



THE EFFECT OF FEMINISM IN THE FICTION OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

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India APA Citation:

Karthik, S (2024). THE EFFECT OF FEMINISM IN THE FICTION OF JHUMPA LAHIRI, Journal of Indian Languages and Indian literature in English, 02(03),40-48; 2024

Submission Date: 20.08.2024

Acceptance Date: 01.09.2024

ABSTRACT

The word féminisme is coined by French philosopher and active socialist Charles Fourier in the year 1837 and the word gain prominence from 1852 when it appeared in Oxford English dictionary and started being used by several western countries. The present study attempts to find insights of various shades of womanism in Indian immigrants with regards to illustrious literary works of Jhumpa Lahiri. The study involves the understanding of the term 'womanism' with reference to feminism, womanhood and motherhood. The term womanism is borrowed from Alice Walker. Lahiri accomplishes in bringing out the various shades of woman through her creativity and talent. It is not possible to define woman in few shades. When it comes to diasporic woman's life, things are quite different. The journey from alienation to assimilation along with their cultural heritage is characterized by a medley of shades that includes patriarchal authority, cultural pressures, gender biasing, banishment, power equation, sacrifice, homesickness, patience, physical and emotional strength, insecurity, anxiety, depression, discontinuity, adjustment, inferior complexes, freedom struggle, identity crisis, generation gaps, reinvention, soul-searching, internalization and unlearning few things.

Key words: feminism, womanhood, power hood, identity crisis, generation gap etc.

The story titled “Sexy” narrates how Mrs. Sen find the meaning of disloyalty and loving without knowing someone. She understands where she is faltering, and her unbiased inner self stops her from taking ahead the extra-marital affair as she couldn’t respect herself when she is Sexy. Some women like Mrs. Sen in the story titled “Mrs. Sen” finds it very difficult to adjust herself in new culture and feel very homesick and alienated. She feels deserted even in the most powerful and developed nation in the world. *“Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence”* (IM 115).

While there are other women like Lilia’s mother and Mala in “The Third and Final Continent” successfully manages to find a place for themselves in a foreign land. The assimilation is smoother and faster for some woman while some are not able to accept the host country for a long time. Lahiri doesn’t make any generalization and shows how the same community may react differently in different situations. “A Real Durwan” depicts the story of a poor Boori Ma who despite of serving the residents of the building for years, the residents don’t think twice before accusing her of theft and very rudely throws her out of the building premise. This illustrates how judgmental a society can become irrespective of earlier deeds of a person.

So, the residents tossed her bucket and rags, her baskets and reed broom, down the stairwell, past the letter boxes, through the collapsible gate, and into the alley. Then they tossed out Boori Ma. All were eager to begin their search for a real Durwan” (IM 82). On the other hand, in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” the little educated Indian villagers showed more positive and constructive attitude towards poor Bibi. They strongly condemned the cruel actions of Bibi’s relatives.

“To express our indignation, we began to take our shopping elsewhere; this provided us with our only revenge” (IM 169);

Not only that, the villagers also take care of Bibi when she is pregnant and gives her much needed moral support. *“At every opportunity we reminded her that we had surrounded her, that she could come to us if she ever needed advice or aid of any kind”* (IM 171). The story narrates how the imperfect and ill Bibi is cured of all the illness once she becomes mother. Being mother makes her confident and capable of not only taking care of herself but also enables her to nurture a whole new life. Lahiri’s characters are a symbol of confused or broken identity. Boori Ma lost her original identity after migrating from Bangladesh to India. She is just reduced to a serviceable Durwan who serves for doing humble chores. It is also noticeable that though she is a stranger to people, but she is still addressed as “Ma” or a mother due to her warm and kind behavior. It is a typical Indian custom where even strangers are being addressed by some relations like Ma, brother, sister-in-law etc. The women who take care of Bibi Haldar are mentioned without being addressed by their names to underline that it is the community that identifies them more than their names. Similarly, Bibi Haldar doesn’t have a forename that is reminiscent of her orphan state and lack of identity. Mrs. Sen is an ideal example of a woman who is lonely, alienated and homesick in a foreign land. The absence of any mention of her forename suggests that she has no identity of her own and whatever she has is owned by her

husband. She doesn't have any individuality and any aspirations for herself. All she has to relate and identify with is her husband that too her husband is unable to understand her feelings and isolation. Her character depicts the helplessness of a woman who is completely banking upon her husband in an alien country.

