

Social Epistemology and Feminism: Reading Feminized episteme in Mira Nair's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

The movie *Namesake* by Mira Nair based on Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake*, a major national best seller. The paper discusses the term 'social epistemology and feminism' and the interrelations between gender and other social categories such as race, class, culture and language, investigating their significance for knowledge-forming process. Feminist epistemologists investigate significant role of gender in knowledge production. The aim of the paper is to bring forth the way *how* an immigrant mother and as social epistemic agent Ashima plays a significant role in the knowledge-forming process in the development of her children in the foreign land.

Keywords: Stand point, social location, episteme, knowledge, custom, value, agent, existentialist, identity

1. Introduction

Social epistemology is the study of the social dimensions of knowledge. "Knowledge" as simply what is believed, or what beliefs are "institutionalized" in this or that community, culture, or context. All the effort is to identify the social forces and influences responsible for knowledge production so conceived. Social epistemology is theoretically significant because of the central role of society in the knowledge-forming process. It also has practical importance because of its possible role in the redesign of information-related social institutions. Feminist epistemologists investigate significant role of gender in knowledge production. Motivated by the political project of eliminating the oppression of women, feminist epistemologists are interested in how the norms and practices of knowledge production affect the lives of women and are implicated in systems of oppression. And seek to understand not only *how* our social relations of gender have shaped our knowledge practices, but also whether and how these relations *should* play a role in good knowing. As a category of social relations then, gender is a significant area of investigation for social epistemology. Additionally, feminist epistemologists have increasingly attended to the interrelations between gender and other social categories such as race, class, culture and language, investigating their significance for knowledge. It may be too strong a claim to suggest that all projects of feminist epistemology fall within the realm of social epistemology. It represents more than just a small subset of social epistemology, however. Feminist social epistemologists has provided key theoretical resources for understanding the breadth and depth of the social dimensions of knowing and shown interest in how gender plays out in knowledge practices is generalizable to an interest in how power relations play out epistemically, especially systematic relations of power. In *The Namesake* by Mira Nair elegantly shows how an immigrant mother combines through Bengali culinary, culture, custom, language and literature to create and redesign her surroundings similar to one found on Calcutta, it evokes not only the character Americanization, but also her nostalgia for India.

Social epistemology is theoretically significant because of the central role of society in the knowledge-forming process. It also has practical importance because of its possible role in the redesign of information-related social institutions. This paper is an effort to read the film *The Namesake* by Mira Nair through the social epistemological point of view and the protagonist of the film, Ashima as an true vessel of feminized episteme in social epistemology. It is important while discussing the Social Epistemology and Feminized episteme in Mira Nair's *The Namesake*.

According to some feminists that the epistemic relevance of the identity of knowers, however, are interested in forms of knowing for which it is questionable whether a differently located knower *could* have the same experience. For example, sex-specific bodily experiences, such as knowing pain during childbirth, cannot be accessed by members of the other sex. Feminists further argue that differentiated knowers expand this idea, suggesting that there are a vast range of experiences differentiated along the lines of social location. It can be understand by this example, in a gender-structured society a girl's experience in math class might differ significantly from her male counterpart's experience. The feminist posed the arguments that gender is epistemically relevant categories of social location apply only as long as the society under consideration is structured along the lines of gender.

Feminist standpoint theory has done the most to articulate the importance of perspectival differences stemming from social location. Sociologist Dorothy Smith argues for the epistemic advantage women sociologists have over male sociologists in their experience of a "bifurcated consciousness", caught as they are between the conceptual world of sociology and the material world of their lives as women (Smith, 7-13). Nancy Hartsock's "articulation of the theory argues that women's contributions to subsistence and childrearing result in a systematic difference of experience across the genders" (238-310).

Further feminist social epistemologists also stress the socially interactive nature of knowers, arguing that epistemically, human beings are deeply dependent on one another. At least three strains of argument support recognition of our epistemic

dependence and correspondingly, the interactive nature of knowers.

