

A STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S WOMEN FROM FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The core objective of this paper is to perceive whether Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction has feminism or not in reference with her woman characters. This paper is an observation to confine the different attitude of Lahiri's women both in the aspects of predicament and empowerment. This paper also exhibits that Lahiri's attitude of feminism is different from other Indian postmodern feminist writers, because, her writings are about Indian immigrants in foreign countries. Global or transnational problems of the Indian women to get existence in their non-native countries are the struggles every day they face and these are vividly told in this paper. These women in order to overcome all their hurdles of existence fight for identity and gender equality. They are adaptable to the cross-cultural life and want to be the independent individuals as they are educated, employable, professionals and accustomed to face the situation of struggles as they are ethno-centric. Therefore, Lahiri's women are observed in this study as transnational, liberal, and stereotypical, radical and archetypal by attitude. Lahiri's women of both first and second generation immigrants and their tendency towards alien life are differentiated in this paper.

Key words: *Feminism, predicament, empowerment, stereotypical, archetypal, liberal*

Introduction

Writers of Indian origin, especially in North America, have attended international recognition. Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Divakaruni, Rohinton Mistry and Anita Rau Badami have produced powerful literature and received prestigious awards. There was an influx of Indian immigrants in the USA after the immigration act of 1965 so that a large number of Indians, especially students and professionals, are accepted and they become the part of the American society. As a consequence, immigrants from India are the American settlers. Jhumpa Lahiri like Nandini Bhadra follows her new approaches to enhance her diasporic writing by incorporating cross-cultural, transnational and postcolonial inquiries. She is one among the women novelists who have taken a foremost position in the art of narrative of realism. There is a spurt in the output of stories produced by these diaspora women writers who specially concentrate on feminist literature. Woman has always been subject of distress in the Diaspora literature. Through various shades of life, these Diaspora writers try to present their women truly and their writings are not exempted from the aspect of the predicament of women.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a writer of Indian Diasporas, vividly depicts in her fiction about the predicaments of Indian immigrants of women in the alien countries where their status is pitiable. Her female characters are the worst sufferers due to their identity loss in a land which is adopted by their husbands. Her women struggle to assimilate in the alien countries as immigrants. As a consequence, they remember their relatives and cling to their own attire and tradition. Most of the female characters are housewives who always remain at home

performing household works. Though they have migrated to other countries, their roles are the same; to give birth, to sweep floor, to cook and to serve her husband and children. They are still subjugated, dependent, neglected women due to their silent suffering. Lahiri thinks: “for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation and the knowledge of longing for the lost world are more explicit and distressing than for their children”. (*An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri by Arun Aguiar*)

Global Feminism or Transnational Feminism is mainly concerned about how globalization affects people across nationalities, races ethnicities, genders, classes and sexualities. This feminism in the third world countries is involved in the professional workforce and such women detract from the migrants’ ability to care for their children. Certain women are outsourced labour because of global demand. This sense of empowerment leads to domestic abuse and gender inequality, however, they are they are able to work across the borders. The Second World War causes the national shortage of labour in the United States and it is an opportunity to women to be employable. They are free from their traditional gender roles as they are employable. Women are liberal from the domestic suffrage in the third world feminism which focuses on the patriarchal oppression that confirms a woman to the household and traditional work. The idea of *liberal feminism* is to break patriarchal oppression of traditional roles, to make the women to be educated and employable and to make them ethnocentric for facing a situation apart from struggles.

Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the distinct experiences of two generations of expatriates who have to mingle with new culture with their Bengali culture. She brilliantly shows her first generation immigrants to be in isolation unlike her second-generation immigrants. Through her writings, the writer consciously or unconsciously voices the mute history and experience of female immigrants. Her female characters are all trapped in a world where they do not belong to. In her writings she depicts different kind of dilemmas in the lives of Indian female immigrants dealing with different themes as miscarriages, marital difficulties, extra marital relationship and generation gap etc. Lahiri's fiction exhibits that the women's migration not out of desire or curiosity but it is due to obligation or duty towards their husbands. Husbands move to another country as a part of their profession and this causes their housewives to follow them without other option. Lahiri fiction is a good instance to reflect certain Indian Bengali women experiencing the predicaments of life. Lahiri is a successful writer in depicting the sense of alienation among her female characters who are exiled and feel suffocated in their adopted land. She presents a true picture of Diaspora women who remain ideal wives of their husbands following native culture in their new homes. These women silently bear the pain of nostalgia and alienation and make an effort to be happy in their family life.