Lahiri doesn't want to limit her visions to just Indian immigrant women. She tries to generalize that irrespective of nation and boundaries, all women need care and affection. A woman might be in her own country among her people but if she is deprived of true love and care, then there is definitely the feeling of alienation and loneliness. Similar to Miranda who develops affection and gets attracted towards Dev but stops to proceed further on moral grounds as he was already married.

Lahiri gives an insight of the lives of Indian diaspora who often find themselves oscillating between two contrast worlds. There is one world to which they are culturally connected to and miss it and then there is host country whose economy and high quality of life attract them to stay forever. Lahiri has beautifully etched the plots where she shows the emotional turmoil, conflicts with self and loss of identity experienced by young wives who have left everything behind in their homeland to just stay with their husbands in an entirely foreign country. Mrs. Sen in *Interpreter of Maladies* and Ashima in *The Namesake* are illuminating examples of this phenomenon. Lahiri shows how Mrs. Sen and Ashima felt a void and meaninglessness in their lives even they are doing financially fine and staying in one of the most powerful and advanced nation. However, there is Bibi Haldar who is poor and ill, but she still manages to find meaning in her life by the support of compassionate community people around her. Lahiri poignantly portrays the distress of Indian immigrant women who are alone whole day once their husbands or children go out. The underlying key theme in "A Temporary Matter" is "motherhood". The protagonist Shoba goes into intense psychological pressure and frustration after losing her unborn child. There is guilt, regret, grief and dejection. All this takes the form of anger that bursts over her husband. It narrates how the loss of motherhood made Shoba bitter that eventually drifted her away from her

husband who stopped going out and kept himself inside home only. Shoba needed care, affection and somebody to vent out her innermost feelings and miseries. But she fought it all alone and finally accepted the loss and starts going out keeping herself occupied all the time in order to forget the pain. A temporary power cut gave her that opportunity to mingle with her husband who has been like a flat mate since long time and this conversation enables her to decide that she needs a temporary time off for some time away from her husband. "When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine" shows the emotions of selfless care and concern just like a mother for her child. Though Lilia doesn't know Mr. Pirzada so deeply but she still takes care of him and understands Mr. Pirzada's concern for his family. She also finds it difficult to realize that he belongs to a different country and when he goes back to his homeland, Lilia feels sad and misses him.

Lahiri focuses on not only on feminism, womanhood and motherhood but she also talks about the sexuality of a woman. At various points she manages to highlight the essence of sacrifice, guilt, adjustment, selflessness, acceptance, care, love and at the same time she also brings out the issues of unfulfilled desires, unhappiness within family, alienation, loneliness, suppression and adultery. She also underlines the

differences in gender roles. For example, in the story of Mrs. Sen, though both Mr. and Mrs. Sen are migrated from their motherland to a foreign world, but it's Mrs. Sen who is eventually alienated as her husband is busy working outside home. So, the experience of displacement brings different plots based on their gender role in the family. Mrs. Sen loves to babysit to keep herself occupied though she doesn't have a child of her own. This displays about her motherly traits. Nonetheless of her underneath sadness and solitude that's remains unnoticed by her husband, she is rock solid to support her husband. "This Blessed House" gives a glimpse of tension and ego clashes between husband and wife. Sanjeev's male ego and rigidity of ideology stops him to open up and accept the new culture. There is an adequate power equation context as Twinkle

feels the dominance and lack of support from Sanjeev for the choices she makes in small matters like house-hold accessories. The readers can feel Twinkle's desire to free herself from the age-old conservatism and gel with new customs and ideas. "The Treatment of

Bibi Halder is a story that depicts the journey of a labeled worthless ill and helpless lady to a confident and independent mother. Her emotional turmoil includes her banishment by society when she cannot become mother but once she became a mother, she got enormous patience and strength to get over the entire social and physical trauma. Hence, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* narrates different stories set in different locations and situations, some set in India but mostly set in America. All the stories revolve around the women essaying different roles and their struggle to deal with loss, pain, alienation, displacement and gender bias.

Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* speaks about several themes like displacement, assimilation, generation gaps in Indian Americans. Besides these, it also sublimely depicts various shades of woman through its central character Ashima. She is a traditional Bengali woman but likes to take her own decisions and explore new things in life. Interestingly, just before the first meeting with her prospective groom Ashoke, Ashima impulsively tried to wear Ashoke's shoes. This displays her enthusiasm to discover new in life. "Ashima, unable to resist a sudden and overwhelming urge, stepped into the shoes at her feet (NS 8)". Jhumpa Lahiri presents a fresh perspective about arranged marriage that it can be seen as a journey to create and find something new in life and it not necessarily always a hurdle to freedom.

She relentlessly put efforts to adjust herself and reinvent herself without separating from her roots. She finds a job as a librarian to keep herself constructively occupied and also encourages her husband to join new job at Ohio. She is traditional but at the same time she also understands the need of time. She depicts strength when she asks Gogol to get back to his job instead of staying with her after the tragic death of her husband. Ashima doesn't make herself a typical helpless Indian housewife. As the novel concludes, Ashima is all set to move back to India to learn singing with a feeling that "city that was once home... is now in its own way foreign" (NS 278). It's an indication that she has succeeded in establishing herself strongly in new culture and has grown over her fears, anxiety, insecurities and loneliness in different phases of her life during her pregnancy, while raising Gogol alone, while the generation gap arises with her own child and the sudden demise of husband. Lahiri make sure that all her female characters get a substantial investment in the story.

Though the novel *The Namesake* revolves around the life of Gogol but the psyche of all the ladies he comes across is vividly described be it Ashima or Moushmi or Maxine. Ashima represents the conventional dominance by patriarchy, gender bias and loneliness while Moushmi is a strong woman who wants to live her life on her own terms rather than getting dominated by the societal pressures. She believes in following her heart, crave for her individuality and refuse to surrender the customs that she couldn't identify with. She is much similar to Maxine, but Maxine is American so it's easy for her as she is following her culture only while Moushmi being American Indian still dares to emancipate herself. Ashima epitomizes Indian mother when she gets anxious at the thought of raising Gogol in new culture amidst strange people all alone, but she adjusted to new world just for the sake of her child so that Gogol's childhood is smooth and easy.

The Unaccustomed Earth is the second collection of short stories by Lahiri. While, *The Interpreter of Maladies* describes the conflict of identity of Indian immigrants on foreignland and their day-to-day struggle for adjustment, *The Unaccustomed Earth* can be seen as next step forward in the journey of Indian diaspora where the displaced immigrants are becoming comfortable and developing a homely feeling for the foreign land. The title is symbolic of the cultural roots an individual has and his attachment with its homeland. Lahiri presents the stories which depicts how the three generations of Indian Bengali families evolve and develops their roots in a foreign land, eventually establishing in new country. It also portrays the influence of the host country one has over the person especially after one generation. The titular story is about Ruma, a woman who has been staying in America since long time with her American husband and small child. Being educated in America and married to American man has brought a remarkable influence of American culture on Ruma. After the death of her mother, the widowed father is coming to see Ruma in Seattle. This is the time when she is confused if she should ask her father to move in with her or not. Her Indian upbringing and values want her to ask her father to stay with her to support him.

However, the change in identity, roles and sensitivity of Ruma because of her American identity confuses her on the same. There is always a conflict of opinions. Eventually she asks her father to stay with them as she might feel guilty for not asking this. Also, she wants her three-year-old son to get some insights about Indian culture from her father so that he will be more civilized, calmer and cultured. This displays her wish that her son should be aware of Ruma's roots. On one hand she is herself adapted to American culture but still she wants her child to know about Indian culture. Though Ruma's father surprised her by his open-mindedness and individualistic thinking when he encouraged her to resume her career prospects. He also starts dating a woman he met recently in London during his journey to America. Ruma finds this very strange as she least expected this transformation in her father's attitude. At time, she finds her father to be more American and open-minded than her. As Ruma's father grows new plants in Ruma's garden, it is reminiscent of new beginning in new land. This act of him emphasizes the theme of the book that individuals do grow upon new culture and land and becomes multicultural, citizen of nowhere who can adjust everywhere.

