

Reconciling Identities: The Diasporic Bengali Woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Reshmi Lahiri-Roy

Avtar Brah writes, 'At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey.'¹ It is this journey that leads to the translation of the persona into the immigrant self. It is a journey that lies at the heart of Jhumpa Lahiri's book *The Namesake*, set in the United States of America in the late 1960s and covering the lives of the Ganguly family over three decades. This paper focuses on the three Bengali women from two generations, Ashima Ganguly, who arrives in USA as a new bride in the winter of 1967; her daughter-in-law Moushumi and Sonia, Ashima's daughter and American-born second child. The paper explores the transitive processes shaping the identities of these three Bengali women living different versions of life in the diaspora. James Clifford observes that diasporas 'follow and express distinct maps/histories – linking first and third worlds ... national or transnational margins or centers.'² (Clifford in Okamura 1998: 121) Lahiri's migrant women, whose origins lie in the third world, are placed by her on the periphery of the first world; as is most visibly observed in case of Ashima. Moushumi appears to be seeking a centrality in the first world which eludes her, as she is constantly renegotiating her identity within the paradigms of her conflicted personal history. Only in Sonia, Lahiri's American born 'not confused' diasporic protagonist does the reader observe the diasporic identity shifting into a transnational centre at the heart of the host nation.

Ashima personifies what Brah terms 'the homing desire of the migrant'.³ The novel commences with the writer portraying Ashima as a 'reluctant migrant' of 'fixed origins'.⁴ (ibid). Ashima's initial hostile reaction to her host country is rooted in the culturally discursive alienation that is a quotidian experience of her life in America. A Hindu Bengali middle class woman would not have experienced any sense of assimilation or belonging in urban middle class Massachusetts in the late 1960s. The white-collar Asian minority living in 1960s USA, although highly educated and labelled as 'model', faced severe disadvantages as documented by several scholars.⁵ For a sheltered, middle class young woman like Ashima, with very limited exposure outside the Bengali socio-cultural discourse, a sense of exile would be predominant. The need for constant translation in her daily existence, within an environment where cultural connectivity cannot be accessed, is a process that often leaves Ashima floundering, in the initial stages of her migrant sojourn. Such a feeling of 'foreignness' is further aggravated as she conceives her child on this alien soil. The transformation in her body mirrors the transformations she experiences at an emotional and socio-cultural level:

¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996) 180.

² James Clifford, *Sites of Crossing: Borders and Diasporas in Late 20th Century Expressive Culture*. The Seeger Lecture. Society for Ethnomusicology, Seattle, WA. October 24 cited in Jonathan Y. Okamura, *Imagining the Filipino American Diaspora: transnational relations, identities, and communities* (New York: Garland Publishers) 1998.

³ Brah 180.

⁴ Brah 180.

⁵ See Bandana Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World* (New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Rutgers University Press, 2005)

Reconciling Identities: The Diasporic Bengali Woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Reshmi Lahiri-Roy.

Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 2, May 2015.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realise, 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 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 curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.⁶

