Journal of the Department of English
Vidyasagar University
Vol. 10, 2012-2013

New Diasporic Narratives : The Reshaping of the Identities of the female Protagonists in the Diaspora Novel

Rima Chakraborty

Migration has long been the part of human history and has always entailed the creation of multiple affiliations and identities. Now the term Diaspora is used to refer to the people or the ethnic communities who have left their respective homelands and have spread out in the other parts of the globe. The term has traditionally been understood as a yearning for the lost home. But in today's world of globalization, being cosmopolitan is an inescapable reality. In this context, Michael Foucault's comment in Of Other Spaces: Heterotopia seems much relevant. He says: "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity. We are in the epoch of juxtaposition."

Now, moving to the concept of 'territorialization' taken from Deleuze and Guattari's immense arsenal of concepts, A Thousand Plateaus it can be mentioned that territorialized knowledge involves fixing people and places into stable configurations where the interrelations among the individual constituents are already mapped out: the maps define, categorize and immobilize the spaces in which people move. Studies in Diaspora, have however revealed the fact that in the present epoch, which is characterized by rapid technological developments, such set maps are gradually losing their authenticity. Steven Vertovec further elaborates that in the contemporary context, interpretations of migration as loss of home and familiars are no longer current and instead have

given way to ideas of diaspora as communities of transnational affiliations. Vertovec justly claims that in the present era, the diaspora discourses advocate the recognition of hybridity, and multiple identities. But even then, there is no denying of the fact that, the loss of homeland brings in a sense of alienation in the minds of the first generation diasporic citizens. Therefore following Foucault's assertion, if "heterotopia" has the critical virtue of incorporating the Real and the unreal, then each diasporic citizen can be considered to be a 'moving heterotopia', who spends his life in search of identity and belongingness.

Indeed the pain of displacement remains quite prominent in the psychological disposition of the diasporic population irrespective of class and gender. But interestingly, in the purview of the modern South Asian diaspora, it can be noted that men and women have experienced migration differently. Moreover it is also true that migration discourses are rarely approached exclusively through a female gaze. Therefore my paper intends to highlight the fact that diasporic migration affects South Asian women in particular ways, differently from men, who are the established leaders of this discourse. The study explores the idea of migration and identity- creation through a literary lens. The central claim of the paper- based on a reading of the novels, Brick Lane and The Namesake, by Monica Ali and Jhumpa Lahiri respectively- is that, diasporic migration enables the South Asian women to adopt new and cross border identities and to become the architects of their independent selves.

Monica Ali's Brick Lane can be read as an evocative tale of diaporic migration and identity creation. Its protagonist, Nazneen begins her journey from a state of mute acceptance of fate and ultimately succeeds in attaining an independent individual agency. Brick Lane pertinently demonstrates the idea that while the South Asian women are often unwilling and unhappy subjects of migration, yet their coming out of the geographical boundaries of their respective homelands actually enables them to create self-made identities for themselves.

The novel opens in 1967 in the rural Bangladesh. Nazneen is born to stoic, unhappy and fatalistic Rupban. The mother leaves it to fate, and not medical intervention to decide whether Nazneen would live or die. Nazneen however survives emphatically and grows up along with her beloved sister Hasina in the dusty, hot, topical village of Gauripur in Bangladesh. But as she grows up, her youth is marked by her mother's stoic unhappiness and eventual suicide, her father's indifference and infidelity and her

unassailable companionship with her sister. When at sixteen, her sister elopes with a lover, Nazneen's enraged father decides to marry the eighteen-year-old Nazneen off to a man more than twenty years her senior. Obedient and unresisting, Nazneen accompanies her stranger- husband to London where she begins her lonely and isolated life.

In London, Nazneen feels dislocated, uprooted and lost. Ali depicts Nazneen's homesickness and loneliness with brilliance. In London's Brick Lane, in the Tower Hamlets council housing, Nazneen lives with her pot bellied, spindly-legged, puffy-faced, older husband, who thinks of her as "an unspoilt girl from the village…Not beautiful, but not so ugly either…" Very early in the novel, after coming to London, Nazneen overhears her husband Chanu describe her so on the telephone and Nazneen's mortification is absolute.