Lahiri does uphold feminist ideals throughout some of her stories which complicate a critical reading of her stories. Although some scholars would like to use Lahiri's short stories as an example of purely womanish themes, further examination reveals that the dichotomy between male and female is increasingly complicated. This is especially true in Lahiri's text because of the complication of cultural differences and the Indian-Bengali diaspora. Her writings both contribute and contest the ideas of womanism and feminism in a way that demonstrates the

difficulty of assigning one reading or the other to these short stories. Lahiri's feminism is relevant to exhibit her women in the view of sexism, stereotyping, emancipation, sexuality, sacrifice, tolerance, acceptance, social and psychic pressures, forgiveness, courage, protection, possessiveness, love and care, understanding and tension, passive sufferings, displacement, migration, adaptation, transformation, reinvention, cultural resilience and diasporic consumption. Lahiri is different from other Indian writers writing in English. Most of the Indian fiction writers writing in English are born and brought up in India, although the writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Jhabvala, Vikram Seth and Salman Rushdie are living either in England or America naturally. But Lahiri's connection with India may be through her parents and grandparents. So her knowledge of India is bound to be confined to the stories from her grandparents, parents, books and newspapers.

Feminism in Lahiri's fiction

Lahiri is a second generation immigrant giving a perfect voice to portray the feelings of Indian immigrants of women. Her history and background resonates in her stories with a sense of auto-biography authenticating her characters' feelings and experiences. Her *Interpreter of Maladies* attempts to interpret the maladies of the human mind. These stories focus on the intercultural miscommunication and conflicts experienced by both male and female immigrants of second generation Indian Americans. Lahiri explores the themes of emotional struggle of love, communication barriers, and incompatible relationships, the East-west cultural distinctions, isolation and dislocation and loss of identity. She shifts lines between gender, sexuality and social status within the diaspora condition. Whether the character is a homeless woman from India or in the United States, they all display the effects of displacement in diaspora. Lahiri views herself as an interpreter of emotional pain and affliction. Her characters have been up-rooted from the secure life-mode of traditional set up and are struggling to cope with the new environment. Most of these are Bengali immigrants living abroad. They are unable to cut off the cord completely. In this process, they are alienated and lost in the wilderness. The trauma of cultural dislocation, an acute sense of loneliness and pangs of estrangement suffered by the Indian immigrants in America are the major maladies interpreted by Lahiri who handles the problems of immigrants in the alien countries. The traumatic life of immigrants is depicted with such authenticity because of her own longing to find her belonging in the maze of cultural alienation.

The aim of '*Radical Feminism*' is to make women as the care takers of children and the cleaners of the houses. This feminism is about the traditional dichotomy that maintains men as economically in power over women. This kind of feminism is observed from Jhumpa's short-story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* that deals with the modern problems of the so-called women of the modern and material world. One of them is like Boori Ma, who struggles for bread and butter and who lives in six by six shelters to hide herself, suffers from self-created maladies. The pain of loss that Boori Ma in "Real Durwan" feels can also be interpreted in terms of how people feel about her. The readers sympathize with her for the loss of her family. The housewives in the building in an attempt to explain her exaggerations collectively take her to be a homeless migrant in pain. This is about an old woman called Boori Ma whose life is sympathetic when the reader sees her living in the shelter given by

people in an apartment. She has had a glorious past, a rich life, in her youth. This is the turn of her fate, from heights of glory to the bottoms of misfortune. “*Bechareh*, she probably constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family, was the collective surmise of most of the housewives” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*: 72). She works there as a durwan or sentry, living under stairs waiting for donations. This old woman has descended from the heights of kingly glory to the dust. Residents of the apartment finally decides what they need is a real durwan.

