

## PORTRAIT OF ICONOCLASTIC FEMALE CHARACTER IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THE LOWLAND"

SHASHIKALA WALMIKI

**Abstract:** Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Lowland" is her second novel and fourth creative output with two collections of short stories. Jhumpa Lahiri in "The Lowland" has portrayed a female character who is unconventional and defies all the norms of an 'Indian Woman' in her protagonist, Gauri. Though Gauri is a minor character in the narrative structure of the novel, as the novel revolves around two brothers, she stands out in the novel with her struggle for freedom and independence from a relationship that is based on escapism and compromise and no love of any kind except that of kindness and gratitude. Lahiri has presented a female character in the novel that defies the conventional roles of a daughter, wife and mother and breaks free from all the emotional tangles of a wife and a mother to pursue her intellectual life and the freedom. Jhumpa Lahiri in the portrayal of Gauri is close to Toril Moi's definition of a woman in "Textual/Sexual Politics" where she says: '..... the idea that any theory that sets out to define women's essence or woman's nature is detrimental to obtain freedom and equality for women.' (2002, p 175) Though, the matter of concern in Gauri's context is that of freedom than equality. The present paper intends to analyse Gauri's character from this perspective and compares her with other female protagonists in Lahiri's other novel. The paper also compares Gauri's character with reference to other female characters in the contemporary Indian writers in English and with reference to the portrait of female characters in the noteworthy Indian writers in English in the past as well. Despite the dislike and hatred for Gauri's character by some readers and reviewers, the paper also attempts to justify the emergence of a new woman in Gauri.

**Key Words:** Iconoclast, Unconventional, Feminism, New woman, Comparison,

**Introduction:** The image of woman in the fiction of Indian writing in English has been gradually changed over the last four decades. The writers have transcended from the conventional images of all sacrificing woman to a self asserting and self defining woman questioning everything that binds or confines her dreams, desires and aspirations. Though this new woman does not always meet with success and sometimes ends up with failure, she is complacent to accept her failures, '-----It is the image of an emerging and struggling woman with no clearly defined path or destiny and hence the usual share of pain, anguish, sorrow, conflicts and the humility to accept failures.' (Rathee, 2012)

Writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Geetha Hariharan, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor, Bharati Mukharji and Jhumpa Lahiri offer a range of experiences of the emerging Indian woman who though rooted in traditions, is firmly committed in re-defining her role and her relatedness to various institutions of the society in the light of modern thought and consciousness. The new woman depicted in the literature of these women writers refuses to surrender before the conservative forces of fatalism and subjugation as well as to the glamorous image created by the market. The new woman tries to pave her independent path which could ultimately enable her to lead a self confident and self reliant life. It is essentially an image of modern woman who refuses to be a saleable commodity in the market and prefers instead to assert her individuality by

challenging the defined social and family norms and structures, be it marriage, wifehood, motherhood or the larger questions related to her liberty, freedom and recognition of her social and intellectual pursuits. Whereas media abounds with images of women valued for their looks, in literature they are shown to be valued for their intellect, intelligence and socio-economic contributions and achievements. Modern woman depicted in the contemporary writings seem to be a product of the rapid transformation and intense process taking place in the society due to various struggles for women's autonomy and empowerment and new consciousness arising out of modern learning, knowledge and awareness.

In this context, Jhumpa Lahiri's portrait of the female character, Gauri in her novel "The Lowland" (2013) attracts the reader's attention and the character varies from the female characters in the contemporary writer's fiction and undoubtedly from the writers of the past too.

Many writers in the past have shown that 'women's power is illusory. She is reduced to a symbol and loses power. She is put on a pedestal as a goddess and worshipped only to be presently brought down and beaten to her knees by the twin whips of domestic injustice and tyrannical system. The doomed woman as always lets be the master of her destiny. Economic independence, educational opportunities and an exposure to international cultural milieu do not prove sufficiently strong enough to resist the pull of

tradition.' (Krishnaswamy, 2001, p-42) Some of the noteworthy writers for such portrait of women in the past are: Raj Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, R. K. Narayan, Kamala Markandeya and Anita Desai.

