Reinscribing Identity Formation on Screen: Ashima and Shashi

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Abstract

The present work observes, from two films of the commercial genre, the negotiation of two leading female characters in sculpting individual identities. Through their thought process, actions and decisions as depicted in the films, the characters attain personal and cultural emancipation which implies that they have traversed a long way from their initial selves. This study traces the mutation of the characters and the transformed reality they create; to understand the nature of the personal struggle they deal with in the course of their journey.

Keywords: Transformation, postcolonial feminism, diaspora, transitional identity, culture

The present article studies the transformation of two female characters from *The Namesake* (2007) directed by Mira Nair, and *English Vinglish* (2012) directed by Gauri Shinde, through the lens of postcolonial and diasporic feminism. Whereas the first film studies the diasporic life of its central character, the latter one heavily uses postcolonial tropes to reconfigure the protagonist's subject position in family and society. However, both of them have some points of convergence that allow the basic arguments of the project to center on the proposition that although both these characters struggle between the pulls of tradition and modernity, they attain a certain level of emancipation that brings awareness among them about their individual identities.

Films have been repeatedly considered as a popular cultural form that can also play the role of identity markers. Apart from being cultural forms, they have immense financial potential. Jigna Desai believes that South Asian diasporic films occupy a very significant place as economic, political, and cultural tools mediating between global capitalism and the postcolonial nation-state. She places diasporic films at a pivotal position by retaining that "South Asian diasporic identificatory processes are centrally configured and contested through the cinematic apparatus" (33). In the same breath, she also upholds the signifying qualities of films by noting:

> Thus, South Asian diasporic films function significantly as part of the shifting economic, political, and cultural relations between global capitalism and the postcolonial nation-state, raising questions regarding the negotiation of cultural politics of diasporas located within local, national, and transnational processes. (34)

Thus Desai considers South Asian diasporic films as agents shaping the cultural identity of migrants by posing questions regarding cultural politics within local, national, and transnational processes. Films are relevant texts in the context of the present article in

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that the ones studied here map the trajectories of two women in their search for identity. In their journey they struggle with internal conflicts between tradition and modernity, as well as with external repressive forces such as cultural and patriarchal values that tend to be directly/indirectly clamped down on them.

Diasporic films depict the existence of tradition and modernity in subject like Ashima, one of the two characters to be studied in the present work, by linking the subject to her postcolonial past. Again, when non-diasporic Shashi is seen through postcolonial perspective, it becomes evident how postcolonial nationalistic ideology imbues women with cultural values and represents them as preservers of rituals. Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto bring in the questions of "national identity" and "the nation as an imagined and bounded territorial space" while defining diasporic cinema (23). They also point out the representative role of diasporic cinema in stating the view point of the postcolonial subject regarding a "re-imagining of the nation"(ibid). It is not inappropriate to say although *The Namesake* and *English Vinglish* do not belong to the same genre, they nevertheless share themes like national identity and re-imagining of the nation. The next part of the article discusses how the films interrogate questions of national identity in transnational cultural places.

It is impossible for a first-generation woman migrant like Ashima to forego her traditionally tailored roles as docile mother, wife, and daughters. However, the mutation caused by her diasporic existence is also a powerful trait of her character; therefore, it also has to be reckoned as an effect caused by globalization. In this vein, Arjun Appadurai's words are immensely relevant as he opines that while in a new diasporic space women might enjoy the fruits of capital and technology, in the domestic space they have to recreate the family as the microcosm of culture. Appadurai observes that "both work and leisure have lost none of their gendered qualities" and even in the new global order the segregation of genders has acquired "ever subtler fetishized representations" (qtd. in Sathian 25). As a consequence, diasporic women have to negotiate harsh conditions at work as well as strive "to reproduce the family as microcosm of culture" (ibid).

