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**DIVERGENCE OF THIRD WORLD WOMEN IN DIASPORA  
READING LAHIRI'S ANTIPODAL FEMALE PROTAGONISTS  
ASHIMA AND GAURI**

**Shirin Akter Popy\***

\*Lecturer,

Dept. of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University,

Sonapur, BANGLADESH

Email id: shirin.nstu@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT**

*Present paper is an attempt to re-read Lahiri's female protagonists Ashima and Gauri, respectively, of The Namesake and of The Lowland, against the backdrop of their identities as third world women and post-migrated diasporic subjects. In fictions, although migration is oriented by the male protagonists; Lahiri in her fictions exhibits a female centered aftermath of it. As third-world female subjects, in their suppression, oppression and powerlessness, though Ashima and Gauri share some common traits, in fact, in America, with their bipolar attitudes towards accepting and rejecting the norms of diasporic life they emerge distinctly. Being exposed to the land of opportunity, America, while Ashima celebrates her former being, Gauri emerges as an iconoclast. This paper is an attempt to discuss the divergence of third world woman in diaspora.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Third World Women, Diasporic Subjects, Powerlessness, Negotiation, Divergence, Bipolar Attitudes.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Migration, either self-willed or forced, being the driving force of the last century, has not only created a multiethnic and multicultural diversity all over the world but also opened new windows in psychosocial and psycho-cultural studies to analyze the “possibilities and problems engendered by the experience of migrancy and diaspora life”(McLeod 208). Migration, becomes more decisive for the women migrated from a third world to a first world country because, in the context of the third world, average women being “tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimised, etc.) (Mohanty 337) and “twice colonized” (McLeod 175) -by colonialist realities and patriarchy, lead a miserable life, in contrast to that striking reality the first world women being “educated, modern,...[and] having control over their bodies and sexualities,”(Mohanty 337) enjoy a life of freedom and privilege. Being migrants, since exposure to the dichotomy of the two realities is inevitable for the third world women, hence, it is important to understand how the third world women of such different socio-cultural and historical backdrops confront the trans-cultural reality of the first world. To delve

deep into it, Jhumpa Lahiri, a consummate artist of diaspora literature, is my obvious choice because in her fictions, depicting “the day to day world of Asian Americans” (Alam 362) she focuses on the predicaments and possibilities of the immigrant women. Her first novel, *The Namesake* (2008), although highlights Gogol’s crisis of identity, indeed, underneath Gogol’s acculturation, stands for a discourse of the struggle and the negotiation of an Indian lady: Ashima Ganguly. Lahiri’s second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), set against the backdrop of Naxalite insurgencies in the newly decolonized India, seemingly starts with the story of the twin brothers Subhash and Udayan, eventually shifts to be the saga of a revolutionary woman, Gauri. In *The Namesake*, while Ashima succumbs to patriarchy and copes with the role of immigrant motherhood, in *The Lowland*, we find a revolutionary woman Gauri who following the dictum “women are not wrong at all when they reject the rules of life,”(quoted in Beauvoir 25) not only disregards the demands of family, society and time, but also breaks all the barriers of the third world entity. Being exposed to the first world ambiance, both Ashima and Gauri react differently to adapt to the trans-cultural reality. Focusing on their lives in India and analyzing how differently Ashima and Gauri adapt and/or adept to the new entities this paper will show the divergence of third world women in diaspora.

