleated and tucked every morning into a petticoat" the very same "sari's she'd worn since she stopped wearing frocks, at fifteen", (Lahiri, 134) the girl had said to Gauri "I like your outfit" before walking away which had made Gauri feel "ungainly" and she "began to want to look like the other women she noticed on campus". A few days later her husband had found a pair of scissors with "clumps of her hair" and all her clothes "in ribbons and scraps of various shapes" for she "had destroyed everything." (Lahiri,141) Gauri then appeared "wearing slacks and a gray sweater" with her hair hung "bluntly along her jawbone". During interrogation she had replied that she had become "tired of those". But it is interesting to note that she could never really be a part. Lahiri writes, "And yet she remained, in spite of her Western Clothes, her Western academic interests, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and against the backdrop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had wed."(Lahiri, 236) She had been once mistaken "for the person paid to open another person's door"

Freud states that 'distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance and self reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.' (Freud, 244) Melancholia can thus be spotted in the actions and reactions of both Ashima and Gauri, as they let their marriages disintegrate in front of their own eyes, as they begin to live almost solitary lives

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isolated from what is happening outside and in a sense almost deserting their families which in fact Gauri does eventually. Ashima learnt to live a life of loneliness but her husband and son were always a part of it, she didn't completely reject them. Gauri on the other hand totally cut off herself from her husband and daughter and shielded herself from any meaningful relationships save for the random fling she had with a woman. Though Gauri had always been a little aloof in nature, different from the family she could never reject the family when she was in India. America gave her a newfound sense of freedom where she did whatever she could. Perhaps Carol Gilligan could help her out of her confused state with her observation,

Within the context of US society, the values of separation, independence, and autonomy are so historically grounded, so reinforced by waves of immigration, and so deeply rooted in the natural rights that they are often taken as facts: that people are by nature separate, independent from one another, and self-governing. To call these "facts" into question is seemingly to question the value of freedom. And yet this is not at all the case. The questioning of separation has nothing to do with questioning freedom but rather with seeing and speaking about relationships. (Gilligan, xiv-xv)

Relationships which ultimately govern the lives of Ashima and Gauri gain lesser importance and the loss of them is what governs their psyche. What Ashima couldn't do, Gauri ends up doing ten years later. But the concern is what would happen ten years further down the lane? Gauri attempts to end her life, commit suicide, but doesn't. Would she actually take her life, ten years from then? Or would the scenario change in the next ten years?

The problem with the diaspora, as is with any marginalized community within the purview of a dominant community, is caused by a difference that is generated due to the ethnocentric attitudes

of each culturally different group. This difference causes a lot of grief and melancholy. In this case it would be pertinent to conceptualize a solution for it. In this case the direct binary opposite of the difference which can be considered as the root cause of the melancholia, would be, assimilation.

When we speak of assimilation in the 21st century, we can't escape the terms such as globalization and cosmopolitan for they are terms as pertinent to a diaspora, as the term diaspora itself. While multiculturalism and transculturalism can be thought of as possible attitudes that will help assimilation, where there will exist an utopian global village I propose to investigate this assimilation in terms of two chief concepts- diaspora and cosmopolitanism. As discussed above, diaspora is generated from the terms '*dia*' and *speirein* meaning across and scatter, respectively; whereas the term cosmopolitan is derived from the term '*cosmopolis*', which is generated from 'cosmos' and 'polis' meaning 'universe' and 'state' respectively, implying a big city inhabited by people of different cultures and habits. The present ideal state where assimilation can occur would then be, a space where one understands that the universe is a space without any boundaries, it should be so free that people from all across the world can exist anywhere in the universe, without any hesitation or problems, where acceptance and acknowledgement of diversities is the key. To explain this I would like to coin the term, 'cosmodia', which would be an amalgamation of the term 'cosmos' and 'dia', which would imply that the universe would be a space that includes people from all over in an all inclusive manner without any conditions. The people of the 'cosmodia' should uphold and promote what Iain and Alistair identifies as an idea that "all human beings share a capacity for reason and are therefore, by nature, members of a universal community"(Iain and Alistair, 123) Delanty observes that 'Cosmopolitan' can mean anything from an attitude or value, to a regime of

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international governance, or a set of epistemological assumptions about the nature of social structures. This multiplicity of inquiry highlights the promise and excitement around the concept and its genuine potential as a developmental, self-problematising set of relations, but it also highlights the concept's limits as an analytic device for sociological inquiry. In his reading, there are three main skeins in the literature on cosmopolitanism, emphasizing institutional, political or cultural dimensions. My term here, 'cosmodia' would be all accepting and would essentially be a space, a location which should be all accommodating. It would be a world which consists of what Higgot calls, 'Super territoriality' while including in it Kant's conception of 'universal citizenship'. This broad concept will help, I feel, in building a ground where true assimilation can occur and people can move from living in a cultural ghetto to being truly global and accepting where the concept of diaspora which actually highlights differences would cease to exist. It would actually lead to a world which shall not be characterized by diasporic melancholia which aids concepts such as suicide. However this is rather utopian in nature though not totally impossible for end of the day, the aim is to create a homogenous world where diversity is well respected. However, Beck has argued that the 'world state' concept is not acceptable since it may propagate hegemonic world order, but I would like to argue that in what I conceive as 'cosmodia', the concept of a political state is not there, it is a neutral space and hence all accepting. Existing in a 'cosmodia' Gauri, would not feel isolated, nor would Ashima, for here differences would be an accepted feature. A Gauri would not get suicidal tendencies here either.

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About the Author: Joie Bose, Teaching Assistant & Research Scholar, Techno India University.