As Appadurai points out, diasporic women have to face challenges both in their workplace and inside the family. Whereas they have to deploy modern techniques to be successful at the workplace, traditional practices give them more acceptability at home. This intrinsic contradiction in diasporic women's lives is evident in Ashima in both overt and covert forms. The diasporic woman has to balance her external and internal life by juggling roles. Whereas on the outside world she has to negotiate and adapt to her diasporic identity, inside the home she has to strive to conserve her culture. However, somewhere between these two ends, she finds the empowerment that enables her to enjoy the fruits of capital and technology, going beyond the confinement of household identity. This opportunity offered by diasporic existence leads her to the sculpting of a new identity.

The brief stay of Shashi in New York provides her with an opportunity to uplift self-esteem by taking a short English course that not only enhances her language skill but also helps to recognize her worth as an individual. This new found self-worth of her, however, can be problematized if seen from a postcolonial lens. The level of confidence she attains

because of taking the English course emphasizes the film's overall tone of colonial complicity. From the persistent tone of *English Vinglish* it can be argued that this change in the lead character was not possible back in India because obviously the transnational space permits her to be adventurous by providing a certain extent of freedom. Without having any intention of becoming Americanized, Shashi utilizes the transnational cultural space to reveal her latent craving for forming an identity. The change that comes over her is not abrupt, rather it is the outcome of a long process of self-realization, which blooms in the conducive multicultural environment of her English classroom in New York. This total transformation reaffirms the film's dominating tone of a colonial view of power and freedom.

Sanjena Sathian establishes a relationship between women liberation and border crossing by noting that female figures, in a culturally permissive space, are more likely to cross over moral and sexual female boundaries which mostly demarcate anti-colonial sentiments of India as a nation. Sathian believes that Bollywood works as a catalyst for projecting this shifting image of female characters on screen. She maintains that "only in a post-nation-state world, within transnational cultural spaces, can the female figure achieve some degree of liberation" (Sathian 22). This article highlights these "transnational cultural spaces" within which two women achieve "some degree of liberation". It argues that a less culturally defined space offers some avenues to South Asian women through which it is possible for them to achieve a certain degree of self-actualization.

Apart from dealing with duality, the present work mainly focuses on the process of identity formation. Therefore, it is pertinent to add a few words here on the socio-psychological implication of the process of transformation that prompts an individual to fashion and refashion his/her own self with a view to acculturating with changing situations. The concept of 'identity' can be a contested one not only because it has been explained in many ways, but also because the very notion of 'identity' has been questioned persistently in discursive practices. Identity has been conceived in opposite terms. Whereas there is an 'essentialist' notion of identity that claims that identity can be determined according to one's 'essence'; 'deconstruction' dismisses the possibility of such a unifying concept.

In her introduction to the book *Reclaiming Identity*, Paula M. L. Moya defines "essence" as "a basic, unvariable, and presocial nature" (7). Usually, essentialism tends to see one's social category (class, gender, race, sexuality, etc.) "as determinate in the last instance for the cultural identity of the individual or group in question" (ibid). Therefore, essentialism voices the concept of a fixed and determinable identity which has a particular historical, social and cultural background. However, the opposition to this view of identity is the core concern of deconstruction.

Deconstruction, holds Stuart Hall, is "critical of the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity" (2). The process of identity formation has been an important part of psychoanalytically-influenced feminism, cultural criticism, and postmodernism. Since identities are constructed within discourse, Hall stresses the need to "understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices" (4). Because modalities of power play a key role in the construction of

identity, difference and exclusion play a more active part in its formation rather than sameness and inclusion.

Gender, as part of discourse, and one of the most effective tools of power, plays a key role in identity formation. In the formation of national identities, gender relations have always been crucial markers. Ania Loomba and Suvir Kaul discuss the role of gender in the evolution of national identities by noting how women are identified as "a crucial 'site' upon which battles are waged between tradition and modernity, or between nationalism and colonialism, or indeed between different nationalisms" (7).

From the preceding views three ideas can be deducted that play a major role in the shaping and reshaping of a person's identity. A subject's historical positioning, as well as gender, along with her degree of mutability in a changed circumstance−are three major defining aspects in the construction of a new identity. As is evident in this brief discussion on the psychological implications of identity construction, the transformation of Ashima and Shashi can be termed as a combined result of their past lives, gender and the experiences they go through in the host country. The next sections of the article analyze the adaptation process of these two characters as related to factors like their past life, their traditional roles as women in their respective families and the fluidity of their characters that makes them capable of accommodating changes and cultural shocks.