In using the term translation with regard to the three female protagonists in Lahiri's narrative, I refer to Rudiger and Gross's definition of translation as 'a wider term covering the interaction of cultures, the transfer of cultural experience, the concern with cultural borders, the articulation of liminal experience, and intercultural understanding.'⁷ But Ashima's is a tale of resistance. She later admits it to herself, pondering over 'the life she had resisted for so long' (NS 280) as she is about to move on to inhabit yet another space outside the structures she has occupied for three decades. In this new journey, she is unaccompanied by Ashok as she had been when she had first come to America as a new bride on her own, boarding a plane for the first time in her life, to join her waiting husband in a foreign space. But at the end of the first journey, Ashima strongly resists the transformation of the cultural identity within which she has been nurtured all her life. She adjusts over the years by recreating Calcutta in the social space of her life in a New England town. The concession made by her over the years as a migrant is the renegotiation and translation of her gendered Bengali middle-class identity into a gendered middle-class Bengali-American one. The translation of her Bengali identity into a Bengali American one takes the form of being a focal point for new Bengali migrants and ensuring that adjustment to American life never translates into assimilation. As Clifford points out, it is selective accommodation, the need to stay and be different simultaneously and in the process identity becomes syncretic.⁸ Ashima enters the narrative as a nineteen year old, Bengali college student about to undergo a traditional bride-viewing. Being a conservatively raised girl from a middle class Bengali family of North Calcutta in the mid-1960s, she does not resist the process. It was an era in which foreign based grooms were widely sought after and as Kalpagam observes 'in the 1960s and 70s, diasporic alliances were settled through personal, kin and friendship networks'.⁹ As a daughter, within a traditional Bengali cultural discourse, Ashima is expected to marry a suitable man chosen by her parents. Her acceptance of the discourse is intermingled with a gentle curiosity. As Ashima tries on the shoes of her prospective groom, Ashok, which she finds placed outside the main door of her parents' apartment and slips them on, 'a pair of men's shoes that were not like any she'd ever seen' (NS 8), the alien look and feel of American-made shoes is immediately discernible to her. As the reader observes, it is not a resigned acceptance of an arranged marriage; Ashima is willing to try new things, albeit slowly and cautiously.

⁶ Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (India: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004) 49-50. Further references to this novel will appear in parentheses in the text prefaced by NS.

⁷ Petra Rudiger and Konrad Gross (eds.), *Translation of Cultures* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009) ix.

⁸ James Clifford, 'Diaspora' *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future. (Aug., 1994), pp. 302-338.

⁹ U. Kalpagam, "'American Varan' Marriages among Tamil Brahmins: Preferences, Strategies and Outcomes', *Marriage, Migration and Gender* edited by Rajni Palriwala and Patricia Uberoi (New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2008) 98.

Vijay Mishra's analysis that 'All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way'¹⁰ provides an insight into the situation of Ashima, the new mother, who after marrying Ashok and moving to cold Massachusetts, longs for family and pleads with Ashok that she does not wish to bring child up alone in a foreign country (NS 32-3). As Mishra observes, Ashima appears to fear a loss,¹¹ a contamination of her cultural history due to interaction with other cultures. But Ashima capitulates when Ashok refuses to return to India, citing the future benefits and inevitable economic progress for their child. Many of the post-1965 generation of white-collar Asian migrants to the USA made the very difficult move due to economic reasons. While they were well-qualified they also sought the economic benefits associated with a move to the USA. In Ashima's reluctant compliance with Ashok's planning, the same rationale is observed. Ashima's alienation is most explicitly detailed by the author in the scenes dealing with the birth of her first child, where the longing for family and familiarity is seen at its most acute. 'Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like almost everything else in America feels somehow haphazard, only half true' (NS 24-5). But it was a situation which several Indian women migrants of that era faced as part of the transformation process which dubbed them 'Asian Americans' and then 'South Asian Americans'. Bakirathi Mani observes, 'to identify as "South Asian" more often than not invokes a post-1965 history of immigration in which South Asians are consistently named the "model minority", immigrating to the United States as skilled professionals' (118).¹² In Lahiri's creation of Ashima, one observes the emotional and psychological costs borne by the women belonging to this group and the conflicts of identity experienced by them. No diaspora is uniform and the group of professional middle class Bengalis who came to USA post-1965 carried their own distinctive socio-cultural discursive hegemonies across nations with them. Nalini Iyer highlights this:

I wish to demonstrate that diasporic works need to be understood within the historical and cultural realities of migration to North America post-1965. I show that reading Indo-American texts solely as Indian literary works leads to critics overlooking the writers' engagement with various literary canons – American, bhasha, postcolonial.¹³

Lahiri's narrative is infused with strong autobiographical elements as is seen in her interview in *The New Yorker*:

Unlike so many immigrant groups, she says of her father and his peers, it wasn't war, famine, persecution or anything like that driving them out. Nothing drove them out: it was a choice. But I think it was a conflicted choice. And it wasn't a particularly romantic choice in the way that friends of mine have moved to Europe, moved to Paris. Just wanting another kind of life - it wasn't that either. It was a combination of hunger for new experiences, perhaps wanting a better quality of life, and furthering one's education. But it

¹⁰ Vijay Mishra, *Literature of the Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 1.

