

A Study of Woman Psyche in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Low Land*

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Feminism is the important aspect in modern society. The role of women has changed from the homebound maiden to the Professional women. This paper tries to show the role of modern women depicted by Jhumba Lahiri in the novel *The Lowland*. Gauri is the protagonist who describe as unemotional, cold women, who doesn't have the home bond. She left her child Bela and second husband who gave a new life to her instead of her widowhood under the suppression of her mother in law. She wants to show her identity as a modern women who supposed to abandon her motherhood and move to California to do her Doctorate. As a modern woman she succeeds in her profession.

Manusmriti or Laws of Manu's also known as 'Manuav Dharmashastra' is the earliest tradition literature in Hinduism. According to Manusmriti. "A Female child, young woman or old woman is not supposed to work independently even at her place of residence." From this quotation, it is understood that how the traditional woman should be? But this paper tries to show the life of a modern independent woman.

The Indian women has been the subject of countless works of art and literature through the ages-which depict her as graceful and loving, a gentle creature in need of guidance and protection. Male are typically portrayed as stronger, more aggressive, dominant, more active and in general more important than females. Females, in contrast are presented as weak, passive and dependent. Most of the literary works are based on Patriarchy.

Patriarchy, which can be said to be the ruling social system almost all over the world, ordains that woman's place is her home, her roles as wife and mother is quite often synonymous with her total human existence. The term 'family' itself is derived from Latin 'Famulus' which means a household slave and 'familia' signifies the totality of slaves belonging to one individual who is the male head. In India, as in Greece, Rome and China,

woman has always been relegated to the background for her family roles and the task of civilisation has become more and more man's business.

In many cultures, the notion of male dominance, and the notion of women as passive, submissive and chaste have been the predominant images for centuries. They advocate the concept of man as woman's 'God', 'protector' and 'provider'. In many cases, customary practices have been based on an order that has not always been conducive to the well being and personal development of women, who are placed lower down the status line. They were regarded to be too stupid and motional to participate in politico-economic activities, since all their energies were channelized to the activity of reproduction. Pandhe in her book 'Women's Subordination' says : " the complementary separation of family and society forced women to stay at home; they could not be in two places at the same time" (Pandhe 20).

In Indian society women's basic role seems to be eternally that of a mother. E.O Wilson in his book *Socio biology: The New Synthesis* makes a very dismissive statement in this context. According to him, mothering is not only a socially role but one fitting women's physical and psychological needs; so it is our biology that determines our roles in society and if we go against it we shall be losers (24).

The oppression of women means the oppression of half the world, because women constitute half the population of the world. Such oppression against women led to an outburst which later became a socio political movement called feminism. Feminism was based on the idea that women can consciously and collectively change their social place. Feminism first emerged in the West and later spread to Asia; India is a feminist movement in the early twentieth century.

According to Gail Omvedt, "Feminism is not a form of social science nor is it a single consistent ideology. It can best be understood as the developing self- consciousness of women as an oppressed section struggling for liberation"(177). Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender.

The activist and the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir provided her views on feminism with the publication of '*The Second Sex*' and expressed feminists' sense of injustice.

Though Beauvoir's book sowed the seeds for a revolution, it did not exactly initiate the women's movement. The book which sparked off the movement was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. Fifteen years after graduating from college, Friedan conducted interviews with many of her erstwhile classmates and the results of this survey proved that the general assumption of a woman achieving happiness and contentment in marriage and motherhood was false. Most of the women interviewed by Friedan were wives and mothers, superficially blessed with all the comforts of life. Yet the survey proved that they were merely playing the role of a devoted wife and loving mother and were supposed to seek fulfilment in it. Friedan holds the view:

“for a woman, as for a man, the need for self-fulfilment autonomy, self-realisation, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. Women's sexual problems are in this sense, by products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfil her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystique of feminine fulfilment ignores”(3)

Friedan's book was followed by Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* in 1969. Millet is considered to be another important feminist of the twentieth century. She vociferously argues that in the patriarchal society, woman has been accorded a demeaning position. She gives a graphic explanation of the insecurities faced by women and she anticipates the problem which society would face one day in the form of female foeticide with the result of rapid scientific development which would enable pre-natal sex determination tests.

A long list of Indian women writers have questioned the patriarchal roles forced on women. Writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Ruth PraverJhabwala, Kamala Markandya, Arundhati Roy, ManjuKapur, Gita Hariharan and many more have given voice to the Indian women's dilemma. Standing on the threshold of modernity, she both aspires to be free and at the same time is afraid to break free. Many of the female protagonists speak out against retrograde customs and institutions. With amazing depth and clarity, these writers

provide a window into the feminine psyche and her struggle to assert herself. For most women authors, writing are a form of self expression.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one such author. She is an Indian American writer who exploded on the literary scene with her Pulitzer winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000). Her second book and first novel *The Namesake* (2003) was converted into a film by the acclaimed film maker Mira Nair. Her second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* was also positively received. In 2013, her second novel *The Lowland* was published, which was long listed for the Man Booker prize.