The concepts of "transnational cinema" and "transnational identity" are pertinent to the basic argument of this article. "Transnational cinema" is a relatively new concept as the idea of "transnational" has emerged from disciplines such as anthropology, migration and postcolonial studies. Transnational cinema can be related with boundary-crossing and at once localized and more globally based cultural studies. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam emphasize the modes of production, representational strategies, and aesthetic characteristics of immigrant cinema in their book *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*. Nataša Durovicová illustrates the idea of transnational as a concept that is connected to unevenness and mobility. She also notes that in its relative openness transnational ideas can be useful to explain emergent forms in film production.

The focus of the present work is transnational identity rather than transnational films as a genre. Here the characters under discussion exhibit transnational turns in more than one instance. Inderpal Grewal introduces the idea of transnational feminism by implying that this brand of feminism creates a connection between the gendered subject and her historical past. In the book *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* Grewal observes how in the United States gendered subjects are produced in relation to race, class, caste, and other social formations. She emphasizes the point that choice plays a significant role in shaping "a central ethical framework for feminist as well as neoliberal consumer practices and the imbrication of feminism with consumer culture" (3). Grewal also notes that the gendered bodies are differentiated from each other according to their geographical location within which race, class, religion, and nationality are considered meaningful in shaping identity. The author wonders what possibilities feminism might have within the "neoliberalism" of the US and what kind of "cosmopolitan knowledge" would be produced in the "neoliberal conditions" since the feminists working in this condition have to assume changing and contingent subject

positions in order to avoid being "incapacitated by this neoliberalism "(3-4). Thus, observes Grewal, feminists within America create many kinds of agency and diverse subjects by embracing changing and contingent subject positions. However, ironically, notes Grewal, that the freedom of choosing one's agency is not innocent of older imperial histories. The newer disciplinary formations in many countries of the world are also derived from their imperial past. Therefore, American neoliberalism paradoxically offers both freedom and restriction to transnational feminists. This inequity is intensified when combined with the expectation of their community that demands conformity to tradition on their part inside the home.

Transnational identity mutates into cosmopolitanism when viewed from a more personal perspective. Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma distinguish between traditional diasporas and the new cosmopolitanism by stating that the latter "results from the confluence of globalization (race, migration, media, money, and culture)…" (2).The critics opine that new cosmopolitan subjects are not confined to a particular nation-state or class. Such subjects "instead [occupy] a range of fluid subject positions, which can be trans-class, trans-local with competing value systems" (ibid). In the next sections of the present study the character of Ashima from the film *The Namesake* is studied as diasporic and Shashi from *English Vinglish* is studied as postcolonial, transnational and new cosmopolitan characters.

The Namesake

Before delving into the specific focus of this section of the article, namely the analysis of Ashima's character, it is pertinent to discuss a few aspects of *The Namesake* that make it, if not a grand Hollywood success, at least a deeply moving family saga. Released in March 2007, this film by Mira Nair whose screenplay is written by Sooni Taraporevala has been acclaimed by both film and literary critics for its richly complex portrayal of people, places, and migrant dilemmas. Nair uses various signs to portray the mobility, dislocation and adaptation of the Gangulis in her cinematic version of Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel.

Airports are considered as transitional places where people from different countries meet only to depart within a short while; almost all types of languages are spoken in this shifting space. In this film Nair uses airports to depict both departure and arrival on the surface level. On a more nuanced level airports here represent the lives of migrants who always feel dislocated as the diasporic home seems to be temporary to them and they feel like tourists in their homeland. For example, after getting the news of her father's death, Ashima is seen clad in a white sari in the airport, on her journey to India. In this scene, the constantly changing electronic screens around her remind the viewer of the dislocation of the migrant family, specially of Ashima, who expresses her unwillingness to face her mourning relatives back at home (0:31:31-0:31:36).