The female characters of *Interpreter of Maladies* have maladies like alienation, guilt-complex, self-insufficiency, over-ambitiousness etc. This book of Lahiri stands for women’s oppression socially as depicted from “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”. Obsession with the feminine world and problems of femininity are unceasingly engaged in Jhumpa’s fiction of realism. This is, in fact, is a different kind of story which really describes about the actual predicament of the women who bear the pressure of horror of the war-time events. The war incidents of feminist issues such as; the woman teachers are dragged out and shot dead, in the same way, about the young women who are raped and killed horribly by the army of Pakistan during the war time of partition East Bengal as Bangladesh. “The teachers were dragged onto streets and shot cruelly and the young women were dragged into barracks and raped” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*: 23).

This collection of Jhumpa can also be considered as a study of *Feminism* when the reader observes with his close view on the predicament of Mrs. Das who lives a life like a bird caged within the attachment of family. She is married but spends her life with romanticism. But slowly her life turns to be unromantic and it becomes a victim of boredom and ennui. What Mrs. Das confides in Mr. Kapasi is something that has got to do with her seeking relief from the pain, an idea that doesn’t work, for the interpreter fails to recognize her pain and doubts both its authenticity and importance. “I’m tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I’ve been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*: 65).

Lahiri delves into the honesty and sympathy of a female mind through the character of Miranda and her way of thinking in the beginning story of her *Interpreter of Maladies* where she underscores her own feminist concern. Laxmi’s belief on self-respect and her feeling of woman’s survival and happiness is only her husband concerns her self-respect and independence. The story, *Sexy* exhibits Lahiri’s concern for *feminine psyche* and its selfishness. Her physical and subsequent mental distance from Dev and her understanding of the tremendous suffering of a fellow woman, along with a child, makes her change course. She comes out of relationship with Dev as she lacks any future. This realization of other’s inconvenience and suffering is something that empowers her to feel the pain of those who are different from her. As she imagines the trauma of Laxmi’s cousin, Miranda feels an unspoken sympathy for her and undergoes a kind of transformation that makes her aware of the pain and the distress of the other and of a family betrayed by the husband and the father. “As Miranda imagined the scene she began to cry a little herself. ... Miranda cried harder, unable to stop. But Rohin still slept. She guessed that he was used to do it now, to the sound of a woman crying” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*: 109)

The eighth story, *The Treatment of BibiHaldar* is about a woman with her problems. This story sounds to be the *feminine voice* and it proves the abilities of woman in the society where male appears as an escapist, and female as daring entity. Bibi feels more depressed and she laments herself about her disadvantages both physically and emotionally as these drawbacks are there with her as woman. This story is about the predicament of a woman who confronts the results of her disability in a society.

“For her service Bibi received no income but was given meals provisions, and sufficient meters of cotton at every October holiday to replenish her wardrobe at an inexpensive tailor. At night she slept on a folding camp cot in the cousin’s place downstairs”. (*Lahiri: Interpreter of Maladies:159*)

BibiHaldar is an individual who maintains her individuality against all odds. In reference with the fiction of JhumpaLahiri from a feminist perspective, it is perceived some issues of post-modern feminism in reference with these issues that are found in an individual woman's inner freedom and awakening. She is molested by an unidentified culprit and as the result of the assault; she becomes the mother of a son. She manages to raise the boy and run a business in the storage room to make money for his future. Her motherliness is a cure for her prolonged illness. She learns the worldly way of living and knows how to cook, stitch, and prepare fire and to dress properly. In all these stories, it is told a lesson of humility and in equality of women who face the challenges of life with dignity and self-respect.

Lahiri’s*Namesake* is about the generational differences of diasporic community. She also talks about the problems of second generation diaspora after their assimilation in the host culture, discussing the dilemmas, conflicts and confusions which have cropped up in the minds of the young people about their adjustments, adaptations and assimilations in the new country. In this novel the mother of the protagonist, Ashima, is an interesting portrayal of *transnational feminism*. Though Ashima spends the majority of her life reliant on her husband and children, her personality, wishes and happiness are not sacrificed. She begins working as a librarian with satisfaction being a house wife. She establishes herself in a new world by winning her fear of ‘loneliness’ with her bravery. She fights for independence. But, the character of Ashima, in particular, represents the effects of double marginalization, patriarchal dominance and gender equality. She has stereotypical feminine behavior. Ashima’s anxiety over adaptation to the new land after giving birth to her child attests her motherly traits. But she can overcome her predicaments and adjust to the new culture mainly for the sake of her children.