¹¹ Mishra 7.

¹² Bakirathi Mani, 'Undressing the Diaspora' in *South Asian Women in the Diaspora* edited by Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003) 118.

¹³ Nalini Iyer, 'Embattled Canons: The Place of Diasporic Writing in Indian Literature', *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India* edited by Nalini Iyer and Bonnie Zare (Amsterdam, New York, N.Y.: Rodopi, 2009) 6.

was accompanied by a certain sense of misgiving. They were leaving behind their families, essentially for personal gain. So, a hard decision to make.¹⁴

Lahiri's fiction, therefore, outlines Ashima as a diasporic Bengali woman located within a socio-cultural discourse which she never dislocates or misplaces. Ashima's socialising is always within a peer group of other Bengali migrants who are located within a specific class and culture status. 'They all come from Calcutta and for this reason alone they are friends' (NS 38). It is undeniable that the idea of diaspora is an occasion for positive identification for many, providing a powerful sense of transnational belonging and connection with dispersed others of similar historical origins.¹⁵ (Ang 2003)

As Ashima's son Gogol observes, every weekend they visit other Bengali families and this creates the network that Ashima requires. It is a network that substitutes for her family, the people she longs for in a home country. Clifford states that diasporas, being transnational in nature, have 'ways of conceiving community, citizenship and identity as simultaneously here and elsewhere'. (Clifford in Okamura 1998: 122)¹⁶ For Ashima, India, and Calcutta in particular, is very definitely home and her children's identification of America with home disturbs her; for in all her years in America: 'She still does not feel fully at home ... on Pemberton road' (NS 280).

Ashima's almost predetermined life choices shape her identity. It is an identity whose roots lie within a strongly Bengali non-Westernised discourse, which in turn is formed on what Stuart Hall terms 'the exclusion of others' by tightly knit communities.¹⁷ Migrants such as Ashima, validate Hall's analysis of the position of cultural identity,

in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.¹⁸

The reader is left with the impression that Ashima's only concession to the American-South Asian discourses within which her children are located is her reluctance to vocalise her protest against her son Gogol's relationship with Maxine, his American girlfriend. Her later acceptance of her daughter Sonia's relationship with Ben, a mixed race American, can be read empathically, as further translation of her identity as a mother after Ashok's death; signifying her efforts to connect with the discursive socio-cultural and emotional locations of her children. But it can also be subversively viewed as a fostering of a patriliney where the son's wife has to be of the 'right'

¹⁴ Jhumpa Lahiri, 'Trading Stories,' *The New Yorker* 7 June 2011.

<http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/06/13/110613fa_fact_lahiri> Accessed August 2014.

¹⁵ Ien Ang, 'Together-in-difference: Beyond Diaspora, into Hybridity', *Asian Studies Review*, 27.2 (2003) 141-154.

¹⁶ Clifford in Okamura.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.' *Culture, Globalisation and the World System* edited by A. King. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991)

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 223.

Reconciling Identities: The Diasporic Bengali Woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Reshmi Lahiri-Roy.

Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 2, May 2015.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

origin, not so much the daughter's husband. As Gwendolyn Foster observes, 'the term translation is rife with signifiers ... Identity is also a form of translation ... from who one is to who one is perceived to be.'¹⁹ When Ashima reconciles herself to Sonia's relationship with Ben, who is half Jewish, half Chinese, there is something almost wistful in her musings on the younger generation's ability to seek personal happiness without being overwhelmed by the pressures of socio-cultural hegemonies and refusal to prioritise family desires above all else. Ashima appears to be admiring their unwillingness to accept 'something less than their ideal of happiness' (NS 276).