In *"Hell-Heaven"*, Lahiri describes the state of mind of a married Indian housewife in a foreign land through her character Aparna. The story is narrated by Aparna's daughter Usha. Aparna's husband is a typical workaholic officegoer who is so enmeshed in his job that he couldn't spend much time with Aparna and Usha. "He was wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate". Aparna is a traditional Indian woman who is very much attached to her Indian roots and experiences alienation and homesickness when she is alone at home. She finds a pleasant company in Pranab whom she accidentally stumbled upon. Pranab soon becomes like a family and a regular visitor at Aparna's house. Aparna develops a unique kind of fondness for Pranab as she feels familiarity with him in terms of common heritage. She revives her old memories of Bengal while talking to Pranab. Though she is a traditional Indian woman, but she craves for her individuality in new culture and begins to harness warm feelings for Pranab. This indicates a shift of identity in Aparna.

Though Pranab was not Aparna's any relative but she still gets possessive for him and a plot of female jealousy appears when Pranab marries an American girl Deborah. Aparna feels insecure and betrayed when Pranab goes away from the Bengali circuit in town after marrying Deborah. She says, "He used to be so different. I do not understand how a person can change so suddenly, it's just hell-heaven, the difference".

"A Choice of Accommodations" is a story of an Indian husband and American wife who have stark differences in their cultural background and life experiences. Amit likes to see himself as an American after a difficult childhood due to separation from his parents. However, when it comes to take care of his daughters he starts behaving like an Indian mother. He also perceives his wife Megan as too casual and somewhat careless for looking after the daughters. Megan is a hard-working, career-oriented and ambitious woman who tries to balance both home and work. Unlike Amit, Megan is an easy-going person and manages to unwind herself irrespective of the responsibilities of daughters. She represents the modern age successful working mothers who don't give up on their ambitions for the sake of family. But she is uncomfortable as she suspects a secret affair between Amit and his childhood friend. This shows that no matter how much modern Megan is, but she is a very private and possessive wife who doesn't tolerate her husband getting intimate with the other woman.

"Hema and Kaushik" is a bunch of three interconnected stories depicting different episodes of the twists and turns in the lives of two protagonists. The first story *"Once in A Lifetime"* is narrated by Hema who despite being raised in United States is quite Indian and develops a crush on Kaushik but never told him. She was shattered and scared when she learnt about Kaushik's mother's breast cancer treatment. She can feel the pain of separation and loss of near ones. The second story *"The Year's End"* is narrated by Kaushik and it is all about his ordeal while dealing with her mother's death. He is not only inconsolably depressed but also feels alienated when his father remarries a very traditional young woman. Amit feels anxious to see another woman taking the place of her mother not only in his father's life but also in his house. The last story *"Going Ashore"* brings back Hema and Kaushik together as a conspiracy of destiny. Hema is a successful professor and wants to get out of the guilt of being in a relationship with a married man.

She respects her family's decision and agrees to get into arranged marriage in India. When Hema and Kaushik rekindle their old friendship and start with a passionate affair while holidaying in Rome, they both have experienced a lot of things in their respective lives and are much more matured and responsible than before. The story ends

with the tragic death of Kaushik in Thailand Tsunami and Hema longing for him. Hema is shown as a strong woman who always respects her parents and cultural ethics while at the same time also desires for the emancipation as she has grown up in America. Even after so many years and oblivion, Hema couldn't forget Kaushik and her feelings only get stronger with time. Apparently, *Unaccustomed Earth* is Lahiri's attempt to dive deep into the characters of second-generation migrants and their challenges to deal with displacement and evolving into new culture residents. All the women characters represent different shades of womanhood and feminism. In some places, Indian woman shows American values and somewhere American women displays Indian values. While most of the woman characters in *The Interpreter of Maladies* are very attached to their roots, but in *The Unaccustomed Earth* the readers see the women characters growing upon their age-old cultural norms and becoming more liberated, independent and evolved. For example, "Ruma in *The Unaccustomed Earth*", "Usha in *Hell-Heaven*", "Sudha in *Only Goodness*", "Gauri in *The Lowland*", and "Hema in *Hema and Kaushik*" manages to carry themselves confidently in the medley of identities and also realizes the importance of individuality, freedom of choices and aspirations. They are not a typical Indian woman dominated by patriarchal set-up. Lahiri gives a bold portrayal of the sexuality and freedom of her woman characters who defy the social pressures, stereotypes and ideologies. She emerges as a genius who despite of the limitation of narration capacity in short stories, brilliantly manages to bring out the most inner details of her relevant and realistic characters. Lahiri presents a soulful narration of various physical and emotional traumas in women's lives like infidelity, divorce, cultural identity conflicts, generation gaps, alienation, loneliness, depression, pregnancy etc. Lahiri's Ashima takes a brave journey from being a simple homely Indian housewife to an open-minded, flexible and strong woman and that is how Lahiri shows the existence of woman as an all-prevailing natural force. Lahiri uses her craft to present a continuous interaction of the constructs established by society in both the countries and its powerful impact on women in both side of the worlds. Immigration in United States has been a topic that harnesses different opinions. For some natives, it's a threat to local job opportunities while for some it's a need to boost economy with talented workforce. For the immigrants, on one hand it's a very lucrative world full of materialistic pleasures with best amenities and financial support while on the other hand it's indeed a tough step to stay away for so long time from their beloved ones. Migration is a different experience altogether for both men and women in the family.