First, feminist social epistemologists who focus on institutional forms of knowing such as scientific research, medical practice, and legal systems understand that in these contexts we are highly reliant on others to produce knowledge for us. Second, arguments to the effect that knowers are differentiated from each other along the lines of social location suggest that in many cases knowers must rely on others differently situated from them in order to attain certain forms of knowledge. Third, recognizing that as children we are highly dependent on others both for our care and for the development of our epistemic skills, some feminist social epistemologists have argued that our epistemic dependence runs as deep as the conditions of epistemic agency itself. Lorraine Code has argued that epistemically, knowers are best thought of as “second persons”, who acquire epistemic skills through others, and who are dependent on others’ acknowledgement of them as an epistemic agent in order to develop and exercise epistemic agency. It is through our interactions with others and our development as children that we learn the skills of knowing, learn what constitutes knowing, and come to be counted among others as knowers.

Acknowledgement of the various forms of our epistemic interdependence has motivated investigations of the dynamics of social interaction and their effects on knowledge production. As we are all socialized differently because we come from different cultural backgrounds and we grow up in different communities. But at the core of every culture remains the uploading of basic human values. A globalized culture has now evolved and it must combat with the world of heterogeneous societies who do not wish to leave aside their historical particulars which give them uniqueness. Certain elements constitute markers of identity- food, clothes, language retention, religion, music dance, myths, legends, customs, individual community etc. These are retained, discarded or adopted differently at different times and places through social epistemology.

Mira Nair’s film *The Namesake* is based on Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, the Pulitzer Prize winner. In Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* the role of memory in a process of change is often used by the writer in an effective way. It is through the eyes of the first generation settlers that the second generation learns about the homeland. Culture displacement involves the loss of language, family ties and a support system. Lahiri stresses culture and its importance in immigrant experience with a humanist outlook. The paper is an effort to analyze Mira Nair’s *The Namesake* diasporic film can be appreciated in respect of Social epistemology and feminized episteme.

The film speaks the journey of Ganguli family from their tradition- bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle together after their marriage in America. They eventually have son Gogol and a daughter Sonia. The plot revolves around this family and the intricacies that come with being first generation migrant bound so much to their tradition and bringing up second generation American-Indians perpetually conflicted by identity crisis.

Instead of dealing forced exile like other diasporic films, *The Namesake* deals an existentialist choice that Ashoke and Ashima made, which nonetheless depicts the same sentiments of being in exile which is strewn about all over the film

through the experience of isolation. In the beginning of the film, a contrast has been made between India which has been shot in a very colourful and crowded and the consecutive scene portraying an almost deserted like, snowy and grey America “not a soul on the street” (Lahiri, 30). With this stark difference Mira Nair has tried to create in order to enhance this feeling of loneliness one feels in a foreign land through strategic use of a fitting colour palette. The scene where Ashima prepares some cornflakes a traditionally American food, but instead of having this dish in American way, she followed Indian way which shows her cultural background and identity. Ashima also wearing sari throughout the film shows her firm relationship in keeping with her tradition and at the same time evolving and learning what is best from her new environment. It shows that how gender plays out in knowledge practices in social location of cultural diversity. Being a foreigner Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts.

In foreign land Ashima could not forget her relatives in India and continuously longs for them. “For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, 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 ordinary life, only to discover the previous life has been vanished, replace by something more complicated and demanding (Lahiri, 49). Ashima’s love of family influences her to create a close-knit web of immigrant friends. This group practices Indian custom, speaks the Bengali language, and, in many respects, becomes a substitute family for the vast collection of relatives back in India. But for Ashima, the close relations between the immigrants become a disregarding their elder’s wishes are impossible whereas the situations reverse after a few years when their children follow the American tradition. As a true epistemically agent she is reluctant to learn to drive, she insists on wearing Indian clothing and eating Indian food, and for many years she lives in America.