In Lahiri's work the extended family acts as a point of rootedness and not so much of discord. Lahiri's skill lies in keeping the extended family peripheral yet visible in almost every scene. To Ashima, America is always a place that has 'hosted' her; albeit a hosting that was neither reluctant nor hostile, perhaps indifferent to some extent. Ashima's identity is created and renegotiated within the choices made for her by family, by husband and later by his death. 'A lifetime in a fist' (NS 279), as she ruminates. But Lahiri points out in her interview that Ashima's gentle, preordained existence was the prevalent migrant discourse within temporal space of the narrative. Ashima, therefore, is very much a cultural insider²⁰ within the diasporic Bengali middle class discourse of that era. 'My parents had an arranged marriage, as did so many other people when I was growing up. My father came and had a life in the United States one way and my mother had a different one, and I was very aware of those things' (Chotiner 2008).²¹ Kalpagam's analysis also highlights the place occupied by arranged marriages within the creation of diasporic transnational identities:

The study of evolving community-specific matrimonial strategies in what are generally understood as 'arranged marriages' is not merely interesting in itself, but indeed essential for understanding how *habitus* constructs gendered identities and how diasporic opportunities redefine social status within cultural groups through the acquisition of both symbolic and economic capital.²²

But within the fictional discourse Lahiri also locates Ashima as the migrant whose yearning for the discursive spaces of the home country remain unassuaged for years. As Gogol observes, on their visits to Calcutta, Ashima is a 'bolder, less complicated version of herself' (NS 81). It appears that the conflicted sense of identity and exile in America often blurs the sharp outlines of the essential Ashima. Ashima's initial resistance to the onslaught of diverse discourses that come her way in USA never fully abates. But Ashima succeeds in creating a new discourse for herself as a diasporic woman within a country that is always a host never a home. Her talent for renegotiating her identity is seen in her ability to recreate Calcutta in socio-cultural terms in the little New England town. Ashima's organising of the religious and holiday festivities and reaching out, translates her into symbolic fixture around which a particular section of the

¹⁹ Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997) 102.

²⁰ See James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Authority', *Representation* No. 2, Spring 1983.

²¹ Isaac Chotiner, Jhumpa Lahiri- Interview in *The Atlantic*

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/04/jhumpa-lahiri/306725/>

²² Kalpagam 98.

Bengali diaspora gathered. 'The wives homesick and bewildered turned to Ashima for recipes and advice' (NS 38) as the diasporic community sought familiarity and discursive stability within a home away from home. Ashima has become a pointer for the younger groups of Bengalis, a fixed point in a dangerously bewildering ground where the 'violation of boundaries', according to Min Ha Trinh takes place.²³ She is a constant with her advice for the younger migrant women, who as Amit Shah puts it, face 'the duality of the immigrant reality, the slow dwindling of rootedness, the new avenues and the roadblocks of assimilation and belonging'.²⁴

The dominant identity for Ashima, the one she is comfortable to be fixed in, is that which is defined by her marriage to Ashok. Over the years, Ashima moulds and remoulds herself as wife, as mother, as widow and then a woman alone. Towards the end of the narrative, Ashima's moulding and re-moulding of herself leads her to observe her own face as 'A widow's face ... For most of her life, a wife' (NS 278). This is Ashima's view of herself after Ashok's passing. Ashima has translated herself from the pragmatic young girl who had stoically accepted an arranged marriage with a young academic living abroad to a woman deeply in love with that husband. America can be read as the nurturing site of this translation of an arranged marriage into a love relationship. As she prepares to depart from her present space and newly step into another old space, Ashima muses that 'She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband' (NS 279).