> What had she imagined? That he was in love with her? That he was grateful because she, young and graceful, had accepted him?…Yes. Yes. She realized in a stinging rush she had imagined all these things. Such a foolish girl. (Ali 11)

Nazneen lives her married life without complaint, but with stifled longings and half acknowledged desires. Watching ice skating on TV substitutes her suppressed sexuality and the razoring of Chanu's hair, dead skin, corns and nails, becomes the site of her imagined mutinies. Her aromatic cooking and her midnight, eating (so that she does not share the table with Chanu) become the watermark for her monotonous, humdrum and unromantic marriage.

Nazneen's life in London is also defined by her love and longing for her sister Hasina. Though Hasina exhibits comparatively more agency than Nazneen by running away with her lover, her lack of education, resources and skills make her dependent on a series of untrustworthy and opportunistic men. She thus makes unwise and constrained life choices that compromise her security, self-esteem and wellbeing. Nazneen wants, more than anything else, to help Hasina and she tries to enlist Chanu in this endeavour. Chanu, however, disapproves of Hasina's willfulness and is also reluctant to reach out to her. Chanu's recalcitrance angers Nazneen and allows her to accept her feelings of rebellion against Chanu as legitimate.

The turgidity of Nazneen's life is finally broken with the birth and death of Raqib, her son. However, it is over this sudden illness and death of her son that Nazneen develops her first emotional companionship with her husband. A few years thereafter,

Nazneen gives birth to her two daughters, Shahana and Bibi. Chanu's relationship with his daughters, is defined by his abject inability to influence their upbringing. Shahana, inevitably and unalterably affected by her environment, challenges her father's every attempt to raise her as a Bangladeshi girl of his conception. The younger daughter, Bibi, is more pliable though not more amenable to Chanu's views. Nazneen loves her daughters, strives to understand them, and tries to protect them from their father's futile temper. It is in her relationship with her daughters and in developing a family life for them that she begins to move out of her own stoic upbringing of silent acceptance and acknowledges her daughters' protests and her own budding agency.

Nazneen's life in Tower Hamlets is shared by the other Bangladeshi women who live there. However Nazneen is drawn especially towards Razia, whom she befriends even though Chanu does not consider her appropriate company. Chanu is suspicious of Nazneen's relationship with Razia because he senses, correctly, that he is marginal in that engagement. Razia encourages Nazneen to go out, learn English, and experience her life in London with the liberties and opportunities that it offers. As Nazneen gradually grows into her friendships with Razia and the community of women, and come in terms with the life in London, Chanu begins to make grand plans of a return to the homeland, Dhaka. It is ironic that the efforts to finance the return to Dhaka create the opportunities for the dawning of Nazneen's agency and individualism. Two new items enter Nazneen's house - a computer for Chanu and a sewing machine for Nazneen. Chanu uses the computer rally his family around the idea of returning to Bangladesh by presenting that country to them on the internet. Nazneen learns sewing and becomes a seamstress. Chanu sources business for her and the sewing machine generates the income that will eventually buy Chanu his ticket away from London and his family, and give Nazneen the security to stay on in London and make her life. The plan of returning homeland further prompts Chanu to take on a job as a taxi driver in order to make more money to finance the enterprise. And this is what brings Nazneen's lover Karim into her life. Ali writes :

> So Chanu became a taximan…And on the first hot day of the year…a new middleman appeared. Karim, with a bale of jeans over his broad shoulder. That was how he came to her life. (Ali 168-169)

Nazneen is attracted, against her will, impossibly and irrevocably to Karim. Karim's youthful sexuality is a powerful magnet for her, in the context of Chanu's

utter lack of attractiveness. Karim kindles Nazneen's dormant sexuality, which with Chanu had been so ignored. Karim also engages Nazneen critically in her faith. Up to this point, Nazneen's practice of her religion was in a personal space. She believed in-

> Regular prayer, regular housework…[and] She told her mind to be still. She told her heart, Do not beat with fear, do not beat with desire (Ali 35).