“... 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 that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding”(Lahiri: *The Namesake:50*)

Other women characters of this novel; Moushumi, Sonia and Maxine represent the key aspects of *liberal feminism*. Moushumi plays an unconventional role and she represents a strong womanhood without caring about the pressures- patriarchal, ideological, social and psychic. She chooses her own way to emancipate herself from the pressures brought upon her by various forces such as family, friendship, identity and culture. Transnational feminist attitude is found in the character of Moushumi from Lahiri’s*The Namesake*. It is Moushumi

who shows her girl-power and comes out as a beautiful, sensuous and an intellectually accomplished girl who reacts strongly against any restriction on her impulses and instincts. Moushumi is a typical postmodern rootless girl challenging alien cultures globally better than a man. She is an instance for her thoroughness of Americazed attitude as a female immigrant of second generation. She has the choice of freedom for adopting a career and a profession of her own interest. Moushumi can pursue a double major in French.

At Brown her rebellion had been academic. At her parents'insistence, she'd majored in chemistry, for they were hopeful she would follow in her father's footsteps. Without telling them, she'd pursued a double major in French. Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture ... without expectation of any kind. (Namesake: 214)

Immersing herself in a third language and a third culture, Sonia becomes a para-lawyer. These women cannot make out the double standard values just like Ashima. And by nature, they are rebellious while growing and hide their social relation to avoid confrontation. Lahiri has deftly narrated the struggle of these female immigrants to assimilate and adapt the host culture and in the process of alteration. Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake* exemplifies the perpetual dilemma encountered by immigrants as they struggle to maintain their identities. For instance, in the case of Sonia, we can see fewer dilemmas as she does not have to grapple with the doubts that trouble her parents. She can fit into a culture which she considers her own. At the end of the novel, Ashima's feeling of exile drawing towards her native land remains her always émigré and never be an immigrant. Uprooted from their own soil to start a new, Lahiri's female characters are forced with questions of identity, issues of guilt and intricacies of relationships. Throughout this novel, the sense of struggle continues to cross across continents, without regard for boundaries. Women of first generation immigrants like Ashima have a cultural disruption and a double consciousness whereas the women of second generation in this novel are more conflicted and they have cultural eruption in false consciousness.

Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* describes the evolution of an Indian in the foreign land. This book illustrates the power of Lahiri's writing, her sense of community and ability to create an imagined land, as joys and painful as life. She presents the efforts of these generations of a Bengali family to take deep roots in America being the unaccustomed earth. All these stories focus on the members of Bengali families living in England or America and they deal with creating lives and identities in the wake of radical disruptions. The second generation immigrants –Ruma's character represents an *archetypal female* immigrant in *Unaccustomed Earth*.

"She didn't answer her father. Her mother would have understood her decision, would have been supportive and proud. Ruma had worked for years, had worked fifty hour weeks for years, had earned six figures while Romi was still living hand to mouth"(Lahiri:UnaccustomedEarth:36).

Sudha in *Only Goodness* succeeded in forging healthy, integrated hybrid cultural and familial identities in their happy homes or family. Ruma values her freedom more than love for her father. Lahiri allows her women characters to develop independently. Of course, they are neither good nor bad; they are self-centered and truly represent human conditions. Thus, the stories of *Unaccustomed Earth* bring out beautifully the struggles of the Indian female

immigrants, especially women who try to establish themselves in a country that is not their cultural home. All the female characters in these stories take different routes from their immigrant parents. Ruma, Mrs. Bagchi, Sangita and Hema choose a different life and so loose the communication with their parents. As a consequence, they would become a cause for themselves facing diasporic situation and mental trauma. But such sense of gain and loss varies from individual to individual as said in the title story which clearly demonstrates the theme of loss in the view of Ruma as a pregnant with her second child and newly relocated from one place to other. She struggles with relentless sadness over her mother's unfortunate death.

Liberal Feminism is an unusual form of feminism that focuses on women's capability to show and maintain their equal opportunity through their own actions and choices. This kind of woman can assert her ability to achieve equality just like Gauri in Jhumpa's fiction. At the heart of the novel, *The Lowland*, Gauri, a female protagonist, lays social transformation and her subsequent exile as an academic. Her non-conformity becomes a fight for her own self and her own rights as a woman. Gauri's struggle for gender equality is her challenge for which she sacrifices her motherhood.