In sharp contrast to Ashima is one whose exile is perhaps never resolved: Gogol's ex-wife Moushumi; a Bengali girl, born in London and brought to America at a young age, longing for Paris, not settling in New York, not comfortable married to a Bengali and loving the Russian Dimitri. Moushumi is the 'twice displaced' migrant child. She rejects her triad of Bengali, British and American identities to embrace a fourth – a European one. Yet from a socio-cultural perspective, such a French identity can be construed as a subversive influence based on her original Bengali identity. Like Russia, France exerted a vivid cultural and ideological influence on the postcolonial Bengali psyche. It could also be construed as an upper middle class British admiration for a supposedly more sophisticated French culture. Like Ashima, she too, rejects USA as a 'host' country. The narrative raises the question of which is Moushumi's 'home' country – England, France or India? As Brah observes "'home" is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination'²⁵ and Moushumi's imagination appears to be still in search of that mythic, perfect home where she can cease her wanderings and 'belong.'

Within the lives of Ashima and Moushumi and the narrative structure itself, the issue of home is a primary one. Moushumi and Ashima both have seamless, borderless existences. Ashima's name itself is used by the author to denote her as ultimately the 'one without borders' (NS 81). Ashima's translations of identity and her final renegotiation of herself as woman comfortable in straddling two worlds evolve over time, using strategies drawn from the strength of discourses within which she locates her own self. She is never over-emphatic on what constitutes her essential identity. This lack of emphasis on part of Ashima is cleverly used by the author as foil for Moushumi's over-emphasis on her French identity; her refusal to be taken as a tourist in

²³ Minh Ha Trinh, 'Outside in Inside Out', *When the Moon Waxes Red: Gender, Representation and Cultural Politics*, revised edition (New York: Routledge, 2014) 75.

²⁴ Amit Shah, 'A Dweller in Two Lands: Mira Nair Filmmaker' *Cineaste* 15.3 (1987) 22-33 in Foster 111.

²⁵ Brah 192.

Paris is also a rejection of America as symbolised by Graham, who had rejected her. In rejecting America, she also rejects her parents' choices for her. It is a rejection especially of the Bengali-American identity of her mother; a woman who 'cannot drive after thirty-two years abroad' (NS 247) yet has an Honours degree in Philosophy from Presidency College. Lahiri's subtle introduction of Presidency College into the narrative locates the work within a Bengali socio-cultural discourse which is very specific in its intellectual assertions. Presidency College as an institution functioned as a focal point of resistance to prevalent political discourses of the time and occupies a vital place in Calcutta's postcolonial narrative. Moushumi's mother's conformity to traditional Bengali discourses sharply negates the historical and political discourses within which her education must have taken place.

Moushumi and Ashima both enter into marriage within their community. But Ashima's marriage to Ashok is not a statement of defiant compliance with or resigned acceptance of a culturally dominant discourse. Ashima's marriage might have commenced as an exercise in curiosity as does Moushumi's with Gogol. Moushumi, always the rebellious cultural outsider, appears almost curious to experience the settled feeling of a culturally accepted marital discourse. But the outcomes of the two marriages in no way mirror each other. Moushumi describes meeting and marrying Gogol as a 'courtship in a fishbowl' (NS 250). But when she is with her lover Dimitri, she can translate her identity into one of anonymity. His apartment where they meet and conduct their illicit affair makes her feel further 'inaccessible, anonymous' away from defining and creating herself as either American or Bengali. A relationship with Dimitri, 'small, balding, unemployed, middle-aged' (NS 264) – in effect, the complete 'cultural outsider' – is her final act in translating her identity into one completely outside the heteronormative discourse of the Bengali-American white collar diaspora. Kate Flaherty acknowledges the 'paradoxical capacity' of Lahiri's novel

to voice the general experience of displacement. Its rather eclectic blend of cultural remnants – Russian, Bengali, American – and its very immediate sensuality, lend palpable force to the typically nebulous experience of heterogeneity. *The Namesake* gives vivid particularity to the sense of being held in perpetual relation to a distant original, of wearing a garment of unknown proportions, of having a name, the imaginative legacy of which, you can never fully inhabit.²⁶

Moushumi's uneasy relationship with her parents, only briefly redeemed by her short marriage to the eligible Bengali bachelor Gogol, does not leave much scope for mutual admiration. But 'one thing about her parents' lives she admires – their ability to turn their backs on their homes' (NS 254). What Moushumi perhaps does not realise is that her parents' choice is as 'conflicted' as her own, in the continual shifting and transcreating of herself between continents.

