

Women empowerment reflected in Indian Diaspora novel *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyze the reflection of the women empowerment in the Indian Diaspora novel *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri. It is rightly said by Alfred North Whitehead- "It is in literature that the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression." Literature is not only a reflection of the society but also serves as a corrective mirror in which members of the society can look at themselves and find the need for positive change. It is necessary to take a close look at some works of literature, in order to understand how literature actually reflects the society. Literature as a whole grows and changes from generation to generation. It is not static but dynamic. It means that each age has its own particular point of interest and its own particular way of thinking and feeling about things. So the literature which it produces is governed by certain prevailing tastes. These tastes last for a time only. The influence of literature on society is felt directly or indirectly. Women Empowerment is a burning issue of this modern age. So, an effort is done in this paper to reflect the traditional roles which women, especially, Indian women are expected to follow and the role which the women choose in context to a novel the *Lowland*.

Key Words: Women empowerment, Indian Diaspora novel, *The Lowland*.

INTRODUCTION:

"I think women are foolish to pretend they are equal to men, they are far superior and always have been."
--- Sir William Gerald Golding

Nowadays gender issue is to be given utmost priority. Now women cannot be asked to wait for any more for equality. Inequalities between men and women and discrimination against women have also been age-old issues all over the world. Thus, burning issue of women's equality with man is a universal phenomenon. Women have demanded equality with men in matters of education, employment, inheritance, marriage, politics and recently in the field of religion also to serve as cleric (in Hinduism and Islam). Their quest for equality has given birth to the formation of many women's associations and launching of movements. In simple term women empowerment means to empower women by giving power or to increase the overall position, status and condition of women in every sphere of life.

Indian Diaspora is a generic term which describes the people who migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the republic of India. Such people have succeeded spectacularly in their chosen professions by dint of their single-minded dedication and hard work. They have retained their emotional, cultural and spiritual links with the country of their origin. This strikes a mutual chord in the hearts of people of India. Despite some limitations of specificity of the concept of Diaspora, it is gainfully engaged in the analysis of emigration and settlement of people beyond the boundaries of their homeland. Maintenance of the cultural identity in the host society is another important parameter of the concept Diaspora.

The Lowland is the second novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, published in 2013. It won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature (2014). The story of *The Lowland* is about Indian immigrants trying to adjust to

new lives in the United States. The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri is a work of fiction that follows two brothers born only 15 months apart in Tollygunge who embark on two very different roads in life. Although they are in each other's pocket as children, both have opposite natures and fate will put them on very different paths. Set in the 1960's, Udayan is an amiable and outgoing young man who is drawn into the political upheaval of the Naxalite movement and who is willing to sacrifice all in an effort to put an end to the starvation and inequality that caused so much suffering. On other hand, the oldest brother Subhash is the more reserved and dutiful, brothers, letting Udayan take the spotlight and lead the way for most of their childhood. When his brother becomes involved in the political movement of the time Subhash decides to continue his education in America.

Udayan, an idealistic student in Calcutta in the 1960s, is drawn into Mao-inspired revolutionary politics. After his violent death (which happens fairly early in the novel), his devoted, dutiful brother, Subhash, marries his pregnant widow, Gauri, and brings her to America in hopes of giving her a new start in a new country. The story flows with mental and social struggle of Indian immigrants especially like Subhash and Gauri.

With increasing literacy among women in India, their ingress into many types of work, formerly which was the preserve of men, women can now regard the bearing and raising of their offspring not as a life's work in itself but as an episode. Now women can earn their livelihood as well as contribute to their family. The Lowland emphasizes on the female protagonist Gauri who falls in love with and marries Udayan Mitra. When Udayan meets Gauri, Subhash is pursuing higher studies in America. After a short time of their marriage, Udayan is caught up in the banned Naxalite movement and eventually killed by the police. This earth shattering event permanently scars each of the family especially his old mother and his pregnant wife. During this period, Subhash returns from under graduate school in the United States to mourn his younger brother's death and to console his parents. He sees how his mother discriminates with Gauri, though she was pregnant. She is given a white sari to wear so that she resembles the other widows who were three times her age in the family. Soon he came to understand that his parents received Gauri coldly and treated her badly because her marriage was not an arranged one with Udayan. He also learned that she was expecting Udayan's child. His parents refused to talk to her or acknowledge her presence in the house. Her in-laws don't want her, they only want her child. Her mother-in-law tells her that she can choose to go somewhere to continue her studies. So it can be seen that women were discriminated not only by men but women are discriminated by women themselves also. Subhash sees the discrimination by his mother and continuous harassing inquiry from the police and the investigation agencies to Gauri, he decides to give her a means to escape. All he could do to help Gauri from the cruelties of his parents and the frequent police inquiries was to take her away officially by marrying her: "To take his brother's place, to raise his child, to come to love Gauri as Udayan had."¹ Subhash knew very well that even if the police were to leave her alone, his parents would not allow her to live a normal life. Subhash tried to convince her to begin a new life : "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."² To get rid of this mental torture, 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. She also observed that two obvious facts reminded her of Udayan's presence. The first was the voice of Subhash: "Almost the exact pitch and manner of speaking. This was the deepest and most startling proof of their fraternity. For a moment she allowed this isolated aspect of Udayan , preserved and replicated in Subhash's throat, to travel back to her."³ The second and most unavoidable fact was that she was carrying Udayan's child: "She felt as if she contained a ghost, as Udayan was. The child was a version of him, in that it was both present and absent."⁴ After Subhash's decision to marry Gauri, his mother tries to dissuade him from marrying Gauri, telling him that she's "Udayan's wife, she'll never love you." She also warns him that Gauri is "too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother." In the decision of Subhash, we can see the new changed phenomena of women

