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Gender and Feminist Consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

Bipasha Majumder (De)
Assistant Professor & Head
Department of English
Debra T.S.K.S. Mahavidyalaya
Vidyasagar University
West Bengal

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Abstract:

The Lowland, Jhumpa Lahiri's fourth book published in the year 2013, is a multi-generational family story partly set in Calcutta of the 1960s and 70s and partly in America. It presents a kaleidoscopic picture of contemporary world encompassing a number of important issues like post-colonialism, immigration, environmentalism and ecology. My endeavour in this paper is to study the issue of gender and feminist consciousness in this novel in detail.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Identity, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Widowhood

In the post - independence era, Indian English fiction written by women writers marks a signal departure from the network of issues like nationalism and confrontation of tradition and modernity, which frequently informed the pre-independence literary gamut, in favour of intensely personal, individualistic issues such as women's quest for identity, recognition, freedom, power and value that provide spiritual nourishment to their alienated selves. Jhumpa Lahiri is a distinguished figure in the post-independence Indian English fiction. She is an Indian American writer who exploded on the literary scene with her Pulitzer Prize winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000). *The Lowland* is Lahiri's fourth book which was short listed for the National Book Award in 2013, and long-listed for the Man Booker Prize 2013. Her new novel is a multi-generational family story revolving around a Bengali immigrant family in the United States (The Mitras) and the Indian section serves as a backdrop against which the story develops. Lahiri says in an interview that the book is based on a tragic incident she first heard about in India during one of her many visits. Two young brothers involved in a violent political movement, were killed just a few hundred yards from her grandparents' home in Calcutta. Their family was forced to watch as they were brutally killed. As Lahiri has put it: "That was the scene that, when I first heard of it, when it was described to me, was so troubling and so haunted me - and ultimately inspired me to write the book" (Neary). In fact Lahiri, in this novel, presents a kaleidoscopic picture of contemporary world encompassing a number of important issues like post colonialism, immigration, environmentalism and ecology. Much ink has been spilt over these issues. But very few works have been done on the issue of gender and feminist consciousness in her novel. My endeavour in this paper is to study this much-worried issue in detail.

Admittedly, women have been fighting for the same rights as men for, approximately, the last hundred years (especially around the turn from 19th to 20th century with the struggle

for the women's suffrage and with second wave feminism and radical feminism in the 1960s) and have been able to improve their situation. Numerous studies and statistics reveal the fact that women have been capable of making some changes to the traditionally accepted feminine gender role. Nevertheless- and this is significant- there is still a lot of work to be done. Gender discrimination is still widespread. One may find instances galore if one takes a look at the newspaper headlines. There is still regular trafficking in of women; female foetuses are killed; five-year-old girls are raped. In an Indian scenario, the situation of women is so grave that gender discourse and feminist movement are inseparable from the concern of human rights in India. Our concern should be not just with equal rights for men and women but with the whole range of socio-political issues related to protection of human rights. In India, "women should receive their due rights and place in society only if they go beyond petitioning the government to make symbolic gestures and concessions on narrowly defined women's issues" as Madhu Kishwar writes in *Off the Beaten Track : Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women* (271-276). True, in Indian context, ideas of western feminism are somewhat out of place. We have to consider the issue of gender and feminist consciousness in *The Lowland* in this Indian Social context.

In *The Lowland*, the female protagonist Gauri falls in love with Udayan and marries him later on. Born just fifteen months apart, Udayan and his elder brother Subhas are inseparable from each other, one often mistaken for the other. They are generally regarded as 'mirror images' of each other. When Udayan meets Gauri, Subhas is in America pursuing a life of scientific research. Udayan - charismatic and impulsive - is drawn towards the Naxalite movement of 60's and 70's whereas Subhas, the dutiful son, takes the easier road and leaves home to pursue a peaceful life of higher studies in America. He does not believe that an imported communist ideology can solve India's problems of poverty and inequality. As Udayan falls deeper in to communist ideology and ensuing violence, he is shot and executed by the paramilitary in stark view of his parents and wife. "There was the clean sound of the shots, followed by the sound of crows, coarsely calling, scattering" (105). Subhas receives a telegram which said "Udayan killed, come back if you can" (83). He immediately comes back to India hoping to pick up the pieces of a shattered family and thus to recover the wounds Udayan has left behind including those seared in the heart of his brother's wife, Gauri. On reaching home, he first meets his parents "[c]alloused by grief, blunted by what no parent should have seen" (91). And then he meets Gauri, widow of his brother, Udayan.