Raja Rao is one of the major first generation writers of Indian writing in English. 'His perspective is so heavily weighed in favour of the masculine conceptual creative pole that he can hardly be expected to eulogise the principles of *assertive feminism*. His narrative scheme displays the victory of idea over fact, mind over body, spirit over physical life. The consequence is the *creation of female characters* (My Italics) who are seen extremely and who are always reduced to symbols.' (Krishnaswamy, p-57) In Raja Rao's fiction, 'inspite of educational opportunities and economic independence, the women in his novel is usually fettered by domestic injustice and tyrannical custom. No radical solution to the woman's dilemma is proposed. The solution, if any, is mystic and personal'. (Krishnaswamy, p-58)

Bhabani Bhattacharya, another landmark in the Indian Writing in English 'presents the Indian woman as the pure woman in his novels. She is pure with exuberance, with vitality and high ideals only to be victimized ultimately. Her vitality is crushed, her ideals dig her own grave and she is invariably is the ray of hope for mankind, that it is the pure woman who through victimized, gives form to an unjust life and informs us and the world we live in with love. The concept of innocent, victimized woman is continuous thread in his fictional output.'

R. K. Narayan who has enjoyed the longest novelistic career among his contemporaries has portrayed varied and complex women in his novels. He portrays 'the double pulls that the Indian woman is subject to, she is torn between tradition and modernity, between her dignity as a human being and her duty as daughter, mother, between marrying for love and marrying for the family, between her desire for autonomy and her need for assurance. In each case she tries to settle finally for a *compromise*, however heart breaking may it be, with the fervent hope, that it would be operable given the rigid social coordinates.' (Krishnaswamy, p- 99)

With Kamala Markandeya, there is a gradual evolution of women in the fiction. 'Markandeya like Betty Freidan in "the Second Stage" (New York: Summit Books, 1981) advocates the importance of family life for deepening the woman's awareness of her responsibility towards mankind. While it is true that a woman is not an appurtenance and marriage is not a career, that the *motherhood is not the great marvel* it was deemed to be, it is now seen that the great conjugal oneness and enduring family life are the necessary first step in preserving a woman's needs of nurturing of warm familial relationships.' (Krishnaswamy, p- 235)

With Anita Desai, among contemporary Indian Novelists, come 'fresh insights to the sexist nature of the issue of sanity' (Krishnaswamy, p- 238) In Anita Desai, 'The awakening of the consciousness progresses to the psychology of self-realisation. She achieves self-awareness by defining herself against social matrices. When the societal pressure points, being inexorable, give excruciating pain, there is a mental breakdown or collapse which allows an escape by self-delusion. This delusion is a temporary phase in as much as her high intelligence and acumen drive her onwards to full confrontation with reality and face the consequences.' (Krishnaswamy, p-241)

'The "image" of Women in literature is invariably defined in opposition to the "real person" whom literature somewhere never quite manages to convey to the reader.' (Moi, p-44) Jhumpa Lahiri defies this notion of Moi in the depiction of Gauri in 'The Lowland.' On the contrary, the character of Gauri, for many readers appears to be too compassionately depicted. 'As a minor character, or as a full-on study in cruelty, Gauri might have been interesting. If there were an ounce of irony or humour in her portrayal, or of unabashed wickedness in her spirit, she might have been fascinating to follow. But her depiction is relentlessly solemn and insisently - actually infuriatingly - compassionate. While acknowledging the brutality of her deeds, Lahiri also wants to enlist our sympathy for Gauri as a person of tragic emotional integrity. She charts her lonely intellectual progress with a scrupulousness that seems intended to confer a kind of martyred dignity upon her, though to me it just intensifies the unpleasant effect of pious sadism that emanates from the book whenever she appears.' (Rev. Lasdun, 2013)

'Gauri is the book's most vivid character. A woman born ahead of her time, unsuited both by temperament and intellect to the conventions demanded by her culture, she reinvents herself most fully in the more liberated climate of the States, but this forging of a new self comes at a terrible cost to her family. Subhash calls her cold-hearted, but Lahiri's insight into the inner conflict of a woman who chooses her intellectual life over the demands of motherhood is unsparing and beautifully rendered'. (Rev. Merritt, 2013) Gauri's character is the most admired character among all the creations of Lahiri. Gauri is brought up in an unusual condition, because, except for Manash, all her other siblings were too old. "By the time Gauri was born, in 1948, her mother was already preoccupied with settling the marriages of her older sisters. Her sisters belonged almost to another generation: teen-aged girls when she was an infant, young women when she was a child. She was an aunt to children her own age..... Her mother was bedridden around that time. She'd had tuberculosis in her spine. Gauri's older sisters had been useful,

helping with household chores, but she and Manash were only a complication. So they were sent away to the city, cared for by their grandparents, in the company of their aunts and uncles.' (The Lowland, 2013, p- 45) Gauri grows up with her brother, Manash, two years senior to her and shares a friendly relationship till the end of the novel. Gauri doesn't cherish any memories of any other member of her family. She graduates from Presidency College in Calcutta with Logic and Philosophy. While her other siblings at her age were dreaming of marriage and husband, Gauri flirts with Descartes and Marx. Her encounter with Udayan, Manash' friend and a post graduate student of Physics in Calcutta University, allures her to defy her family wishes and walk out on them to marry him against the wishes of both her and Udayan's Family. Udayan's Involvement with Naxalite Movement brings his untimely death and leaves Gauri bereaved only to realize her pregnancy that Udayan was not aware of. She is rescued from her indifferent parents-in-law by her husband's elder brother Subhash. Subhash, a professor of Oceanography in Rhode Island University comes for his brother's cremation. He is attracted to Gauri, marries her and takes her away from her past to the States where he hopes they might eventually come to love each other.