Men are out of home most of the time while it's the woman of the family who has to spend most of the time alone at home in new country and culture that too in a different time zone from their home country. This makes it tougher for women fraternity to nurture their personality and identity as they find it difficult to talk to their people on phone due to huge difference in day and nighttime. Moreover, the responsibility

to raise children and give them cultural understanding lies more on the shoulders of the woman or the mother in the household. Hence, there is whole lot of things that goes in creating new life in new world with a new identity. The journey from confusion to fusion is not an easy task for a traditional Indian woman and this is beautifully described through the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri.

It is quite fascinating to explore feminism in the literary work that involves the cross-culture theme because there are vast differences in the societal stereotypes and morals in India and Western countries. The way a woman perceives herself empowered or strong highly depends on her cultural values and heritage. A traditional Indian woman may feel empowered by becoming a mother while a western woman may see herself powerful only if she has a successful career. This can be felt at several instances in Lahiri's work. For example, traditional Ashima or Mrs. Sen or Aparna are not happy within their family despite of being in the most powerful country with the best infrastructure at their reach. They still feel alienated because their value system makes them crave for their own people and roots to which they belong. However, there women like Sudha or Hema or Megan or Moushami who feel liberated when they are away from the societal ties and take the control in their own hands. The theme of motherhood is significantly underlined in the work of Lahiri. Most of the women characters are given strengths from their motherhood like Boori Ma, Shoba, Ruma, Ruma's mother, Ashima, Sudha, Kaushik's mother, Chitra, Mrs. Sen, Aparna, Gauri and Bela. The challenges of motherhood in a foreign land while raising children amidst different culture and the following consequences in the form of generation gaps and clashes are brilliantly emphasized by Lahiri.

Jhumpa Lahiri has very realistically portrayed the condition of Indian woman who is tied up with lot of social pressure and expectations that is much larger than their male counterparts. She shows the conflicts in the mind of newly migrated young Indian woman who is scared and lonely in new culture and could not understand the freedom given in American lifestyle. They are reluctant to cross the gap between the traditional and modernity as they are so deeply conditioned to look after everyone before herself. The realization of individuality and courage to question patriarchy comes very late. Indian first-generation mothers find it difficult to accept their children following American culture or getting married to American people. There is lot of apprehension and fear of going into unknown territory. Indian mothers try their best to make their children aware and respect Indian heritage, languages, religious beliefs, festivals that can keep them close to their family. Lahiri depicts that how the conservative upbringing of Indian women makes them deeply rooted to their home culture but at the same time makes their life miserable as desperate housewives because they fear to gel with unknown people outside. Through her work, Lahiri highlights the journey of Indian immigrant woman from an obedient, traditional, religious homemaker to an open-minded mother when she accepts her children's relationships and friendships with Americans. Lahiri's writings give a fair picture of the pain, helplessness and loneliness of Indian women at different stages in her life. The first when she arrives at the alien country with her husband being the only known person. And the second when she finds her children becoming Americans and there is a cultural and moral clash between them. She struggles

to adjust in every situation be it as a wife or as a mother. Similarly, Lahiri also gives a reasonable account of the sensitivity and conflicts in the mind of second-generation women who are raised with Americans but also been largely introduced to their Indian heritage. These independent women have a different definition of empowerment and success though there are times when they also relate to their Indian values giving a clear indication of being multicultural and their mixed identities.

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