Her long hair was pulled back above her neck. She sat with her head down, her wrists bare, dressed in a sari of crisp white. She was thin, without a trace of the life she was carrying...He saw that the fish he had been served at lunch had not been given to her (94).

Indeed, widowhood in India is a state of social death. It is virtually impossible to overlook their presence on the streets of Vrindavan. They can be spotted in white saris, shaven heads and eyes filled with pain. Even though they have not committed any crime, they are compelled to live a miserable life and it is blasphemous for them to complain about that. They are ostracized as ill omens who deserve an isolated life as they are believed to have

brought death to their husbands. They are coerced to live a life devoid of any pleasure, comfort and companionship. Let us recall such lines as:

The vermillion was washed clean from her hair, the iron bangle removed from her wrist. The absence of these ornaments marked her as a widow. She was twenty- three years old...After the mourning period ended her in-laws began to eat fish and meat again, but not Gauri. She was given white saris to wear in place of colored ones, so that she resembled the other widows in the family. Women three times her age (108-109).

On seeing the discrimination meted out to Gauri, Subhas pleads for her telling her mother: “Why don’t you ever talk to her? ... You’ve taken away her colored clothes, the fish and meat from her plate... It’s demeaning. Udayan would never have wanted her to live this way... You can’t separate them. For Udayan’s sake, accept her” (114). His mother gets angry with him and says: “Don’t tell me how to honor my own son” (114). She further says that Gauri “could go somewhere to continue her studies. She might prefer it” (114). In fact his mother’s deliberate coldness toward her daughter-in-law, reinforced by his father’s passivity seems to be intended to drive her away from the house.

Thus Lahiri has taken up an interesting issue of women in this novel – the relationship of women with other women- thus with themselves. Psychoanalysis has totally mythologized the positive values of this kind of relationship. Lahiri seems to suggest in this novel that women are not only archetypal victims but also accomplices in the system of exploitation though in their subservience to the prevailing power structure in the family that acts as a powerful agent of patriarchal values and concerns. In fact the patriarchal values are so deeply rooted that the mother-in-laws can’t help believing in the reigning patriarchal ideology (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority) and so they derogate their own sex and co-operate in their own subordination. When mother-in-laws torture their daughter-in-laws they only unleash their frustration on them thus maintaining the prevailing power structure in the family.

Another important issue Lahiri seems to suggest through the characterization of Gauri is that mere education is not enough for emancipation of women. They should have the inner strength to resist the patriarchal view that widows, and not the widowers, are ill omens who deserve an isolated life. In *The Lowland* Gauri can do nothing but to live a miserable life of a widow after Udayan’s death. However Subhas extends his helping hands towards her and gives her a means of escape. Against his parents’ wishes he marries her and takes her to America “[t]o take his brother’s place, to raise his child, to come to love Gauri as Udayan had” (115). Lahiri says: “He had tried to deny the attraction he felt for Gauri. But it was like the light of the fireflies that swam up to house at night, random points that surrounded him, that glowed and then receded without a trail” (116). Moreover Subhas knows it well that even if the police were to leave her alone, his parents would not and Gauri will not be able to protest against the ill treatment meted out to her by her mother-in-law. Giving due respect to what Subhas suggested to her she, therefore, decides to accompany Subhas to Rhode Island, not the least out of love she feels for him, but out of an opportunity it offers for higher studies

and economic freedom and after all an identity of her own which she always longed for. Her calculated decision to be Subhas' wife and to flee from Tollygunge to Rhode Island is a very significant one as it reveals the hardships faced by women when living alone without their male partners. So an Indian widow like Gauri always tries to find an alternative to her pain-fraught existence.

In Rhode Island Gauri gives birth to a daughter named Bela. As the time passes, she is found to be withdrawing from her role as a mother and starts to feel suffocated. She continues to be haunted by the memories of her first husband, the real father of Bela. "Even now, part of Gauri continued to expect some news from Udayan. For him to acknowledge Bela, and the family they might have been"(154). When Bela starts to go to school, Gauri finds time for herself and expresses her wish to attend classes at the university. Initially Subhas refuses saying that he doesn't want his daughter to be looked after by babysitters. Let us recall such lines as:

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'd 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(162).

Gauri begins to resent Subhas for it and takes it as a betrayal of his earlier promise. This time we can find her inner strength to resist the patriarchal ideology that women have to do all sorts of household work after their marriage despite the fact that they have capabilities for other activities. In fact Lahiri strongly stresses the need of women's activity in every field of life. Let us recall what Anita Desai, another distinguished figure in Indian English fiction, has said: "The social system from long has been opposed to independent work and intellectual exercise by woman. Why do we not have an Indian Mrs. Carlyle?" ("Indian Women Writers: The Eye of the Beholder" 58) Gauri feels 'depleted' doing the same chores daily and begins to begrudge Subhas's absence when he is away at work.