Thus Nair creates an ambience in the film where the character of Ashima symbolizes the contradiction of diasporic life in the form of agony and achievement. She contains the pathos of separation, yet attains the fulfilment of raising a family on a foreign land. She successfully treads the middle ground of two countries, two cultures and two languages like the perfect migrant subject she represents. The film portrays how she lets go of her

children once they grow up. Although she frequently calls Gogol, her attitude is never demanding or judgmental. Moreover, the way she absorbs the pain of Ashoke's premature death also proves her resilience. Since this part of the article establishes her as a successful negotiator of cultural adaptation, the following paragraphs traces the growth of this character as seen through Nair's lens.

At the beginning of *The Namesake*, Ashima appears to be engrossed in taking music lessons (0:4:23-0:4:49). But immediately after that she is shown as the bride-to-be in an arranged marriage with Ashoke Ganguli, an immigrant student in the United States pursuing his PhD. During Ashoke's family's visit to her house prior to the marriage, Ashoke's father asks her whether she can travel half the way across the world, leaving her family behind, to live with Ashoke. Ashima is not hesitant to answer in the affirmative (0:9:13-0:9:14). This is a crucial point to be noted about her personality because it shows, early in the course of the film, that she can make her own decisions. Her life in the USA embodies the duality of tradition and modernity in a consistent and pervasive manner. She always wears bangles and vermilion, marks of a married Indian woman. At the same time, she learns to adjust to the Americanized behavior of her children, starting from their food habit to choice of partners. Ashima's duality is not superficial and is inextricably linked to her inner self. She learns to drive, but cannot keep pace with fast American roads (0:54:23-0:54:42). She celebrates Christmas but makes greeting cards based on traditional Indian motifs (1:9:28-1:9:59). The quick decision she takes at the beginning of the movie of travelling to America is repeated once again when she decides to stay back in the house that belongs to her and Ashoke, at Pemberton, New York, instead of moving along with Ashoke to Ohio (1:6:28-1:6:37). Ashima breaks her bangles and wipes away the vermilion from her forehead after Ashoke's death, but tells Gogol that it was not necessary for him to shave his head (1:19:48-1:19:51) as a sign of mourning. Echoing Appadurai's words mentioned earlier, it can be said that she uses the diasporic cultural space as a liberating tool despite maintaining two separate identities in her inner and outer lives. However, this shaving of head has more intense emotional values for Gogol who does it as a ritual of coming back to his own culture. He did it after recollecting his childhood memory of seeing Ashoke do the same when he got the news of his father's death.

Ashima's character is unique in the sense that her adaptability in diasporic space is untypical. Gogol and Sonia, born and brought up in the USA, have to face lesser complications in adapting to the host culture as they do not have to bear the cultural baggage of the past. Ashoke, though a first generation immigrant like Ashima, makes a conscious choice of not going back to India as he sees America as a land of opportunities, where "Gogol can become whatever he wants" (0:25:17-0:25:19). Therefore, it is Ashima, the unwilling immigrant, who has to bargain the most in adapting to diasporic space. The all−pervasive duality of her personality is reflected in the ultimate decision of dividing her dwelling between America and India−six months in each place. Ashima internalizes the western values of self-dependence and individuality, and also learns to give her children their own space and freedom. Her work at the local library and friendships with white Americans indicate her openness to change. On the other hand, her concern for the grown-up Gogol, both when he first loses Maxine and then Moushumi,

reflects the anxiety of an Indian mother. Perhaps the most striking feature of Ashima's acculturation is the equanimity she shows in balancing two starkly opposite cultures within her. Creating such a balance on her part is significant, because she does not have any one guiding her through this uneven journey. As a transnational subject, she is attached to her cultural history but at the same time embraces changes contradictory to that history. Thus she expresses Grewal's idea of choosing an identity that is both liberated and incapacitated by contradictory American political practices that treat the country's gendered migrants in a complex way.