It is one of the deep ironies of the novel that Nazneen's intellectual and critical engagement with her faith begins when she embarks on her adulterous affair or in other words when she allows her heart to beat with desire. In this sense, Ali links the two passions in Nazneen's life - her faith and her affair- to establish the emergence of Nazneen's distinct voice. Karim, her lover, introduces Nazneen to the idea of political Islam and it is through this forbidden relationship, that Nazneen discovers her own voice, views and agency. She now understands comprehensively the feelings of unrest, insecurity and political opportunism that take over Tower Hamlets following the 9/ 11attacks in New York. As Chanu's plans to return to Bangladesh gain momentum, Nazneen begins to realize that her own desires are aligned to her daughters' and that she actually desires to stay on in London and build a life there.

Ultimately Nazneen's actions determine the course that her family takes in the novel. She decides to end her relationship with Karim and does so. Nazneen also shepherds her daughter's aspirations and intends to see them fulfilled, along with her own. Thus she decides to stay back while Chanu sets on his journey to return to his native land.The novel ends with Nazneen as the architect of her own life: comfortable in her companionship with Chanu across the world; at peace with her sister Hasina's choices and chances; living her life of ingenuity, creativity and resourcefulness with her daughters, Razia, and the community of women, and acknowledging and enjoying her dreams and desires.

Now, speaking of Jhumpa Lahiri's second literary venture The Namesake, it can be said that like Ali, Lahiri too shows how the omnipresence of foreignness and the necessity of grappling with the foreign culture, reconstruct an independent identity for one of the central characters of the novel- Ashima Ganguly. Lahiri's novel opens with the depiction of the lonely life of Ashima, who along with her husband Ashoke Ganguly shifts to Cambridge/ Massachusetts after her marriage. Thus Ashima stands as an epitome of the South Asian women who are not agents of diasporic migration, but follow their husbands as passengers. However this section of women, whom Ashima

represents, does not remain passive in the land of adoption. In fact they are compelled by their challenging circumstances of loneliness and trauma of migration to build new and dynamic identities.

The Namesake begins in the 1960s and traverses a period until the 2000s.It is the story of a young Bengali girl, Ashima, who is uprooted from her native Calcutta, to be married off to a young and promising Bengali academic, Ashoke, in Boston, America. In the novel Ashima is not a diasporic by choice as her husband Ashoke is. As the dutiful and obedient daughter of middle-class Bengali parents living in Calcutta in the early 1960s, she enters marriage, "obediently but without expectation" (Lahiri 7). The marriage is arranged by the two sets of parents and Ashoke and Ashima exert little personal choice in the decision and barely meet each other prior to the marriage: "It was only after the betrothal that she'd learned his name" (Lahiri 9).

Ashoke had left his native land in order to pursue his Ph.D. in fiber optics. Hence being occupied with professional assignments, he finds little time to think about the cultural conflict after migrating from Calcutta to Boston. Moreover, Ashoke had passed through worse calamities in his life. He had been a victim of the train accident in which he survived miraculously. Hence Ashoke's shifting of home was also because he wanted to escape the dreadful memories of the train accident. On the other hand Ashima mostly remains confined within her apartment after her arrival to Boston. And since her oriental past refuses to amalgamate with her occidental present, Ashima fails to escape the all-pervasive sense of nostalgia. As circumstances obliterate her option of immediate return to 'home', Mrs. Ganguli indulges herself in reading Bengali poems, stories and articles in order to escape the pain of displacement. And after some months, when she becomes pregnant, the experience of childbirth and the prospect of child rearing in a foreign land becomes too difficult for her to bear. Hence even after Gogol's birth, she says to Ashoke, "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (Lahiri 33). Therefore, Ashima Ganguli in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake certainly impresses the readers as a representation of the highly disturbing experiences of the first generation Indian diaspora.

