



## The Female Iconoclast in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

### KEYWORDS

Iconoclast, Gynocriticism, Feminine psyche and nurturing

ARCHANA VERMA SINGH

**ABSTRACT** *The main aim of this article is to analyze and critique the feminist archetype in the novel The Lowland. The study would look at the traditional roles which women, especially, Indian woman are expected to follow and the course which the main protagonist Gauri chooses. By abandoning her home and her family, to pursue a career, she rejects the feminine prototype. This paper would also attempt to critique the myths surrounding motherhood using a gynocritical approach.*

Elaine Showalter coined the term Gynocriticism to signify the study of women represented in literature by female writers, portraying the feminine viewpoint. The Gynocritical approach views gender in the context of its social and cultural aspects. This school of thought believes that sex is a biological construct while gender is a product of the social and cultural milieu. Women writers have constantly struggled with the dominant male discourse and the suppression of the female voice. The early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Simon de Beauvoir advocated a complete break away from what they called feminine traits, in order to be successful in a man's world. Later, feminism took a less militant view with Betty Friedman and Germaine Greer talking of the need for women to not abandon the family and their responsibilities for their careers. Modern feminism encourages women to nurture her feminine aspects while simultaneously challenging the traditional roles thrust on them. With gender roles turning on their heads, the discourse has become all the more exciting.

A long list of Indian women writers have questioned the patriarchal roles forced on women. Writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Kamala Markandya, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Gita Hariharan and many more have given voice to the Indian women's dilemma. Standing on the threshold of modernity, she both aspires to be free and at the same time is afraid to break free. Many of the female protagonists speak out against retrograde customs and institutions. With amazing depth and clarity, these writers provide a window into the feminine psyche and her struggle to assert herself. For most women authors, writing is a form of self expression.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one such author. She is an Indian American writer who exploded on the literary scene with her Pulitzer winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000). Her second book and first novel *The Namesake* (2003) was converted into a film by the acclaimed film maker Mira Nair. Her second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* was also positively received. In 2013, her second novel *The Lowland* was published, which was longlisted for the Man Booker prize.

In this novel, the main female protagonist Gauri falls in love with and marries Udayan Mitra. Udayan and his older brother Subhash are inseparable in childhood and generally regarded as "mirror images" of each other. When Udayan meets Gauri, Subhash is in America, pursuing higher studies. Udayan is caught up in the banned Naxalite movement and eventually is killed by the police in stark view of his parents and wife. This earthshattering event permanently scars each one of them, especially the two women, one the mother whose favourite son has been taken away from her and the other, his

young pregnant wife. Subhash, the elder brother returns to mourn the younger brother's death. On seeing the discrimination meted out to Gauri and the police and the investigation agencies still harassing her with questions concerning her dead husband and his comrades in crime, he decides to give her a means to escape. Against his parent's wishes, he marries her and takes her to America. "To take his brother's place, to raise his child, to come to love Gauri as Udayan had. To follow him in a way that felt perverse, that felt ordained. That felt both right and wrong" (115).

Gauri gives birth to a daughter Bela, but soon begins to feel suffocated in both the marriage as well as in her role as a mother. She continues to be haunted by the memories of her first husband, the real father of her daughter and "Even now, part of Gauri continued to expect some news from Udayan. For him to acknowledge Bela, and the family they might have been. At the very least to acknowledge that their lives, aware of him, unaware of him, had gone on" (154).

When Bela turns five, Gauri is desperate to get out, to find time for herself after years of almost continuously staying at home and looking after the baby. But, Subhash refuses, saying that on principle, he didn't want his daughter to be looked after by babysitters while Gauri joined classes at the university. Gauri begins to resent Subhash for this. She takes it as a betrayal of what he has said when he'd asked her to marry him. "Though he had encouraged her to visit the library in her spare time, to attend lectures now and again, she realized that he didn't consider this her work. Though he'd told her, when he asked her to marry him, that she could go on with her studies in America, now he told her that her priority should be Bela. She's not your child, she wanted to say. To remind him of the truth" (162).

This resentment continues to grow with Subhash finally having to make peace and allowing Gauri the freedom to attend classes. Gauri begins to cherish the time spent away from her daughter and her husband. She feels "depleted" doing the same relentless chores daily. Caught up in an unrelenting surge of emotions, she also begins to grudge Subhash's absence when he is away at work. "She resented him for going away for two or three days, to attend oceanography conferences or to conduct research at sea. Due to no fault of his own, when he did appear, sometimes she was barely able to stand the sight of him." (163).

In *Towards a New Psychology of Women*, Jean Baker Miller recognizes that women are seen as nurturers and caregivers and that their "selves were almost totally determined by what the dominant culture believed it needed from women" (17). Thus, the so called feminine virtues are cherished in women and like, Gauri, if they want to break free, they are branded as

failed mothers and wives.