¹. Laheri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*, Noida Random House India. 2013. p.115

². *ibid*, p.119

³. *ibid*, p.122

⁴. *ibid*, p.124

empowerment in which Subhash offered an opportunity to Gauri to begin a new life. It is interesting to see Gauri's path to self-discovery and emancipation from the assigned identities of a widow, dutiful daughter-in-law, mere wife and mother. And at the end of the novel certainly the reader cannot defend or condemn her refusal to let her life be defined by the flawed choices of the man she loved.

Getting ahead we see Gauri as an obstinate and cruel mother-in-law; we are made to compare and contrast a marriage made in love and another conceived for convenience. Gauri endeavors to start a new life in America with Subhash. Initially, Gauri is keen to perform her family duties especially for her child. She felt Bela was her child and Udayan's, and Subhash for his helpfulness was simply playing a part. But soon Bela seemed to recognise Subhash: "To accept him, and to allow him to ignore the reality that he was an uncle, an imposter."⁵ As the time spent, 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".⁶ On the other side, Subhash, who according to Gauri was just role playing, makes his great efforts to fulfill his promise to Gauri, "I'll make it [Bela] mine, Gauri."⁷ Here we can see she has tried to start a new life but due to traditional cultural background, Gauri is not able to start a new conjugal life with her new husband Subhash who is her brother in law previously. She cannot forget her former husband who is her first love and Bela's biological father. She accepts Subhash only as her baby's father but not as her husband. She continued to maintain the distance and her independence from him. She tries to free herself from nostalgia. Subhash gives her all the freedom to develop herself not only academically but socially. She was not able to express her gratitude for what Subhash 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. 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 for such compromises. One day she asked Subhash if they could hire a babysitter to give her time to take a survey of German philosophy. Subhash did not agree to this because he did not want to pay a stranger to care for Bela. He reminded her that her first priority under the present circumstances should be Bela and not her studies. Gauri often left Bela alone leaving her engaged while she took a walk alone. When Subhash found this out he told her, "My mother was right. You don't deserve to be a parent. The privilege was wasted on you."⁸ Here Subhash was just connecting what his mother had warned him when he had almost planned an alliance between Gauri and him: "She's Udayan's wife, she'll never love you."⁹ and that "She's too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother."¹⁰ The issue of separating was not discussed since the point of their marriage was Bela. Gauri had never recognised the joy in sacrifice that motherhood always offered. So, it can be said that Gauri is empowered but she has forgotten the values of blessings of woman incarnation.

When Subhash along with Bela came to Calcutta three months after his father's death, Gauri left the place for good to California leaving a farewell letter for Subhash. She left both Subhash and her child Bela. She had accepted a teaching position in a college just to get out of the jumble she was in. Bela intensely felt her absence which Subhash's fatherhood couldn't in any way compensate. Gauri's absence led to certain observable changes in Bela's behaviour. We see our own skin crawl from a mother's abandonment and understand what it means to live a life of exile; we are shown what happens when people refuse to reconcile the past and how this ghost of the past ruins the lives in the present. At the end of the novel, we can see Gauri has to live her life lonely.

Throughout the novel, Gauri's role had changed so many times in the past: "From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman... She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these

⁵. *ibid*, p.146

⁶. *ibid*, p.146

⁷. *ibid*, p.137

⁸. *ibid*, p. 175

⁹. *ibid*, p.160

¹⁰. *ibid*, p. 114

conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end."¹¹ In the end, she was well aware that the silence of Bela and her absence was a fitting punishment for her crime. Though late she understood what it meant to walk away from her own child.

The omnipresent memory of Udayan has haunted Subhash and Gauri to the extent that it influenced the course of their lives. The plot of the novel concerns, obligations and passions, parental love and abandonment, choices that we make and the blood and genetics that run in our blood, and the destiny that we cannot shake. Throughout the novel, we can see that despite of cultural traditions and prejudices, Lahiri has tried to show the empowerment of women through the medium of male protagonist Subhash. He sacrificed his own personal life for the sake of his brother's pregnant wife. He offered Gauri a new life free from stereotype and conservative atmosphere of the society. We can also see that Gauri is empowered not only economically but socially also. She is aloof from her mother-in-law as well as society's coldness and cruelties. But it is ironical that Gauri at some point missed her role to be a good mother and a wife, though she is empowered economically and socially. It is suggested here that as human-being cannot make their future but just live in future so every human-being especially woman has to try to grab the opportunity to empower herself and to show gratitude who provide her opportunity to empower. It is not society but women themselves have to put their best efforts to empower in de facto not de jure.

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¹¹ . *ibid*, p.240