She had eschewed the stability Subhash had worked to provide....while he learned to accept her for who she was, to embrace the turn she'd takenit was a miracle to him that she had discovered meaning in her life (Lowland: 225).

Submissive to Udayan in love, she later finds herself a tormented victim, and in a desire to redeem her past, casts away the mother-daughter bond to create her own niche. Lahiri goes whole hog into drawing powerful female characters, viz. Gauri and Bela in this novel. In this novel while Bela's character is understandable, Gauri remains highly complicated and inexplicable. Thus, this novel becomes a story of a widow tethered to tradition and psychologically disempowered by the loss of trust. Lahiri leaves it for the readers to decide if Gauri is more sinned against than sinning as the novel remains conclusively ambiguous to point out the victim. No doubt, *The Lowland* introduces some feminist issues which exhibit its writer's specific stand in regard to these issues. The way Gauri's character is handled, her leaning towards extreme leftist ideology, her first marriage against the will of her maternal uncles and second marriage against the will of her in-laws, her zeal for studies in unfamiliar condition and her interest in world affairs, her choice of living alone without bothering about her baby daughter, her leaning towards lesbian affair and such other brings in those issues one by one can assess her feminism.

Girl power in multiculturalism, women securing space for themselves, the bad girls who can counter men by their feminine wiles and their assertive-aggressive sexuality, the third world woman challenging ethnicity and facing the problems of identity, mutual- understanding of men and women irrespective of the differences, their struggle for achievement of their equality, dignity and freedom of choice, controlling their lives within and outside their homes etc. are found in Lahiri's fiction. The study of Lahiri's fiction reveals, like many Indian women writers in English, a remarkable height of achievement. She chooses a variety of themes like her male counterparts and similarly she has given special prominence to the role of women. Lahiri understands the problems and predicaments that have come in the way of

the progress of women. Time also plays an important role, as gender issues involving first generation female immigrants might be rather different from those which the second generation female immigrants face. This difference may be related to the fact that first generation immigrants often have stronger connections and memories of their home land than those of second generation.

Conclusion:

Lahiri is able to depict clashing cultures and their fusion beautifully from a feminine standpoint. The examination of feminism in literature is a rather intriguing aspect. Western ideals of feminism can differ from that of African and Asian because of the ways in which women assert themselves as strong individuals. The prime instance of this transnational feminism can be found in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. Her female characters often find themselves isolated and alone in a new country or even alone within a marriage or relationship. *The Namesake* holds many examples of these quietly empowered and independent women. Jhumpa Lahiri's style of writing is natural and effortless that flows smoothly and beautifully. Her female characters represent the traditional customs of their old Bengali homes and the lifestyles of their newly adopted western ones which struggle with starkly different cultures. Her depiction of human being serves as a proof of power. However, these stories depict the complexity of the human experience. Jhumpa Lahiri explores, through her *The Lowland* a variety of streams and ideas of female independence within itself. This is the novel which indeed a symbol of feminism through the main character of Gauri and identify the main areas that her character presents. Gauri is a bit of those and much more for there are more angles to her character. Lahiri's fiction reflects the multiple identities of women and her yearning for the Indian sensibility bears the stamp of a vagrant searching for her lost home. Thus, the collection of short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri is based on the predicaments and inner turmoil of Indian woman immigrants besides the men who live in the United States. Lahiri makes a search for identity with an emotional empathy through her female protagonists. The greatness of her writings is in making the tale of human idiosyncrasies thought-provoking and soul searching. Jhumpa Lahiri does not explicitly point out the remedy. She has presented all women characters as they are in real life, but these characters, in one way or the other, teach the lesson of humility and equality, and motivate the readers to retain the good of the past in the face of the challenge of life with the head held high almost all the stories end on a positive note with the hope of a tomorrow. Thus, Lahiri's works reveal various aspects of modern women's feelings and exhibit the fully awakened feminine sensibility and feminist views.

Besides other women writers, Lahiri is bold, frank and have shown realistic attitude towards love, sex, lust and man-woman relationships. She is one among the post-modern writers who creates a new tradition in the Indo-English literature. She presents certain feminine issues of oppression, alienation, class and the human psyche as the source of identity. She allows the reader to read the text both in post-colonial and feminist perspectives.

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