

From Subjugation to Emancipation: A Critical Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* with Special Reference to the Character *Gauri*

Dr. Saba Parveen

Assistant Professor, Dayanand Girls P.G College, Kanpur
E-mail: sabaraza25@gmail.com

Abstract—*The emancipation of women has always been a matter of great concern not only in India but also around the globe. The image of woman in the fiction of Indian Writings in English has gradually changed over the last four decades. There is a long list of female writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Geeta Hariharan, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor, Bharti Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri who are constantly portraying in their fiction experiences of emerging Indian women breaking the shackles of patriarchy and raising their voices against all kinds of social injustices. The emerging new woman depicted in the writings of these women writers is adhered to redefining her role and her relatedness to various institutions of the society in the light of modern thought and consciousness. The Lowland is Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel and her fourth literary output published in 2013. It was shortlisted for the National Book Award in 2013, and long listed for the Man Booker Prize 2013.*

The novel is a multigenerational family story partly set in Kolkata of the 1960s and 70s and partly in America. Gauri, the central female protagonist of the novel is an educated modern woman who refuses to play the conventional role of a mother, daughter and wife and liberates herself from all the emotional ties to pursue her intellectual life and freedom. The present paper aims at showing how Gauri struggles hard to redefine her identity in a hostile modern world and becomes an epitome of emancipation.

Introduction

The emancipation of women is highly debated and discussed issue in today's world. It is not about making a female equal to a male. Moreover it is also not about making one of them inferior to the other. It gives everybody both women and men an alternative and freedom to choose. Emancipation is all about freedom and equality for all. In Merriam-Webster dictionary an emancipated woman is defined as a woman who is free from old social limitations and customs. If we analyse Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* from this perspective, we find that Gauri, the central female protagonist of the novel, is shown as an emerging new woman who refuses to play the conventional role of a mother, daughter and wife and liberates herself from all the emotional ties to pursue her intellectual life and freedom. The present paper primarily aims at showing

how Gauri struggles hard to redefine her identity in a hostile modern world and becomes an epitome of emancipation.

Women have been the subject of innumerable works of arts and literature through the ages. She is depicted as graceful and loving, a gentle creature in need of guidance and protection. Males, on the other hand, are portrayed as stronger, dominant, energetic, more aggressive and in general more efficient and important than females. Women, in contrast are presented as submissive, passive, and dependent. Patriarchy is the base of most literary works of arts and literature. This image of woman has been gradually changed in the last four decades. In Indian writings in English, there is long list of Indian women writers' who have raised their voices against this patriarchal social order. Writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Geeta Hariharan, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor, Bharti Mukherjee, Ruth Pravar Jhabwala, Kamla Markandeya, Arundhati Roy and many more are constantly portraying in their fiction the experiences of emerging Indian woman breaking the shackles of patriarchy and raising their voices against all kinds of social injustices. An emerging new woman depicted in the writings of these writers is adhered to redefining her role and her relatedness to various institutions of the society in the light of modern thought and consciousness.

Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to the list of such authors. She started her writing career with her Pulitzer Prize winning collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000). Her second book and first novel *The Namesake* (2003) was also a grand success and transformed into a film by the acclaimed film maker Mira Nair. Her second collection of short stories *An Unaccustomed Earth* was also appreciated worldwide. *The Lowland* (2013) was Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel and fourth literary output. It was shortlisted for the National Book award in 2013 and long listed for the Man Booker Prize 2013.

The novel *The Lowland* is a multigenerational family story partly set in Kolkata of the 1960-70s and partly set in the United States of America. Gauri, the central female character

of the novel, is an educated modern woman. She falls in love with Udayan Mitra and marries him. Udayan and his older brother Subhash are inseparable in childhood. They go to school together, listen radios and learn more codes. In youth the brothers parted their ways. Udayan drawn towards reform and revolution and becomes an activist in the Naxal Movement. Subhash, on the other hand, leaves for America for his Graduate Studies to Rhode Island, U.S.A. When Udayan marries Gauri, Subhash is in America. Udayan is caught up in the banned Naxalite Movemant and eventually is killed by the police in front of his parents and wife.

When Subhash learns from his parents in a letter that Udayan has been killed, he comes back to India to pick up the pieces of his shattered family and to heal the wound Udayan has left behind. After becoming a widow, Gauri was treated disdainfully by her in laws. She was pregnant with Udayan's child. Seeing the pathetic condition of Gauri, Subhash proposes her for marriage just for the sake of her child. Initially Gauri rejects his proposal but later she agrees as he promises her to continue her higher studies in America. Subhash tries 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". (Lahiri p.119)