Gauri is grateful to Subhash for bringing her away from the prying neighbours and the government officials. Gauri admires Subhash for his more evolved attitude than Udayan. ".....Gauri observes Subhash's 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. (The Lowland, p-91) Gauri's gratitude to Subhash for bringing her out of the hostile environment in Calcutta and Subhash' humane attitude cannot coax her to love Subhash. Gauri is perennially haunted by Udayan's memory and his untimely death fills Gauri with anguish at Udayan for leaving her alone in the world. Her anguish dries up the tender motherly affection for her daughter, Bela. Though she gives in physically out of kindness to Subhash, Gauri finds it impossible to feel the kind of love felt for Udayan, neither for Subhash nor for her daughter. 'Though she cared for Bela capably, though she kept her clean and combed and fed she seemed distracted. Rarely did Subhash see her smiling when she looked into Bela's face. Rarely did he see Gauri kissing Bela spontaneously. Instead from the beginning, it was as if she'd reversed their roles, as if Bela were a relative's child.' (The Lowland p-114) Time doesn't soften Gauri, '.....after five years, in spite of all the time, all the hours, she and Bela spent together the love she had once felt for Udayan refused to reconstitute itself. Instead there was a growing numbness that inhabited her, that impaired

her" (The Lowland p-117) Lahiri seems to defy all the notions of a woman, an Indian woman in particular in portraying Gauri. Eventually Gauri abandons her daughter and Subhash to follow her intellectual and academic life in California, far away from them without leaving any clues for her exact contact details. No emotional ties or motherly affection deter her from pursuing her desires, instead liberates her psychologically and physically from all the ties and responsibilities.

Lahiri doesn't pass judgment on Gauri in the novel for her actions. A sense of acceptance of the consequences of her actions permeates the novel. 'It was not unlike the way her role had changed at so many other points in the past. From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to a childless woman. With the exception of losing Udayan, she had actively chosen to take these steps. (The Lowland, p-168) Jhumpa Lahiri transcends from a traditional character to an evolved character in Gauri who accepts the consequences of her actions and thus creates a New Woman who doesn't sulk in brooding over what is right and what is wrong. Lahiri definitely doesn't offer a rosy picture for Gauri, rather offers a life that emerges after an unconventional life, 'She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be *alone* in the end.' (The Lowland, p-168)

Gauri is a rebel, rebels against the family and marries Udayan, rebels against Subhash and Bela and abandon them unabashedly. Gauri's tearing her traditional clothes and cutting her long hair short are symbolic references that convey the process of transformation from a conventional woman to a new woman. Her casting away saaries and stepping into slacks and tunics symbolically represent her psyche expressing a sense of liberation from suffocating and constricting elements in her life. Gauri doesn't hold on to the ideas of a sweet wife and all sacrificing mother. Gauri's attitude draws her closer to the modern concept of motherhood, 'In the deification of the mother lies the destruction of the woman's psyche.' (Krishnswamy, p- 73) Gauri's acknowledgement of her failure to be a good parent and her acknowledging Subhash, the better parent make her a new woman. She is devoid of the feelings a normal mother would have unconditionally. Gauri neither feels guilt nor remorse for her actions. She is also aware of the damage she has caused to her daughter Bela, by abandoning her. Her intellectual pursuit for a doctoral degree gradually alienates her from her daughter. Consequently her daughter hates her to the extent of never to forgive her mother. Gauri's awareness of her disastrous actions makes her ponder over "What had Subhash told Bela, to keep

her away? Nothing, probably. It was the just punishment for her crime. She understood now what it meant to walk away from her child. It had been her own act of killing. A connection she had severed, resulting in a death that applied only to the two of them. It was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed.' (The Lowland, p-169)