Since *The Namesake* is a film based on a novel, it is pertinent to compare the written and film versions based on the depiction of Ashima's character. The film's director Mira Nair took the liberty of portraying Ashima's character with bolder strokes than Jhumpa Lahiri did in the novel. In the novel, Lahiri mostly develops Ashima's character through introspection, that is, by portraying her thoughts more than her active presence. However, Nair makes her more expressive and outspoken. She renders the growth of Ashima's individual self through her bonding with her children and Ashoke and the way she lives after his death. Although in the novel Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the Gangulis as a couple who respect each other, she does not depict any romance in their relationships. In the film, however, Ashima is portrayed as a woman who is fully concerned about her individual entity, and also about the role she has to play with different people in her life. She is not only the wife of Ashoke, and the mother of their children, but also a woman who loves her husband. Her marriage was arranged, but she loved her husband by choice and not as a part of her wifely duty. Nair pays much attention to the development of the romantic relationship between Ashoke and Ashima by highlighting incidents only scantily mentioned in Lahiri's text. For example, Ashima mistakenly shrinks Ashoke's sweater in a washing machine.This leads to their first argument after marriage; the whole incident is described in one sentence in Lahiri's text (10). However, this incident is expanded into a beautifully romantic cinematic moment in Mira Nair's film where Ashima, hearing Ashoke's remonstrance about the shrunken clothes, locks herself in the bathroom to cry (15:33-17:00). Ashoke's attempt to calm down Ashima and make up to her in that scene initiates the tenderness between them, something that keeps growing in the course of the film.

Comparing the print and screen versions of *The Namesake*, Madhurima Chakraborty argues that whereas Lahiri represents migrancy as "a state beyond the simple interaction of monolithically construed home and host lands,…" Nair "not only reaffirms home and host as opposed binaries, but also, in creating this simplistic and dual identity, resorts to nation-statist associations of homeland with authentic identity…" (612, 616). She further observes that the film is less transnational and more nation-statist because "though the diaspora is transnational, diasporic culture makes no such commitment to questioning or compromising nation states" (619). Thus Chakraborty argues that as opposed to Lahiri's representation of diaspora as transnational, Nair makes her film portray the homeland and the host land as binaries and having monolithic appearances. However, in my analysis, though the film's overall message remains that diaspora is nostalgic about a homeland that is seen as static; Nair develops Ashima's character in a transnational way. This also reminds one of Hall's idea of cultural identity that is never static, but always fluid and

changing. The way she negotiates her identity in the diasporic space reaffirms the fact that she is capable of navigating between the home and host culture without being perpetually stuck anywhere. This point is illustrated in the following paragraphs using examples from the film version of *The Namesake*.

Nair's representation of a number of love relationships on screen accentuates Ashima's embodiment of Indian culture as well as adaptation of American ways. Unlike Gogol's relationships with either Maxine or Moushumi, which rely heavily on physical proximity, Ashima and Ashoke's bonding seems to be more spiritual and based on mutual love and respect. Ashima's reluctance to pronounce the words "I love you" like "Americans", as she terms it in the scene inside Victoria Memorial, reaffirms her stance of maintaining the tradition that considers displaying emotions openly as immodest (44:19-44:14). However, she does not want to disappoint Ashoke and at one point declares spontaneously that she loves him.

The duality in Ashima between tradition and modernity is visible in other instances of the film version of *The Namesake* in which she appears to be stronger as a character than the book allows her to be. For example, she tells the nurse of her discomfort about the length of the hospital apron during her stay in the hospital at the time of Gogol's birth. The nurse covers her legs with a blanket to relax Ashima somewhat at this point (20:08-20:33). In the novel, Ashima keeps her uneasiness to herself.

Three more striking scenes in the film outline Ashima's individuality in a way that the novel does not. The first one occurs when a white American friend at the library asks Ashima to imagine a moment of bliss in her life by closing her eyes and thinking about the moment when she had felt most intensely happy in life. When Ashima closes her eyes, like a revelation it occurs to her that she would be free from bondage by leaving America after selling their American house (1:39:14-1:39:44). Here the disposal of property symbolically refers to her eagerness to tear all roots and become free. Her ultimate decision of living in both America and India is another example of a preference for a fluid existence as opposed to being comfortable with confinement in a particular space. Ashima's decision to be borderless, a character trait reflecting her name, establishes her identity as the ideal transnational citizen.