After giving birth to a girl child named Bela, Gauri wants to continue her studies but Subhash doesn't allow her as he doesn't want his child to be left on the mercy of a babysitter. Gauri dissents from his view. She begins to feel suffocated both in marriage as well as her role as a mother. Once when Subhash and Bela has gone to India to attend the last ritual of his father, Gauri leaves her home and moves to California to pursue her Doctorate. After completing her studies she managed to get a job in a college where she has to play the role of a teacher as well as of a mentor. Here the role of Gauri as a mother, wife and daughter can be analyzed. She is a different woman in all aspects. Being an abandoned child in her family she could not be a traditional wife and mother but she emerged as a successful modern woman in her career. Simone De Beauvoir 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 all my own." She was proud of being self sufficient. (Beauvoir p.824) Likewise Gauri is also capable of taking her own decision. She does not leave things to fate and curves her own destiny. She was very well aware of the Udayan's passion for revolution and accepted the fact that it was bigger than their relationship. She takes the decision of leaving Bela and Subhash because she knows that they among themselves would be a much happier family than they would be with her. This whole action unravels the complexities of Jhumpa Lahiri's female character.

Women generally wish to be look beautiful always. Their physical appearance, dressings, jewellery are a matter of great concern for them. As Simone De Beauvoir writes in *The*

Second Sex "She can do herself: perm, hairdos, makeup, and new dresses already expensive enough."(Beauvoir p.827) but Gauri is not at all interested in all these worldly pleasures. She is different from all the other woman of her age as she prefers books to jewels and sarees. She used to spend most of her time in the library studying her Philosophy book. It seems that while portraying the character of Gauri, Lahiri defies all the notions of a woman, an Indian woman in particular. Eventually, Gauri leaves her home, daughter and husband to follow her intellectual and academic life in California far away from them without leaving any clues about her exact address and contact details. No emotional ties and motherly affection dissuade her from pursuing her desires instead liberate her physically and psychologically from all the familial ties and responsibilities.

Gauri is grateful to Subhash for giving her new life and opportunity. He brings her away from the prying neighbours and government official. Gauri admires Subhash for his more evolved attitude than Udayan. "...Gauri observes Subhash independence in cooking and finds him opposite to Udayan. Though Udayan fought for the freedom with revolutionary ideas, he expected to be served at home either by his mother or by Gauri."(Lahiri p.91) Gauri's gratitude to Subhash for bringing her out from the hostile environment of Kolkata and Subhash humane attitude cannot coax her to love Subhash. She is continuously haunted by Udayan's memory and his untimely death fills her heart with anguish at Udayan for leaving her alone in this hostile world. Udayan is also a reason for her marrying Subhash as she wants to stay connected with him, " In the back of her mind, she told herself she could come one day to love him, out of gratitude if nothing else"(Lahiri p.127) that's why she was not receptive to Subhash and stayed aloof from him.

In creating Gauri, Lahiri has defied all the notions of an Indian woman that she has presented in her earlier fiction. Ashima, the female protagonist of the novel *The Namesake*, is perfectly fit in the conventional role of a woman, a good wife and a devoted mother. Despite of being a part time employee of the library, Ashima is very icon of a mother. Unlike Gauri, Ashima shares a loving relationship with her husband and children and she is more caring and connected parent. Gauri is opposite to Ashima. She is a rebel. She rebels against her family and marries Udayan. She rebels against Subhash and Bela and abandons them unabashedly. Gauri's act of tearing her sarees and cutting her hair short are symbolic indication of her transformation from a conventional woman to an emerging new woman who doesn't bother about the ethics. She neither feels guilt nor remorse for her action. She is portrayed as a unique individual with her own ambition and aspiration that she doesn't sacrifice for anyone.

Conclusion

If we analyze the character of Gauri through feminist perspective, it is obvious that she is a proponent of liberal

feminism that demanded 'equal access to the symbolic order' (Moi p.12). The early feminist believed in liberation of women from all sorts of restrictions 'Woolf...ends up firmly in favour of women's rights to financial independence, education and entry into the professions.' (Moi p.14)Gauri liberates herself from all the shackles that obstruct her identity and individuality. She is an incarnation of Moi's idea of a woman'. She averts herself off from the responsibilities of a wife and a mother. She sheds her femininity by cutting her long hair to short and replacing her traditional sarees for slacks and tunics. She abandons the comforts of a warm family to pursue her academic and intellectual life. Thus, throughout the novel, Gauri emerges as a new woman, a woman who is breaking the shackles of patriarchy and age old conventions. The journey from subjugation to emancipation was not easy for her and she has to lose many familial and relational bonds while pursuing her academic and intellectual life and career. The character of Gauri can be seen as an epitome of emancipation who shatters the preconceived notions of what she should do and must do.

References

- [1]. Beauvoir, Simone de., *The Second Sex*. 1949. Trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley. Newyork: Vintage, 1974.
- [2]. Lahiri, Jhumpa., *The Lowland*, Random House India, 2013.
- [3]. Toril, Moi., *Sexual/Textual Politics*. II.ed. Routledge. Newyork and London. 2002.