In creating Gauri's character, Lahiri has defied all the notions of an Indian woman that she has presented in her earlier novel 'The Namesake'. One of the protagonists of the novel is Ashima, an immigrant wife, at par with the conventional image of a woman. A good wife, a caring and devoted mother, though a part-time employee in a library, Ashima is a very icon of a mother. Unlike Gauri, Ashima shares a loving relationship with her husband and a more caring and connected parent. 'Throughout the novel it is Ashima who is connected to her children. She is especially anxious for Gogol (her son). Ashoke's unexpected death leaves her devastated and lonely, but she continues to be the binding factor in the family even as she works in a public library. She responds admirably to the changes in her children's lives.' (Walmiki, p-10) Gauri is opposite to Ashima, she is a rebel. But her rebellion is not so much for freedom from an oppressive milieu or equality. But it is for her love for her first husband and her husband's death leaves her in loneliness that cannot be shared with any other person, not even with her daughter. Unlike a typical Indian woman to be grateful to her rescuer so to sacrifice and compromise, Gauri detaches herself from the very person who brought her out of hostile environment at his parent's place. Gauri is being portrayed a unique individual with her own desires and aspirations that she doesn't sacrifice for anyone.

From feminism point of view, Gauri is an exponent of liberal feminism that demanded 'equal access to the symbolic order.' (Moi, p12) 'The early feminists 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) She abandons all the restraints constrictions that obstruct her individuality. Gauri is an embodiment of Moi's

idea of a woman, '..... the idea that any theory that sets out to define women's essence or woman's nature is detrimental to obtain freedom and equality for women.' (2002, p 175) She shirks off the responsibilities of a wife, and a mother. She sheds her femininity by cutting short her long hair and shedding the traditional saris for slacks and tunics. She abandons the comfort and shelter of a warm family to pursue an intellectual and academic life. She chooses her lovers with no inhibition in her sexual orientation. She is seen masturbating in a toilet being attracted to a stranger on the bus stop (strange of Jhumpa Lahiri to portray). She has a temporary physical relationship with a female student as well.

The major concern of the feminists is freedom for women from subjugation and oppression that cripple their psyche. From Virginia Woolf to Helen Cixous, it is all about woman, who is bound by socio-cultural restraints to control her and about the necessity to liberate her from any constrictions that deny a fulfilling life. There are number of contemporary writers who address the issues of feminism, but with a guilt or sense of moral propriety and judgment. The female iconoclastic characters in the contemporary female protagonist novels generally tend to vacillate between right and wrong and suffer from the self imposed guilt for their actions. But Gauri is way beyond any obstructive thoughts to oppress her from reaching her goals. In this sense, Gauri emerges as a New Woman, a woman of the twenty first century. To some readers, Gauri may appear selfish, but Gauri is selfish not for any material achievement but for her freedom and for her love for her first husband. She is the one who followed her heart on her realizing the impossibility of establishing a cordial domestic relationship based on love. It is her uncompromising attitude to adjust with whatever is offered to her on the platter that makes her unique. Jhumpa Lahiri, however doesn't offer any moral comment or judgment on Gauri leaving it to the imagination and interpretation of the readers. But, undoubtedly, Lahiri makes a signature statement on the image of a new emerging woman of the twenty first century with the creation of Gauri's character.

## References:

1. Krishnswamy, Shanta. *The Women in Indian English Fiction 1950-1980*. Ashish Publishing House. New Delhi. 2001. Print
2. Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. Published by Alfred A Knopf, New York, Toronto September, 2013 Web <http://www.pdf-archive.com/2014/06/10/the-lowland-jhumpa-lahiri/the-lowland-jhumpa-lahiri.pdf> 17/06/15
3. Lasdun, James. Rev. The Guardian. Thursday 12 September 2013 09.00 BST Web <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/12/lowland-jhumpa-lahiri-review> 17/06/15
4. Merritt, Stephanie. Rev. The Guardian. Saturday 7 September 2013 14.30 BST. Web. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/07/jhumpa-lahiri-the-lowland-review> 17/06/15

- 
5. Rathee, Manjeet. Dr. *Images of Women in Media and Literature: Journey from Difficult Daughters to Desirable Daughters*. The Criterion: An International Journal in English. Vol. III. Issue. I, March 2012. ISSN 0976-8165 Web www.the-criterion.com
  6. Toril, Moi. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. II Ed. Routledge. New York and London. 2002. Print
  7. Walmiki, Shashikala. *The Cultural Clashes and the Search for Identity of the Indian Diaspora Across the Borders in Jhumpa Lahirir's "The Namesake"* Contemporary Issues in Languages and Humanities. Vol. 4, No. 1, February, 2014. ISSN NO. 2249-9792. P. 4-17. Print.

\*\*\*

Ms. Shashikala Walmiki/Asst. Professor/ Dept.of English/A. M. College/ Hadapsar/ Pune/ Maharashtra/  
shashi\_315@yahoo.com