When Gogol is one, Ashima and Ashoke make plans and save up for Ashima's first trip back home to Calcutta. But the trip is a grief-stricken one as she hears of her father's death before her departure and her first trip back 'home' becomes one of loss and mourning. And then once again after their return to States, Ashima's life follows

the trajectory of success that Ashoke attains as an academician. Ashoke is hired as an assistant professor of Electrical Engineering at the University. And hence the Gangulis migrate to the University town outside Boston. The address is 67 Pemberton Road. This is the house where Ashima lives for the next twenty seven years, till Ashoke's death. It is in this house that her daughter Sonali, who is called Sonia, is born. In this house her children grow up, go to school and leave home. Here she entertains her swelling community of Bengali friends with lavish parties, full of painstakingly cooked foods that recall the taste of home for her and her community of migrants. As her children grow up, she learns to accept their American tastes in food, clothes, friends and relationships.

As the years pass, Ashima becomes the centre of her community of Bengalis. Her life in New York expands as she takes on a part-time job at the community library and builds alliances and friendships there. But through it all Ashima remains the tremulous immigrant. When Ashoke takes a job in Cleveland, she reluctantly learns to live on her own- "At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind" (Lahiri161). However, it is when Ashoke suddenly dies in Cleveland that Ashima realizes the outlines of her own identity. Surrounded by her community of friends and flanked by her children, she decides to stay in this adopted land, where she has made a home for her husband. At the end of the novel, Lahiri leaves us with Ashima's decision to sell the house that she has lived in for most of her married life and become a transnational, living partly in India and partly in America with her children and friends.

> Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States… True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere. (Lahiri 276)

Thus at the end of Lahiri's diasporic tale, Ashima the immigrant by circumstance transforms into the transnational by choice, as she decides to carve her own life and identity, and live between countries and beyond borders.

Therefore, it is evident that Nazneen, Ali's reluctant wife and Ashima, Lahiri's pliant, immigrant bride, both pine for their absent homes in the Motherland. The protagonists of both the novels are presented as initially hapless and helpless in the grip of the massive change that their marriages lead them to. But gradually they become interested and creative agents, who stretch, change, adapt and modify their

individual circumstances and thereby embark on a course of identity-making. Sapped by the intense loneliness and utter alienation of their new marital homes, they turn to the different metropolitan groupings that exist in their new hostlands and to which they are driven by their class locations. For Ashima, this is the public library where she volunteers and the expatriate Bengali community who become her friends; and for Nazneen, it is the company of Razia and the other garment workers. Indeed Nazneen and Ashima belong to different class contexts but what is noteworthy is that both after moving out of their respective homelands get an opportunity to reterritorialize themselves, and become the architects of their independent identities- an opportunity which their homelands never provided them.

Edward Said in Representations of the Intellectual has put forth that a condition of marginality stemming from being an expatriate or exile, "frees you from having always to proceed with caution, afraid to overturn the apple cart, anxious about upsetting fellow members of the same corporations…"(Said 63-64). Certainly Said's comment appears much relevant in the context of South Asian women who are freed from the constraints of their respective societies by the experience of immigration. Lahiri and Ali, both being South Asian Diasporic writers, while portraying the characters like Nazneen and Ashima also reflect their own positions as authors inhabiting interstitial spaces. So to sum up, where on one hand, the South Asian diasporic fiction portrays the pain of nostalgia, displacement and alienation suffered by a section of first generation diasporic women, it also depicts the realities of the recreation of their new and independent identities.

Works Cited

Ali, M. Brick Lane. U.K: Doubleday Publication, 2003

Deluze, Gilles, Guattari, Felix. Anti-Oedipus. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. London and New York: Continuum, 2004. Vol. 1 of Capitalism and Schizophrenia. 2 vols. 1972-1980.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces. Heterotopia" (1967). trans. Jay Miskowiec. N.p. n.d. Web.3 Web.30 October 2007

Available at: http://www.foucault.info./documents/heteroTopia

Lahiri, Jhumpa. Namesake. India: Harper Collins, 2007

Said Edward, Representation of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures. USA: Vintage Books, 1994

Vertovec, Steven, Religion and Diaspora, WPTC-01-01, Paper presented at the conference on 'New Landscapes of Religion in the West', School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, 27-29 September 2000 in New Approaches to the Study of Religion, Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz & Randi Warne (eds), Berlin & New York: Verlag de Gruyter, 2004, pp. 275-304.

Available at: http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/Vertovec01.PDF.