### **Ashima and Gauri: The Third world Women**

In *The Namesake*, we see, a docile and an obedient, Indian woman, Ashima, who “without expectation” (NS 7), consents to get married according to the choice of her parents in fact she is a prototype of an Indian woman. To see obliquely, Ashima falls prey to her oriental upbringing, where she had to be voiceless at every moment. Actually, it is impossible for her to scale the boundaries that society has created. Therefore, Ashima cannot but embrace marriage because marriage is the “only means of survival and the only justification of her existence” (Beauvoir 364). Compromise is the lesson she had been taught to follow since her childhood. So, we see, even, before her twenties, in the middle of her studies, without protest she was ready to be married to a “widower with four children,” even to “a cartoonist...who had been hit by a bus in Esplanade and lost his left arm” (NS 7). It had been Ashima’s good luck that both of them rejected her. In reality, there is nothing more in store for a third world woman, where women cannot assert their opinion and are treated as commodities. The ‘commodification’ of women becomes even more clear when Ashima’s mother tries to raise the demand of her daughter with the false commendations “she is fond of cooking, and she can knit extremely well. Within a week she finished this cardigan I am wearing” (NS 7). Instead of being angry or rebellious “Ashima smiled, amused by her mother’s salesmanship”, because “it had taken her the better part of a year to finish the cardigan, and still her mother had to do the sleeves” (NS 8). However, in the third proposal, that of Ashoke, she opens “not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile” (Beauvoir 352). As a wife, Ashima, also, fulfills the demand of patriarchy she “takes his name...becomes his other “half.” She follows him where his work calls him: where he works essentially determines where they live; she breaks with her past more or less brutally, she is annexed to husband’s universe; she gives him her person” (Beauvoir 365-366). That is why, Ashima Badhuri becomes Ashima Ganguli and sacrifices her academic career for being an obedient wife to Ashoke. Leaving her motherland and beloved ones, she moves to America with her husband, where optionlessly she has to accustom to the likes and dislikes of her husband and “cook for him, hoping to please” (NS 10), although in return “it has never occurred to him to buy his wife flowers” (NS 12). As a traditional Indian woman Ashima renders the due respect to her husband. She even does not address her husband by his name, Ashoke, because, tradition requires a Bengali wife not to do that. In fact, “Ashima never thinks of her husband’s name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is” (NS 2). Like a typical Indian wife, Ashima always remains “listless and silent” (NS 12), undemanding and compromising.

Studying Lahiri's fictions shows that her women suffer from a third world environment and a demanding patriarchy, as evidenced by the lives lived by Ashima and Gauri in India and America. Gauri's early years are a bit different from Ashima because she was brought up differently and showed an urge to establish her individuality since her childhood. Unlike Ashima, though Gauri was privileged to choose her husband, after marriage, she had to be as usual: a silent daughter-in-law and a compromising wife. In the perspective of Indian culture as Gauri's marriage to Udayan was an unconventional one-love marriage-her acceptance to her in-laws house was also not warm. Before marriage, Gauri was a philosophy student at the renowned Presidency College. She had an ambition to complete her study and to be self-reliant. But, after marriage she saw that her days were consumed with household chores. "If the servant was late or had a day off" (LL 290) it was Gauri who had to accomplish all the works even if sometimes "her palms felt as if the skin had been scraped off" and she saw that "studying was impossible in the house" (LL 290). Her husband Udayan, a revolutionary Marxist, fought for equality and rights for the common people, but, at home, as a traditional husband he wanted to be served, and urged that his wife be patient against these injustices done against her. Exploiting her love for and faith upon him, he used Gauri as an instrument in his mission against the police officer, about what she was unaware of and for what she suffered from a sense of guilt. So, it is evident that, not only Ashima, but also Gauri is treated as a secondary being who had to sacrifice her person before the patriarchy.

The world became more cruel to Gauri after the death of Udayan as Subhash observed, "[h]is mother's coldness toward Gauri was insulting, but his father's passivity was just as cruel" (LL 115). Though they knew that Gauri was expecting, in the name of custom they had taken "away her colored clothes, fish and meat from her plate" (LL 114). It is apparent that "[t]heir treatment of Gauri was deliberate, intended to drive her out" (LL115). Only were they waiting for the event that gifting them the grand-child Gauri would go away. Though Subash promised her a fresh life in America in which she would be free and be allowed to study, we see after the birth of Bela being inconsiderate to the will and wishes of Gauri he started to assert his patriarchy. He expected Gauri to leave her study and give Bela the priority. But Gauri failed to be a traditional mother and being fed up with Gauri's negligence to Bela, he stopped talking with her. "The day he broke his silence, he said, my mother was right. You don't deserve to be a parent. The privilege was wasted on you" (LL 175). So, in the context of the third-world entity, we see "what binds the two women together is the sociological notion of the 'sameness' of their oppression" (Mohanty 200).

### **Divergence in Diaspora**

While in their identity as third world female subjects Ashima and Gauri are same, both of them are poles apart in their responses to the demand of and exposure to the diasporic surroundings and society. Ashima's diasporic entrance into the American set up is burdened with the sense of alienation and nostalgia. In fact, being married to Ashoke, Ashima is "wrenched from...[her] mother(father)land" (Mishra 448) to America where she is overwhelmed with "essential sadness of the break" (Said 439) with her family and the past because "exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss" (Rushdie 10). So, for her diaspora becomes a state of exile and being "homesick and bewildered" she feels like a lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts"(NS 49). Ashima's distress is multiplied thinking of the consequences of motherhood in a foreign land, "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"(NS 6).