In the novel *The Low Land*, the main female protagonist Gauri falls in love with and marries Udayan Mitra. Udayan and his older brother Subhash are inseparable in childhood. When Udayan meets Gauri, Subhash is in America, pursuing higher studies. Udayan is caught up in the banned Naxalite movement and eventually is killed by the police in stark view of his parents and wife.

When he took her to America, he promised her to continue her higher studies in America. After giving birth to girl child named Bela, Subash did not allow her to continue her studies. But Gowri protested his view. Once Subash and Bela went to Calcutta to give last respect to his father's death, Gowri left one letter in Bengali and moved to California to pursue her Doctorate. After completed her Doctorate, she got a job in a college. The role of Gouri as a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother and as a professional woman is analysed. As a abandoned child in her family, she could not be a traditional wife and mother. She is different from others in all aspects. She emerged as a successful modern woman in her career.

Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex*, she writes, "Many women are conscious of these advantages, even those with the lowest-level jobs. I heard a cleaning woman as she was washing a hotel lobby floor say, "I never asked anyone for anything. I made it on my own." She was as proud of being self-sufficient."(824) Likewise Gouri also takes her own decision. She carves her own destiny and does not leave things to fate. She understands the passion Udayan had for the revolution, and accept the fact that it was bigger than their relationship. She makes the decision of leaving Subash and Bela because she realizes that they among themselves would be a much happier family than they would be with her and in

doing so, Lahiri again unravels the complexities of her female character and how they continue to live in these gray areas, long after the text is finished.

Gouri emerges in the text as one of the major enigmatic female character created by Lahiri. She can be starkly contrasted with her other female protagonist like Aashima Ganguly in *The Namesake* and Hema in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Lahiri's female characters are independent within their family. But Gouri is distinct from others by abandoning her family and her daughter.

Women usually worries about their physical appearance and they wish to be beautiful always. They love to wear jewels and attractive dresses. Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex*, writes about the dressings show the personality of a person. "She can do herself: perm, hairdos, makeup, and new dresses are already expensive enough."(827) But Gouri is different from other women. She prefers books to jewels and saris. As a student of Philosophy, she wish to be in the library always.

Subash's parents did not want her, they only wanted her child. They often repeated to her, "You won't be of help" (110) His mother said she could choose to go somewhere to continue her studies. She lead her life as a widow with the unloved mother-in-law and suffered by the enquires of the Policemen about the dead husband. When Subash approached her, she rejects initially. Subhash tried to convince her of the most obvious facts: "that in America no one knew about the movement, no one would bother her. She could go on with her studies. It would be an opportunity to begin again". (119) Later when she thinks about her future, she decided to go with him. "only the present moment, lacking any perspective, eluded her grasp. It was like a blind spot, just over her shoulder. A hole in her vision. But the future was visible, unspooling incrementally."(111) Giving due consideration to what Subhash suggested to her, Gauri decides to accompany Subhash to Rhode Island, not the least out of any love she felt for Subhash, but it offered an alternative for change and academic prospects which she longed for.

Her life had always been stretched to the extremities by choice or circumstances. While her elder sisters led a normal life with her parents, she was brought up in her grandparents' house and she felt a sense of autonomy. Later, she had felt audacious eloping with Udayan, flaunting conventions. With Udayan's death, she felt, the ligaments that had

held her life together had perished. Now her impulsive and calculated decision to be Subhash's wife, to flee to America with him, and with that action also to flee from Tollygunge, to forget everything her life had been, she felt even more extreme.

But Gauri had married Subhash also as a means of staying connected to Udayan. "In the back of her mind she told herself she could come one day to love him, out of gratitude if nothing else." (127). But even as she was going through this phase of her life, she knew it was useless, "just as it is useless to save a single earring when the other half of the pair was lost" (128). In Rhode Island, she was not receptive to Subhash either; she continued to maintain the distance and her independence from him. She was unable to express her gratitude for what he had undertaken or to convey the ways he was a better person than Udayan. They lived separately in the same apartment. All the while Subhash hoped things would be different in the course of time. He felt, "he had inherited his brother's wife; in summer he would inherit his child" (141). Initially she tried to mingle with the mixed Indian community: for instance, she was happy to mix with other women of the University at the dinner party of Narasimhan and Kate. Later she withdrew saying she did not have anything common with them. Subhash found it quite disturbing when she cut her hair short, dramatically altering her face and adopted the American style of dressing. Certain irrational fears haunted Gauri before and after the birth of Bela, her child.

When Bela turns five, Gauri is desperate to get out, to find time for herself after years of almost continuously staying at home and looking after the baby. But, Subhash refuses, saying that on principle, he didn't want his daughter to be looked after by babysitters while Gauri joined classes at the university. Gauri begins to resent Subhash for this. She takes it as a betrayal of what he has said when he had asked her to marry him. "Though he had encouraged her to visit the library in her spare time, to attend lectures now and again, she realized that he didn't consider this her work. Though he had told her, when he asked her to marry him, that she could go on with her studies in America, now he told her that her priority should be Bela. She's not your child, she wanted to say. To remind him of the truth" (162). She opposed the view of Subhash and she continued her studies.

