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THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

AMBIKA SHARMA

Asst. Prof. S.G.H.S. College,
Jiwan Nagar, Sirsa & Research Scholar, JJTU, Jhunjhunu (Raj.)
Email: ambikasharma29@gmail.com



AMBIKA SHARMA

ABSTRACT

Women from girlhood are being told to find fulfillment and happiness as a wife and a mother in traditional feminine roles. Women often search for relationships with other women in order to share experiences and find fellowship. The relationship with the mother is the first relationship a woman has and it contributes to the construction of the subjectivities of a daughter. A daughter usually recognizes the mother as the source of comfort in moments of sorrow and the provider of treasured wisdom. Motherhood is a persistent theme in literature. Jhumpa Lahiri is a noted writer of diaspora literature in English. Mother characters in Lahiri's works move to a foreign land and establish their family there, away from their homeland. Lahiri depicts various phases of motherhood through her mother characters' who deal with their children along with the conflict of diasporic solitude, identity crisis, alienation, displacement, cultural transformation and assimilation when they move to a foreign land. Her women characters respond in a different way as per the circumstances they encounter in a foreign land. Mother-daughter bonds in Lahiri's fiction are different from the traditional mother-daughter relations as they involve negotiation between different generations of immigrant women. The present paper is an effort to deal with the mother-daughter relationship in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* which depicts Gauri's unresponsiveness towards her daughter Bela. Gauri follows American concept of freedom for career and advancement for her own life. She absorbs herself in a new culture to such an extent that she becomes careless and unresponsive towards real life, love, and familial relationship.

Keywords: Ambition, Assimilation, Culture, Identity, Motherhood, Transformation,

With the publication of her second novel *The Lowland* (2013), Jhumpa Lahiri once again has proved herself a dynamic Diasporic writer of Indian English literature. *The Lowland* was shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize (2013), US National Book Award (2013) and the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction (2014). Jhumpa Lahiri has won DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in Litfest 2015 held in Jaipur, India for *The Lowland*. In this

novel, Lahiri explores her characters' emotional turmoil, certainties, and dilemmas, uprooting and assimilation, hopes and fears along with their joys and grief as well. However, the depiction of the postcolonial plight of her diasporic characters has also been parallelly defined. The plot of the novel spans over four decades. The story revolves around the two Bengali brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, who hailed from "modest middle-class

homes" (Lahiri 3). Both the brothers were very close in their childhood. Though both the brothers were of similar look, sound, and height later on they drifted apart from each other. Subhash preferred study and leaves Tollygunge, Calcutta to pursue a Ph.D. programme in the United States. Unlike Subhash, Udayan turns to radical politics and joins the Naxalite movement, by a sense of injustice and poverty he finds around him. Later on, he is captured and killed by the police in the lowland, near his parental houses. When Subhash comes to know about Udayan's death, he immediately returns to Calcutta for the first time in three years to stand by his crushed family.

After the funeral, he comes to know the facts of Udayan's death from Gauri, Udayan's widow. He also comes to know about Gauri's pregnancy and his parents' rude and forcible behaviour towards her to lead a typical Bengali widow life. Subhash tries to persuade them and requests his mother saying, "You can't separate them. For Udayan's sake, accept her" (114). His mother angrily responds in a harsh tone, "Don't tell me how to honour my own son" (114). Subhash out of a sense of duty and love towards his brother, Udayan and to prevent Gauri from the ill-treatment of his parents and regular police enquiries as well, decides to marry Gauri. Gauri accompanies Subhash to Rhodes Island, America in order to find a change and an opportunity to escape herself from the ghastly events behind her and to fulfill her ambition of higher academic perspective although both of them don't share a bit of love at the moment.

Unlike Ashima (Lahiri: *The Namesake*, 2003), Gauri likes the tranquil and secluded life in a foreign country. She spends most of her time watching boring American TV programmes. She isolates herself from the outer world and starts living alone in her bedroom as Americans do. "Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings" (237). It shows that she has started to settle in America just after her arrival. She wants to be like other American women as she thinks for herself to be "like a woman Udayan had never seen" (134). This is her inner urge to assimilate herself into the new culture to escape from her past and to

come up with a transformed American woman. She rejects her Indian dress *Sari*, a unique and specific symbol of Indian Identity, without informing Subhash about it. One day Subhash finds a transformed Gauri;

In one corner of the floor, all of her saris, and the rest of 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. A few minutes later he heard her key in the lock. Her hair hung bluntly along her jawbone, dramatically altering her face. She was wearing slacks and a gray sweater" (141).

This change in her dress indicates Gauri's transition from an Indian woman to a western lady.