When Moushumi asks Ashima whether she minds that Sonia's husband Ben is not Indian, Ashima answers in the negative, and says: "times have changed…no I don't mind" (1:40:44-1:40:54). Through such a candid declaration, Nair shows how Ashima is now capable of adapting to and negotiating with her identity. The most significant sequence in the film that establishes her as a strong individual contains the speech she delivers at the last party she throws at their Pemberton house. In it, she talks about her life's journey, and also about how she is defined by her years in America, not India. In the book, Jhumpa Lahiri presents these words as Ashima's interior thought. By changing the interior thought into a speech before guests Nair portrays an Ashima who is not hesitant to express her innermost thoughts. The film version of *The Namesake* thus redefines her in a new light and images her with bolder strokes.

The patriarchal values are subtly operative within the narrative of *The Namesake* as Ashoke is portrayed in it as a compassionate husband, as reversing the pattern of the

typical representative of patriarchy. However, from Ashima's perspective, the narrative seems to be seamlessly complicit with the traditionally patriarchal social framework of India. An arranged marriage had brought Ashima and Ashoke together and she had started her life in the host country depending on her husband, both socially and financially. After the birth of Gogol, she complies with Ashoke's resolution of staying back in America, although she wants to return home at that point. Her emancipation thrives in the space she is comfortable alongside the patriarchal boundary and not by shattering it. Nevertheless, the strong individual that is born within Ashima is evident in her embracing life once again after losing Ashoke, by seeking inner peace in musical lessons. Through the revival of passion for music in her, Ashima manages to create her own personal space at the end.

***English Vinglish*:**

Unlike *The Namesake*, *English Vinglish* operates crudely and overtly within a strong patriarchal mould treating it as normative. Shashi, the central character of the movie, is a middle−aged housewife who is continually harassed by her husband and teen-aged daughter for her failure to communicate in English. She toils all day long in serving her family but this labour is utterly undervalued by her family members. Although she possesses great culinary skills and runs a small household business selling homemade laddoos at a good price, the constant humiliation she suffers at home saps her self−confidence. She seems alright while interacting with outsiders, like laddoo buyers or even her daughter's teacher at school, but it is within her house and with her family members, that she feels unsure of herself. The strong patriarchal overtone of Indian society is depicted by Shinde through Satish's character who treats his wife Shashi as no better than a useful household object. However, this overtone is refreshingly deconstructed in the portrayal of the warm female bonding, firstly between Shashi and her mother-in-law, and secondly between Shashi and her niece Radha in New York.

The film's entrenched colonial concepts of empowerment, identity formation, freedom and authority are largely instrumental in shaping its postcolonial characters. The westernized husband and daughter symbolize superiority of their English medium education and the daughter's school is also a glaring evidence of the same disposition. Another parent in the school is shown as progressive because of her ability of speaking fluent English. It is also remarkable that Shashi anxiously keeps asking the teacher if her daughter is good enough in English as she recognizes this feat as more empowering than all other things. The way Shashi's four-week English lesson changes her status inside the family is another residual effect of the recurring colonial trope of the film.

Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* utilizes a number of tropes to develop the central character Shashi who is aware of the domestic discriminations she has to endure because of her not knowing English and because of being a simple housewife who does not question the way her family members treat her. In this film, the director invests various day to day objects with meaning to convey her message to the viewers. For example, she makes a newspaper a persistent symbol of expressing the status of a certain character. The film begins and ends with Shashi's encounter with newspapers. In the first scene it is shown that both Hindi and English newspapers arrive at their Pune house and she reads

the Hindi one, whereas the English one in preserved for her husband, the smart, dignified, superior Satish. In the last scene inside the plane, where the family are taking their journey from New York back home, the air hostess asks which newspaper they would like to read. Satish asks for the *New York Times* and Shashi also spontaneously asks for the same, only to change her mind after seconds, and asks whether they have any Hindi newspaper. The last scene implies the traversing of Shashi who now wants to read Hindi not as the only option available to her, but out of love for her mother tongue. This choice makes it clear that she learns English only to uplift her sense of dignity, not to make it an integral part of her life. As Sathian observes that the female figure in Bollywood films can achieve some degree of liberation within transnational cultural spaces, by exercising freedom of choice Shashi makes the best use of her returning flight, a space that symbolizes trans-culture in its true sense.