She waited for Subhas to take over, to allow her to leave, to attend her class or to study at the library. For there was no place to work in the apartment, no door she could shut, no desk where she could keep her things...She resented him for going away for two or three days, to attend Oceanography conferences or to conduct research at sea (163).

Finally Subhas "willing to compromise" (163) allows Gauri the freedom to attend classes at the university where she starts to argue with her professor and her classmates, who are all men, regarding anti-positivism, praxis, immanence and the absolute. We may recall such lines as: "They never solicited Gauri's opinion, but as she began to contribute to the discussion they listened, surprised that she knew enough, at times, to prove them wrong" (165). Here Lahiri has empowered Gauri thus refuting the prevailing vague concepts of masculine as active, dominating, rational and creative and feminine as passive, acquiescent, emotional and conventional. The gender attribute pertaining to Subhas' sex is somewhat missing in him. This type of unheroic male figure lacking in the expected machismo surely

points to Lahiri's deliberate eradication of male-female dichotomy thus emphasizing a kind of alignment with feminist strategies in writing this novel. Here Subhas finally makes compromise and Gauri escapes in to her world of Philosophy classes at the university her priority being in intellectual pursuit and not child bearing.

Thus the novel breaks the mould of a stereotype image of a mother – one who instantly and instinctively puts motherhood and her children above all things. In fact the patriarchal civilization has ignored women's efficiency in other fields apart from rearing their children and degraded them as uncivilized, submissive sexual objects. Significantly, women themselves are taught, in the process of being socialized, to internalise the patriarchal ideology (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority). Even women who call themselves feminists don't always realise it. Though Gauri has been presented as an iconoclast in this novel, she is not without a conflict - conflict between her traditional role as a wife and mother and her career, self-identity, recognition, power and value in this male-controlled society which subordinates women to men in all cultural domains. Gauri is acutely aware of her shortcomings as a mother and feels guilty when she is unable to feel as a mother should. Her parental instinct battles with her craving for independence. We may do well to recall such lines as:

But her worst nemesis resided within her. She was not only ashamed of her feelings but also frightened that the final task Udayan had left her with, the long task of raising Bela, was not bringing meaning to her life... after five years, in spite of all the time, all the hours she and Bela spent together, the love she'd once felt for Udayan refused to reconstitute itself. Instead there was a growing numbness that inhibited her, that impaired her (164).

In fact women have traditionally felt a sense of self-worth on activities like nurturing and taking care of others. When they are unable to look after their family they feel inadequate and Gauri is no exception to it. However, Lahiri is bold enough to write about one who finally gives priority to her intellectual pursuit rather than child bearing thus breaking the mould of a stereotype image of a mother. In fact our society doesn't allow a mother's self-interest to be taken in to account along with caring for others. Hirsch writes in the book *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* that this is a "pervasive general cultural taboo to which all women whether white or black, are subject" (170).

However, it is difficult to sympathise with a mother who abandons her child and her husband, a man who gives her a means of escape from the miserable life of a widow and an unwanted daughter-in-law. Admittedly, economic deprivation and physical brutalisation are absent in the life of Lahiri's female protagonist in this novel. Her material wants are taken care of by her husband. As the novelist says: "She never expressed any unhappiness, she did not complain" (159). Nevertheless – and this is significant – Subhas is unable to enter the emotional world of Gauri who remains haunted by the memories of her first husband, Udayan. He never encourages her to visit the library in her spare time or to attend lectures on German philosophy. He never admires her intellectual progress. He never stands by her on her way to self-discovery and emancipation from the assigned identities of a wife and a mother. He fails to realise the sense of isolation she suffers from after she is compelled to

marry her husband's brother. We may cite such lines as: "But the smiling, carefree girl in the photograph Udayan had sent, that had been Subhas's first impression of her, that he had also hoped to draw out – that part of her he'd never seen" (159). And so, I think, the character of Gauri deserves our sympathy that gets intensified when she meets her daughter after several years only to be rebuffed by her. Bela introduces Gauri to Meghna, her only daughter, by saying: "This lady was a friend of your grandmother's, ... That makes her your great-aunt. I haven't seen her since your grandmother died" (310). Thus, Gauri becomes a successful professional but ends up as a lonely individual upon whom Lahiri seems to confer a kind of martyred dignity making her a tragic heroin of the novel.

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