Bandana Purkayastha comments,

According to South Asian Americans, the notion of a superior culture is based on the superior achievement profiles of this group in the United States. Linking high levels of achievement (in education and occupations) as the outcome of South Asian values – hard

²⁶ Kate Flaherty, 'Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*', *Philament* 5 (December–January 2004/2005) 1. Accessed 6 August 2014. <http://sydney.edu.au/arts/publications/philament/issue5_Commentary_Flaherty.htm>

work and strong families which are tied by strong bonds of love and obligation – South Asian parents place an ‘unusual’ emphasis on getting good grades and building upper-tier careers.²⁷

Purkayastha’s further analyses are also highly relevant in the context of Lahiri’s narrative in helping the reader locate and understand Moushumi’s conflicted and tense relationship with the narrow and highly structured boundaries of her upbringing. Purkayastha’s contention is that ‘immigrants and their children try to integrate by following the educational, occupational, residential patterns of the white middle class’ as one of the many routes to integration and that ‘transnational literature, in many ways, has started to document this process.’²⁸

It is a method of integration that Moushumi has adopted and then renegotiated halfway through her journey as a ‘twice displaced migrant’. Embracing a Francophile identity, Moushumi, in search of a new home, negates both the Bengali and American sections of her identity. With her divorce from Gogol, she places herself completely outside the diasporic upper-middle-class Bengali discourse.

The narrative strongly emphasises issues of belonging and assimilation in the lives of its protagonists. As Ashima is assigned the position of a protagonist without borders by the author, the reader is left cogitating whether the diasporic experience has left Ashima rootless, floating disjointedly in a diasporic vacuum or whether there has been an unconscious translation of Ashima’s deeply rooted Bengali identity into what Trinh calls the ‘doubly exiled, walking the “in-between zones”’²⁹ which can often be experienced by the dislocated, gendered migrant. Ashima thinks of herself as ‘belonging everywhere and nowhere’ (NS 281), but never as ‘American’. In this Ashima strongly mirrors the discourse of the first post-1965 generation of Indian professionals and their wives who came to the US for economic and academic progress and were sure of their transient location within the American cultural discourse. Lahiri’s parents who came to the USA via England in the late 1960s ‘never thought of themselves as American, despite the fact that they applied for and received citizenship.’³⁰

Sonia, Lahiri’s youngest protagonist, functions as a signifier for the smooth transitioning and renegotiating of transnational identities without experiencing excess angst. Brah says, ‘Clearly the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations.’³¹ In Sonia, the reader observes the antithesis of the supposed ‘ABCD’, namely American Born confused Desi (NS 118); a derogatory nomenclature often used for second generation South Asian migrants. Sonia is neither confused nor at any stage worried about her position within the mainstream American discourse or society. Sonia occupies a place of comfort within the narrative structure; maybe as an aspired self for the author herself who has confessed in an interview with Isaac Chotiner that ‘there is sort of a half-way feeling’ of being

²⁷ Purkayastha 91.

²⁸ Purkayastha 176.

²⁹ Trinh 70.

³⁰ ‘Jhumpa Lahiri’s struggle to feel American’ *Morning Edition* 25 November 2008

<<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97418330>> Accessed August 2014

³¹ Brah 194.