Food is another important leitmotif of the film as through the making of laddoos Shashi creates her identity. It is also worth noting that her ability of cooking excellent food is the only thing that Satish values about her. Shashi feels confident and happy when her customers praise her but ironically when her husband tells her that she was born to make laddoos, she feels humiliated. Reducing the wife to the status of someone who can just make good sweets is a patriarchal trope utilized by Shinde to make Satish look like an insensitive husband.

But it is language that is undoubtedly the most pervasive symbol of the film since it plays a vital role in the making of Shashi's new identity. From the beginning of the film she faces alienation and humiliation in her family as her husband and daughter unitedly ridicule her for her wrong pronunciation. She also feels unsure of herself before other parents from her daughter's school and before Satish's colleagues. This linguistic bias plays the key role in developing the colonial overtone of the entire film.

In New York when everyone from his sister's house speaks English with Kevin, the American groom of her niece Meera, Shashi feels uncomfortable and goes back to her room. She again suffers extreme embarrassment in the coffee shop where the woman at the counter insults her for poor English. However, it is noteworthy that she feels comfortable with her American teacher David, as she feels that no one will belittle her in the English class. The multi-lingual classroom in the New York Language Center symbolizes a harmonious space free from gender and racial biases. This is the place where Shashi starts to grow as an individual sculpting her own identity. The next sections of this article follows Shashi's quest for discovering her individual self that initializes in the English class.

The storyline of *English Vinglish* depicts Shashi's reluctant and lonely journey to New York to attend the wedding of her niece. Secretly, she takes a month-long English language course during the stay. A change can be seen in Shashi's attitude just after she boards the plane when she sips wine according to the advice of her co-passenger (played by Amitabh Bachchan). The adventure that starts that way continues as she successfully enrolls for the English course on her own, paying the tuition fee with the money she saved by selling laddoos. Shashi's craving for an independent identity is evident in the way she enjoys the new title of "entrepreneur" given to her by her English teacher (0:55:16-0:55:33). She celebrates her new name by dancing on the street, but her

enthusiasm is deflated as her husband shows indifference to it. However, she does not question his lack of interest and accepts it as normative.

Although Shashi has learned to speak English, how far she has been able to emancipate herself remains unclear at the end of the film. While the movie shows her inner struggle between tradition and modernity, she ultimately submits to the culturally defined role of an ideal housewife. She suppresses her feelings for Laurent, the French classmate who is romantically inclined to her. She also feels guilty as she is busy attending an English class when her son gets hurt. Shashi's internalization of her culturally defined role is too deep-rooted to make her see herself as an individual with personal longings. She still holds fast to the idea of the family as the place to reproduce the microcosm of culture, as opined by Appadurai, and strives to maintain dual identities inside and outside the home space. It is questionable whether her accomplishment makes her a better caretaker of the family or brings any radical changes in her. The wedding speech Shashi delivers towards the end of the movie is not meant to destabilize the existing mould of the society; it is rather used to strengthen it through the insertion of moral and familial values. The conciliatory tone of the speech embodies Shashi's type of emancipation, which is tempered with both tradition and modernity.

Unlike Ashima in *The Namesake,* Shashi in *English Vinglish* is eager to prove her worth before her family members through her struggle to learn English. Though this struggle begins as a means to increase her worth in the family, Shashi makes a self-discovery in the process and begins to question the present order of things in the society she is a part of. For example, after being praised for her culinary skill in the English class by everyone, she becomes aware of her talents. That awareness prompts her to tell Laurent sarcastically that "man cooking art, lady cooking daily job, duty" (1:07:20-1:07:28). She also expresses her disgust at her daughter who insults her on the phone by saying that children have no right to treat their parents so disrespectfully (1:15:04-1:15:20). Noticeably, Shashi has been treated very poorly by her husband and daughter from the very beginning of the film, but she starts to question such treatment after joining the English class in New York, for this is an act that helps her develop subject position to an extent. Because of her newly-found self-consciousness, she finds it harder to tolerate Satish's taunt that she was born to make laddoos, and tells Radha that all she needs is a little respect (1:50:37-1:50:44).

