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Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction

This paper argues that Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* offers motherhood as a site of agency for negotiating a transnational identity for the postcolonial female subject in diaspora. Lahiri shows how traditional gender roles – often considered subordinate in the postcolonial context in their appropriation by nationalist agendas – can be read as a source of empowerment when translated into the context of middle class immigrant life in America. *The Namesake* depicts the cultural and national fluidity offered by this status: the immigrant mother, a central character in this novel, is able to preserve the Indian traditions that link her to her homeland while simultaneously benefiting from the privileges afforded by American citizenship in order to ensure a successful future for her American-born children. An Indian matriarch living in the suburbs of Boston, she does so through the careful negotiations she makes for her family on a daily basis in response to the often conflicting demands of traditional Bengali culture and the pressure to become an assimilated American. Although in the context of Western feminism it may seem contradictory that it is through the role of wife and mother that a subjectivity which transcends any fixed national identity is achieved, this reading of Lahiri’s novel is informed by the arguments of transnational feminists who resist any essentializing understanding of female emancipation. This paper concludes that immigrant women from the so-called “third world” need to be understood not only in the context of their particular national histories, but also through the manner in which they appropriate these histories in forging individual identities in America. Lahiri’s *The Namesake* provides the occasion for such a discussion within ethnic American literary studies, especially as this field continues to engage with postcolonial and transnational paradigms.