Though at the beginning she seems to be a nostalgic one whose essence was made up of her cultural identity and who was totally dependent on her husband gradually she learns to negotiate her life as a diaspora. As soon as the plot progresses Ashima starts to accommodate, to acculturate and to negotiate with the host culture only to raise her children with proper care and education. Ramona-Alice Bran in her essay "A Lifelong Pregnancy" views immigrant

motherhood in a different way, she says, “[t]he immigrant woman bears a double burden: that of giving birth and that of making sure the link between past and future is not lost” (136). For this reason, as an immigrant mother, Ashima considers it her added responsibility to nurture her child with the proper knowledge of her culture. In America, to connect her children to their root Ashima tends to inject Indian norms and traditions into the psyche of her children. But, in spite of all the impositions, she remains simultaneously concerned about her son’s acculturation to the host culture and his school grades. Although to retain the legacy of the Indian culture and Hindu religion “she teaches him to memorize a four-line children’s poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adorning the ten-handed goddess Durga... Saraswati... kartik... Lakshmi... Ganesh ” (NS 54) and so on, every afternoon Ashima did not forget to tell Gogol to watch ‘Sesame Street and The Electric Company’, to bring good grades in English”, so that he can maintain pace with his American peers.

In fact, it was not easy for Ashima to accept many aspects of American culture like: calling parents by their names, public display of love, but for the ease of the acculturation of her children she begins to celebrate foreign culture and even admits that her son “Gogol spends his nights with Maxine” (NS 166). She learns from her failure to settle Gogol’s life, and so, leaves Sonia uninterrupted choosing her husband. After Ashoke’s death when “Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone” (NS 278) it is expected that she would leave her identity as a foreigner and return to India. But surprisingly, by this time Ashima has become a different woman who learns to be self reliant, and admits her double identity, deciding to live India and America for six months in rotation. Thus, Ashima compromises with the double culture as well as with her double-being that of an Indian women and that of a mother of American born children. In this way, Ashima seems to be a “stereotypical presentation of an Indian woman: an obedient daughter who respects her parents’ choice of a husband, a devoted wife who follows Ashoke to foreign continent, and the loving mother who dedicates her life raising two children” (Bran 138). And only to reinstate her being as diaspora wife and mother, she becomes a negotiator between two cultures.

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s literary world, Gauri’s individuality as a first generation diasporic woman is very clear. When Ashima, in *The Namesake*, was busy with preserving and practicing Indian Culture in America, Gauri paid no attention to all those issues. After her very arrival at Rhode Island, Gauri began to explore it. In the campus, “watching the girls walk away, Gauri felt ungainly. She began to look like the other women she noticed on the campus” (LL134). One day Subash noticed that:

“[i]n one corner of the floor, all of her saris, and her petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scrapes of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws. He opened her drawers and saw that they were empty .She had destroyed everything. A few minutes later he heard her key in the lock. Her hair hung bluntly along her jawbone, dramatically altering her face. She was wearing slacks and a gray sweater” (LL 141).

Again, in her identity as an immigrant mother, Gauri is antipodal in relation to Ashima. Because in contrast to her Gauri is a complete mess who failed to nurture her child, as it is expected from an Indian mother. By marrying Subhash and leaving India, for Gauri it is a truth beyond dispute, she wants to leave behind the ghastly events, that took place in her life, and she wanted her child to come into the world “ignorant and safe”(LL 125). Gauri gives birth to a daughter, Bela, Udayan’s child, in Rhode Island, but day by day she found that she fails to mother Bela in the way a mother ought to be because she becomes keenly aware that she fails to free herself from Udayan’s memory; “[s]he felt as if she contained a ghost, as Udayan was. The child was a version of him, in that it was both present and absent. Both within her and remote”(LL 124). In America, Gauri noticed that “it was possible not to think of him [Udayan], to remember him. No aspect of him had traveled to America. Apart from Bela, he’d refused to join her here” (LL 164). Thus, Bela turned up to her as Udayan’s