As stated earlier, Shashi's self-discovery does not lead to a sustainable change in her way of thinking; Shinde portrays her as too conditioned by patriarchal values to change, specifically after her family joins her in New York one week before their expected arrival. She seems to think that taking care of the family is more important for her than the English classes. Thus, Shashi's brief stay in New York brings a welcome change in her, if only temporarily. In this sense she can be said to fit into the definition of a cosmopolitan subject as given by Rajan as Sharma when the say that a cosmopolitan subject: "instead [occupy] a range of fluid subject positions, which can be trans-class, trans-local with competing value systems" (2).

However, even after making her self-discovery, Shashi does not directly question her husband or daughter about their demeaning behavior towards her; rather, she accepts them as they are. Compared to Ashima, Shashi proves to be a much weaker character and

someone willing to sacrifice her individuality for the sake of her family. Ashima chose to stay back in New York when Ashoke moved to Ohio. At the end, Ashima chooses to leave her children to find bliss in India. These two incidents prove that unlike Shashi, Ashima values her individuality to a much greater extent.

Both Ashima and Shashi are split between tradition and modernity, albeit in distinctive ways. In her insightful essay "The Habit of Ex-nomination: Nation, Woman, and the Indian Bourgeoisie" Anannya Bhattacharjee argues that Indian immigrants create the idea of a nation which is ahistorical and not a geographically bound unit. She opines that this idea of a nation, in absence of any historical context, is constituted of "a timeless essence of Indian unity in diversity", and "the question of women [is] inextricably linked to nation-ness" (Bhattacharjee 20-28). She also observes that "…Indian woman is expected to be responsible for maintaining this Indian home in diaspora by remaining true to her Indian womanhood" (Bhattacharjee 32). This idea of women as embodying culture, as defined by postcolonial nationhood, along with the patriarchal value system of the society, condition Ashima and Shashi in such a way that they always act within the given structure without even being aware of it. The level of internalization of these culturally modified values by Ashima and Shashi, especially the latter, is too deep to be transformed. However, these two female characters have gone through transformations and have come a long way.

The conundrum the woman characters of the two films discussed go through can be assimilated to Stuart Hall's views on identity. In Shashi's case, it might seem her self-discovery and forming of a new identity happens abruptly within too brief a period in New York. However, the fact is she has always been self-aware inwardly but was triggered to break the shell in the conducive ambience of her multi-national English classroom. Again, both Ashima and Shashi are in the process, rather than reaching the actual state of a changed cultural identity. In their juggling between modernity and tradition, they conform to the idea of "cultural identity" coined by Stuart Hall in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (234). According to Hall, cultural identity can be studied in at least two ways. Whereas the first kind of cultural identity reflects the shared historical experiences and cultural codes of a given people, the second, and more complicated type of cultural identity "is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being" (Hall 236). This second kind of cultural identity is associated with a constant transformation and therefore eschews fixity of essence. It is unstable in nature. Cultural identity can be either complicit with, or at variance with, historical orientation; it can even be both at the same time. That is why Hall defines cultural identity as "[n]ot an essence but a *positioning*" (237). Ashima and Shashi embody this cultural identity as they are both complicit with, and at variance with their historical positionality.

Films that depict Asian American people's struggle to balance between two cultures can be considered as a part of diasporic cultural studies. Diasporic cultural studies are inclusive of, though not limited to, transnational practices and thoughts of migrants who are influenced by the globalization of economy and culture. In this article, we see that the protagonist of *The Namesake* is subjected to transnational practices such as border crossing and learning new languages, driven by economy and culture. These same conditions apply to non-diasporic Shashi, who as a postcolonial subject utilizes English

as a tool for attaining emancipation. The colonial bias evident in the narrative of *English Vinglish* is reaffirmed by its protagonist's use of her short-term English course in attaining some sort of empowerment. Therefore, finally it becomes obvious that both Ashima and Shashi's mutability is inclusive of neo-imperialistic globalized practices reminiscent of their postcolonial identity.

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