American.³² Sonia does not have issues of divided allegiances. The transnational identity of Sonia is quite strongly created by the author almost as an ideal for a Bengali migrant child. As Stuart Hall observes,

Cultural identity, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.³³

Sonia’s life translates easily from that of a typical South Asian American teenager in small town USA to becoming a capable young attorney in Boston. Like her life, her identity negotiation is portrayed as running along a smooth track. In her case ‘bonds of ethnic ties and the fixity of boundaries have been replaced by shifting and fluid identity boundaries ... that alter the ethnic landscape’.³⁴ Unlike Moushumi and Ashima, Sonia as a young girl or adult woman does not struggle with notions of displacement. Her engagement and relationship with Ben, who straddles a half Jewish half Chinese racial identity within mainstream American discourse, can be read as the ultimate translation of the diasporic Bengali, feminine identity. This relationship may be read as translating to one of multicultural assimilation within the cultural melting pot that is the USA or may also be subversively decoded as the unification of two ethnic minorities living on the fringes of white America’s hegemonic discourse. Ben is himself a product of two ethnicities which have deeply felt the pangs of exclusion in USA prior to diasporic assimilation with the passage of time. These people are excluded by white America as ‘racial/cultural outsiders’; this exclusion brings them into what the tightly knit Bengali-American diaspora of the 1960s and 70s would consider as unnatural unions. In her film adaptation of *The Namesake*, Mira Nair portrays Ben as a white American, maybe transcribing this relationship as the reason for Sonia’s inclusion into white mainstream America

Over the years, Sonia has learnt to cook the food she had refused to eat as a child and she and Ashima have ‘developed a surprising companionship’ (NS 279). Both Ashima and Sonia reach out and negotiate newer identities and closer bonds using the bridges provided by the culture embedded in Bengali cuisine. Sonia’s is the face of the diaspora which is not unhappy, but not rooted in cultural traditions either. But the roots of ingrained values and future happiness are very visible in her existence. Moushumi, on the other hand, leaves the reader speculating as to how this particular Anglo-Bengali American Francophile will finally translate herself.

³² ‘Jhumpa Lahiri’s struggle to feel American’ *Morning Edition* 25 November 2008

<<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97418330>> Accessed August 2014

³³ Hall, Cultural Identity 224.

³⁴ Clifford, Sites 18.

Unlike Moushumi's inability to root herself anywhere, Ashima is rooted by her very seamlessness. Ashima, who has yet to feel at home in her house of the last twenty five years, will now return to India 'with an American passport' (NS 270). But for six months every year she will be in America as well, 'slipping from one culture to the next' (NS 279) for the rest of her life. Ashima's is the ultimate story of acceptance with grace after initial resistance and rejection of the new; a translation into understanding, never assimilation. Ashima's character appears to signify the transcreation of a new Bengali-American identity; what Vijay Mishra analyses as 'creative reconstitution of a new hybrid empowering self.'³⁵

The Namesake begins and ends with the journeys undertaken by Ashima Ganguly. Ashima Ganguly née Bhadury arrives on a cold winter's morning in January 1967 to join her young husband Ashok Ganguly in the United States of America. At the narrative's end, Ashima Ganguly, widow of Professor Ashok Ganguly, prepares to leave the United States to undertake another journey to her place of origin. But now, the once reluctant migrant exhibits strong attachment to the 'host' nation. Ashima, though not calling herself American, is not really completely and only an Indian any more, she is truly Ashima, 'the limitless, borderless one' (NS 26).

Reshmi Lahiri-Roy teaches within the Education faculties at Monash and Deakin University. She publishes in the area of cross cultural studies, postcolonial studies, migrant and gender issues, Bollywood and Diasporic cinema. She is a founder member of the New Zealand South Asia Centre at University of Canterbury. She holds a Ph.D. in English and Cultural Studies and a Master of Arts, from University of Canterbury, New Zealand. She has a M.A. in English, a B.A.(Hons) in English from University of Bombay, India and a Graduate Diploma in Journalism from Bombay.

³⁵ Mishra 193.