So, Gauri continues to feel alienated in her own home. She escapes into her world of classes at the university and the library and locks herself in her room, busy in course work. She is acutely aware of her shortcomings as both a wife and a mother, but chooses to continue on this path. Women have also "traditionally built a sense of self-worth on activities that they can manage to define as taking care of and giving to others." (Miller,53). So, Gauri feels inadequate when she is unable to 'feel' like a mother ought too. And while she is grateful to Subhash for taking her away from Tollygunge, she resents him for what he isn't, Udayan. A discerning reader will not miss the fact that it's almost as if she has already seen so much in life that she is unable to believe in the institutions of marriage or motherhood any more.

The final chasm in their marriage takes place when unexpectedly coming home early one day, Subhash finds Bela abandoned by her mother in the house. Subhash punishes her by not speaking to her for a week. "The day he broke his silence, he said, my mother was right. You don't deserve to be a parent. The privilege was wasted on you"(175). But, for the sake of their daughter both Gauri and Subhash continue to live under the same roof. She continues to pursue her further studies, travelling to Boston for a Doctoral programme.

On his father's death, Subhash visits Calcutta with his daughter Bela. On returning to America, they find that Gauri has finally broken free. She has accepted a job, teaching at a university. All she leaves behind is a letter in Bengali, leaving Bela to Subhash. On the face of it, the father and the daughter have succeeded in picking up the pieces and moving on, but the fissures run deep. Bela's grades suffer and she is seen wandering alone in different parts of the area. Although Subhash resists it at first, he is forced by the school Counselor to take Bela to visit a Psychologist. Gauri's sudden departure has left a permanent scar on the twelve year old Bela.

Unlike Ashima in *The Namesake*, Gauri refuses to toe the line and fit into the framework of the role of the traditional Indian Bengali immigrant wife. She rebels against the claustrophobic norms thrust on her. Although it is difficult to empathize with a mother who abandons her child and her husband, especially when the husband is the very person who gives her a means of escape from the life of a widow and an unwanted daughter-in-law. Gauri can be seen as an iconoclast, who shatters the preconceived notions of what she should and must do. The cutting of her hair and her sari's are the first signs of this rebellion. "In one corner of the floor, all of her saris, and her petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scraps of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws. He opened her drawers and saw they were empty. She had destroyed everything." (141). This appears, at the surface level, to be a deliberate rebellion and selfish attitude on Gauri's part but it won't be a hazard to state that it can also be attributed to the covert conflict and pain that results in such an overt display of her seething emotions --- of pain, separation in her childhood that amounts to abandoning in some way, then separation of her husband, his brutal killing, negation by her in-laws --- that her second husband failed to salve and gradually create a place for himself by replacing the past memories with love and affection, rendering emotional succor.

Gauri was not an uneducated woman, she was a graduate of philosophy from Calcutta's prestigious Presidency College. Her constant companions are her books and some of the first few conversations she has with Udayan are about books and philosophy. Breaking traditional norms, she elopes with Udayan and marries him. None of her family members are informed about the wedding. "She did not care what her aunts and uncles, her sisters, would think of what she was doing" (287).

Gauri spent most of her childhood with her maternal grandparents, away from her parents. Her sisters were much older to her, almost belonging to another generation and she felt close only to her brother Manash, who was also sent to be raised by the grandparents. And although she never resented her parents for sending her away and actually appreciated them for the autonomy they had inadvertently given to her, Gauri never received her mother's love and nurturance the way a child does. Her abandoning of her own daughter, for very different reasons, therefore is less surprising. It seems she did not know a mother's tender love and did not know how to reciprocate it either.

Throughout the novel, we see Gauri haunted by the memories of her first love, her first husband. When Udayan is being rounded up by the police, before he is shot, he manages to look at her face. "He knew that he was no hero to her. He had lied to her and used her. And now he was going to abandon her. Or was it she abandoning him? For she looked at him as she'd never looked before. It was a look of disillusion. A revision of everything they'd once shared" (page).

Thus, Gauri's final abandonment of her family comes as no surprise. She has herself seen abandonment both at the hands of her parents and then at the hands of her husband. Betrayed by the man she genuinely loved, betrayed into being a party to a policeman's murder she loses faith in ties and the bonds of love. The study shows that by negating her feminine self, she does not find peace or self fulfillment. She is definitely a successful professional, but ends up as a lonely individual.

## REFERENCE

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. 1949. UK: Vintage, 1997. | Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. England : Penguin Books. 1992. | Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. United Kingdom: Random House, 2013. | Miller, Jean Baker. *Towards a New Psychology of Women*. Boston : Beacon Press, 1976. |