ghost from what she wanted to escape. While we find Ashima as a devoted mother who for the sake of her children, even acculturates to American culture, day by day Gauri grows reluctant to motherhood. Gauri's over devotion to study rather than her daughter let her little daughter abandoned in the house. Disregarding the life that was inhibited by custom and tradition, Gauri grabs the opportunities of the migrated land. She began to continue her study and eventually became a Doctoral candidate at Boston. Whereas, a traditional Bengali woman cannot think of her existence without her husband and solely dedicates her every effort to please her husband and nurture her children, Gauri sets a new trend. After completing her Ph.D, Gauri left Subhash and Bela. When Bela was 12 years old, Gauri joined at a college, in California, as a teacher. Her excellence as an academician is obvious here. Among Lahiri's first generation women, Gauri is the exception, not only for her academic achievement but also for her courage to abandon her daughter and husband. Her abandonment of Subhash and Bela is self-willed and she did not suffer from it. Rather, by doing so she liberates her soul from being enslaved by the things she did not love, and "[s]he entered a new dimension, a place where a fresh life was given to her" (LL 232). Abandoning them, Gauri showed her annoyance towards the institution of marriage, exhibited her hatred towards the masked identity of Subhash, and proved her disbelief that a woman should always restrain herself as "her children's mother, her husband's wife" (Friedan 83). In her self-made solitary life, Gauri even enjoyed her temporary lovers. She even appropriated the sexual tolerance of American society in building a homo-sexual relation with one of her students in California, though she was forsaken by the girl for some reason unknown. In the way, it is her diasporic exposure that provides Gauri the force to appropriate the "global forms of culture" to set her free from "the local forms of dominance and oppression" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 462).

Thus Gauri deletes the pattern of femininity of her origin. Cutting her hair short and wearing shorts like other American women Gauri attempted to alter her previous life, for what she chose to marry Subhash, for what she embraced migration. Gauri believed that her altered look may alter her past. In *The Lowland*, though her transgression of boundaries is an indecisive process, marked by "fascination and fear, confidence and insecurity, responsibility and guilt" (Booker 158), Gauri tried her best to transgress it. Using her identity as a diaspora "she had generated alternative versions of herself"(LL 240). She chose different paths, tried to be successful in an uneven way that is unfamiliar to an Indian woman like her. While Ashima suffered from the alienation that Migration caused, Gauri, consciously, used migration as a tool to alienate herself from her previous identity. She enjoyed her separation from her husband and daughter because to Gauri "[i]solation offered its own form of companionship" (LL237). And thus, for Ashima and Gauri migration "provide[s] the tools for a different kind of identity formation" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 462), while the former becomes a negotiator, a transgressor becomes the later.

Ashima and Gauri, both are women in diaspora, who share a war torn post-colonial past. By virtue of their marriage both of the women were exposed to a hegemonic first world, though Ashima considered exposure to a foreign land as her destiny, Gauri used it as a means of forming a new identity. In their diasporic unveiling the role the two women played is antipodal in nature. While Ashima tried to find her identity in her traditional domestic roles, Gauri emancipated herself from it. In this respect, Gauri's defying her former being can be seen as her journey towards the formation of a modern identity. In *Practicing Modernism Reading Post Modernism*, Patricia Waugh describes modern identity

"as one from a world of honour to one of dignity: in a world of honour the individual discovers his true identity in his roles, and to turn away from the roles is to turn away from himself, but in a world of dignity the individual can only discover his true identity by emancipating from socially imposed roles."(121)

So, it can be said that jumping from Ashima to Gauri Lahiri has shifted her women from a world of honor to a world of dignity. And in this way a third-world woman, Gauri re-creates her modern identity.

## CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri, in her fictions, deals with the “late twentieth-century diasporas of advanced capital to...the New World...whose overriding characteristic is one of mobility” (Mishra 447-448). Almost all of her male protagonists, from the Pulitzer winning *The Interpreter of Maladies* to the latest one *The Lowland*, are found in the race of establishing themselves successfully in American materialistic world. In fact, the drive for being successful in America kept the male immigrants unaffected by the diasporic influences. But Lahiri portrays a tremendous influence of diaspora life upon her women. It is true that we can list some common characteristics for third –world women or draw a bottom line for them, but nothing is fixed for a diaspora woman. Therefore, emerging from the same socio-economic and cultural set up, Ashima and Gauri react divergently in their same exposure to American ambiance. It may happen that in near future Lahiri is going to introduce a different type of Indian Lady to us who in her assimilation, will neither be like Ashima nor be like Gauri. I think, for Lahiri’s women, “[d]iaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation[Gauri] and difference[Ashima]”(Hall 438), proving that divergence in diaspora is eternally true.

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