This resentment continues to grow with Subhash finally having to make peace and allowing Gauri the freedom to attend classes. Gauri begins to cherish the time spent away from her daughter and her husband. She feels “depleted” doing the same relentless chores daily. Caught up in an unreceding surge of emotions, she also begins to grudge Subhash’s absence when he is away at work. “She resented him for going away for two or three days, to attend oceanography conferences or to conduct research at sea. Due to no fault of his own, when he did appear, sometimes she was barely able to stand the sight of him.”(163).

As the years passed Gauri is found to be withdrawing little by little from her role as a mother, contrary to the position she had naturally asserted earlier stating, "I'm her mother".(146) On the other hand, Subhash, who according to Gauri was just role playing, strives to achieve the implication of his promise to Gauri, "I'll make it [Bela] mine, Gauri" (137). After Bela began to go to school, Gauri spent her time at the University library on Philosophy. Her readings and ruminations on the concept of time in the context of her own future haunted her but they also kept her alive: "it remained her sustenance and also her predator". (151) She behaved "as if she'd reversed their roles, as if Bela were a relative's child and not her own". (159) Subhash had even gone to the extent of suggesting that Gauri would think of having a child with him to give Bela a companion. If they were four instead of three, he believed, it would close up the distance and correct the imbalance. Though Subhash was right from his own point of view, she would never risk no such compromises; "that though she had become a wife a second time, becoming a mother again was the one thing in her life she was determined to prevent from happening". (161) With Subhash she learned that sexual union intended to express love could have nothing to do with it; that her heart and her body were different things.

A farewell letter on the table. She had accepted a teaching position in a college just to get out of the mess she was in, exposing "only her self-interest, her ineptitude... She had done it, the worst thing that she could think of doing."(232) In the meantime, Gauri, away from Subhash and Bela, got settled in southern California, in a small college mainly meant for undergraduates. Her job was not only to teach students but also to mentor them. She was expected to be approachable and to maintain generous office hours. This obligation to be open to others and to forge alliances had in the beginning brought an unexpected strain. But she was quite successful with her colleagues and students. Yet she preferred isolation because

it offered its own form of companionship:" the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquillity of evenings" (237). When desire eventually began to push its way through, she sought friendships with men but she had never allowed herself to reach the point where they might complicate her life.

Unlike Ashima in *The Namesake*, Gauri refuses to toe the line and fit into the framework of the role of the traditional Indian Bengali immigrant wife. She rebels against the claustrophobic norms thrust on her. Although it is difficult to empathize with a mother who abandons her child and her husband, especially when the husband is the very person who gives her a means of escape from the life of a widow and an unwanted daughter-in-law. Gauri can be seen as an iconoclast, who shatters the preconceived notions of what she should and must do. The cutting of her hair and her sari's are the first signs of this rebellion. "In one corner of the floor, all of her saris, and her petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scraps of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws. He opened her drawers and saw they were empty. She had destroyed everything." (141). This appears, at the surface level, to be a deliberate rebellion and selfish attitude on Gauri's part but it won't be a hazard to state that it can also be attributed to the covert conflict and pain that results in such an overt display of her seething emotions --- of pain, separation in her childhood that amounts to abandoning in some way, then separation of her husband, his brutal killing, negation by her in-laws --- that her second husband failed to salve and gradually create a place for himself by replacing the past memories with love and affection, rendering emotional succour.

In *Towards a New Psychology of Women*, Jean Baker Miller recognizes that women are seen as nurturers and caregivers and that their "selves were almost totally determined by what the dominant culture believed it needed from women"(17). Thus, the so called feminine virtues are cherished in women and like, Gauri, if they want to break free, they are branded as failed mothers and wives. So, Gauri continues to feel alienated in her own home. She escapes into her world of classes at the university and the library and locks herself in her room, busy in course work. She is acutely aware of her shortcomings as both a wife and a mother, but chooses to continue on this path. Women have also "traditionally built a sense of self-worth on activities that they can manage to define as taking care of and giving to others."

(Miller,53). So, Gauri feels inadequate when she is unable to 'feel' like a mother ought too. And while she is grateful to Subhash for taking her away from Tollygunge, she resents him for what he is not, Udayan. A discerning reader will not miss the fact that it's almost as if she has already seen so much in life that she is unable to believe in the institutions of marriage or motherhood any more.

According to Shoma Sen, the novel features the feminism: "an individualistic kind of feminism in the character of Guari, who abandons everything to pursue a career in Philosophy."(141) Gauri finds a stable job teaching at presumably one of the Claremont Colleges. Gauri contemplates reaching out to Subash, Bela and her friends but never does, living, a mostly solitary life.

Thus, Gauri's final abandonment of her family comes as no surprise. Gauri's intellectual lifestyle, her passion for academics, and instead seeks a meaningful connection with living being. She has herself seen abandonment both at the hands of her parents and then at the hands of her husband. Betrayed by the man she genuinely loved, betrayed into being a party to a policeman's murder she loses faith in ties and the bonds of love. The study shows that by negating her feminine self, she does not find peace or self fulfillment. She is definitely a successful professional, but ends up as a lonely individual.

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