One more important factor in the knowledge-forming process is the use of language. The use of Bengali language in the film by first generation is used to mark the moments of intimacy, difference, and comfort and some serious moments as Bengali folk music and songs like Rabindra sangeet, Narrul geeti, traditional Bengali lullabies beside Baul and Bhatiali which are significant to obtaining knowledge. After a settlement in the US when Ashoke is explains to Ashima the way to the Fulton Fish Market, Ashima replies in Bengali that if she gets lost then what will happen? Ashoke’s replies in Bengali that he will not let her get lost. Some other incidents like their last phone exchange just before Ashoke’s death, when Gogol returns from Cleveland with shaved head and when Ashok and Ashima are walking in a beautiful place near a school in this intimate scene Ashima expresses her love in Bengali hence Nair tried to remind that language plays both role-as a bridge and as a barrio for communication.

Adesh Pal in his *Teorizing and Critiquing Indian Diaspora* says that the first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From the second generation onwards ties with the homeland gradually get replaced by those with the adopted country. Food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs of individual community etc. become the markers of identity. These are retained discarded or adopted differently at different times and places.

The question of identity is a complicated issue for the second. Ashima and Ashoke try hard to hold on to their Indian-ness, their culture despite surrounded by the American culture all around. The second generation immigrants are not attached to their cultural past, infact; they find it easier to accept America's hybrid culture. Both Gogol and Sonia grow in suburban New York and choose American over their Bengali culture, which is not liked by their parents. Upon Gogol's graduation the family goes on a trip to Calcutta, as they enter India, "There are endless names Gogol and Sonia must remember to say, not aunt this and uncle that but terms far more specific: *mashi* and *pishi*, *mama* and *maima*, *kaku* and *jethu*, to signify whether they are related on their mother's or father's side, by marriage or by blood" (Lahiri, 81-82).

The significant role of gender in practices of knowledge through the norms in the social location of cultural diversity in Lahiri's *The Namesake* and in Mira Nair's film *The Namesake* present in their own way, different Bengali sangeet, some taboos imposed on Bengali Hindu house-wife, maintaining Bengali dressing style in the diasporic world, selection of a Bengali baby's name, baby's rice ceremony, practices of different Bengali rituals, deities and festivals, the use of Bengali literature, Bengali culinary items and some other cultural traits to remember Bengali 'men, milieu and moment', nationalism among the Bengali "imagined community" (Benedict Anderson's term) in a foreign land. While some feminist epistemologists such as Code and Fricker focus on interpersonal relations within a community, others draw attention to the importance of a knower's relations with multiple communities. They argue that many of the feminist critics of science were made possible by bridge knowers, individual feminist scientists interacting with both scientific communities and feminist communities (Tuana, 441-461). The idea of knowers' individual-in-communities has been suggested as a model that both captures the importance of interrelations with multiple communities and, by keeping individual knowers in the foreground, is capable of attending to the power relations that individual knowers must negotiate within those communities (Grasswick, 85-120). Nair also presented these elements more clearly through audio-visual modes and relies on "chronotopic" (Bakhtin's term) motif or sequences of time and spaces in narrative pattern that unify multiple temporalities and histories.

Gogol tried all in an effort to build a wall between his present and his past. Even with all his efforts to the contrary, however, Gogol cannot ignore the memories of his past – his name, his parents, and his Indian heritage. They have shaped his character and they define him as a human being. When the dynamics of his own family change after the death of a beloved family member, Gogol slowly begins to realize that he cannot simply walk away from who he is. He begins to love his family and their Indian custom and open up about his heritage in relationships, and he incorporates his family into his life. The years of resisting his past have made him uncomfortable in the present. Gogol at the end realizes why his parents used to visit their homeland annually; he understands the value their native culture had for them. Gogol opens towards a new understanding of his own rich culture which till now he did not try to understand. The film is a portrayal of the progression of Gogol's cultural education and the broadening of end he realizes the value of his Indian identity.

The identity of the individual, which is never consistently affected by society, is something one has to discover through a process of reflections and negotiations. As Hall says, "identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall, 10).

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