Gauri has a negative attitude towards the baby in her womb and compares with a ghost. She takes motherhood as a burden. "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. Both within her and remote" (124). Gauri, even after giving birth to her daughter Bela, (Udayan's child) is unable to bring herself to love and care for her own child as much as a mother would. This happens not only because of her post delivery despair or that she still loves and mourns for Udayan but it is her inner urge for her ambition of higher academic pursuit and escapes from the responsibilities of mother and wife as well. That's why she fails to attach herself with Subhash and Bela and to be a mother in a real sense. Even she finds pleasure in separation from her daughter and her husband Subhash. She follows American concept of freedom for career and advancement for her own life. She absorbs herself in a new culture to such an extent that she becomes careless and unresponsive towards real life, love, and familial relationship. Her carelessness can be noted when she leaves Bela, a six years old baby alone in the apartment when she herself goes for a walk alone. Her torture towards Bela increases day by day as she isolates herself in her bedroom, living her daughter outside alone. After joining German classes, she starts remaining outside the house every evening keeping herself away from family. Her behaviour towards her

daughter Bela was, "as if Bela were a relative's child and not her own" (159). Subash on observing her cold behaviour towards Bela reminds Gauri that her priority is to take care of her daughter and motherhood is the prime duty of an Indian woman. He then recalls his mother's observation of Gauri that "She is too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother" (114).

Lahiri has designed Gauri's character with the thin and entangled threads of ambition. Over obsessed by her ambition, she even neglects the role of a wife and a mother. She even tries to adopt different ways to succeed that are quite unfamiliar to any Indian woman. In the same house, Gauri keeps the distance from Subhash and they live separately. Pius in his journal Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland: A Critical Analysis*: puts some questions regarding Gauri's decision to leave Bela and Subhash: "...Why would Gauri regard motherhood and career as an either/ or choice? Why make no effort to stay in touch with Bela or explain her decision to move to California? Why not discuss her need to leave her marriage and her child with her husband?" (Pius 112). This analysis of Pius aptly conveys that Gauri made no attempt to be a good mother.

After the death of his father in Tollygunge, Subhash along with Bela comes to India to perform last rites. Here Bela's grandmother did not allow her to go outside of the house alone while her mother Gauri had left her to roam around the campus in Rhodes Island even when she was only in her third Grade. This reflects the indifferent attitude of her careless mother Gauri and her caring grandmother in India. Suzan Lewis defines motherhood in her journal: "Mothers' a primary child-rearing role and the more marginal role of fathers, except in terms of economic provision, and is frequently taken for granted as natural and right, despite the lack of evidence that children need exclusive maternal care." (Tizard, 1991) It is a mother's responsibility to take extra care of her child while Gauri even after being mother rejects the basic concept of motherhood. She sacrifices the joy of motherhood and rejects her twelve years old daughter forever for her teaching job in California. She thinks California as her home: "She had wanted California to swallow

her; she had wanted to disappear" (233). Gauri crosses the boundaries twice, for the first time when she left India for USA and second time, when she crosses the threshold of her house in the USA, leaving her daughter and her husband forever when both of them were in India. In both scenarios, the reason behind was her over ambitiousness for higher studies and her dream for success in life at any cost.

Gauri's sudden departure to California not only befuddled Bela and Subhash but also shattered their emotions completely. Bela was psychologically disturbed due to her mother's treacherous and disgusting behaviour. She was too shocked that her performance at school was affected and even Subhash was advised to seek the help of a psychologist for her. Due to this indifferent attitude, Bela's love for her mother converts into hate and she makes it a habit of telling her friends that her mother had already died. The pain and anguish of Bela can be perceived very well when she knows that her mother is alive and residing somewhere else, rejecting her own child especially an adolescent girl who is considered to be more close to her mother. Gauri has tortured her daughter to such an immeasurable extent that no one can forgive her weird behaviour to punish a fatherless daughter in a foreign country. On the contrary, Subhash is an incarnation of sacrifice, responsibility, love, and care. His efforts are praiseworthy who accepts and rears a child whose biological father had died and the mother abandoned her to fulfill her own dreams.

Like Ashima of *The Namesake*, Gauri has never tried to teach her daughter, Bela, nitty gritty of native culture in any respect. It is her grandmother who combs her hair and makes her learn to have them braided during her visit to India with Subhash. In this way, Gauri is not only rejecting the Indian traditions but she is not teaching them to the next generation also. As an ungrateful human being she disposes of her family, lives a liberated life and even her responses are negative when anyone asks her about having children or not. In totality, she denies home culture to assimilate herself into host-culture. On the other hand, Bela, unlike her mother, Gauri, feels proud to know that she is going to be a

mother," *the pride, the ease, with which she carried the child*" (265). She feels a connection with her baby even before the birth and she proclaims her baby as the "*unknown person maturing inside her was the only being with whom Bela felt any connection ...the only part of her that felt faithful, familiar*"(268). Thus Bela never takes motherhood as a burden and a negative experience for herself though she had suffered a trauma of abundance of her mother.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri has peeped into the psyche of a woman who prefers her academic life, career, and ambitions over the demands of the parental care of her daughter and the familial responsibilities. In a foreign land, Gauri leaves her family in total doldrum, leads a free and liberated life and becomes a lesbian with her student, Lorna. But she still feels lonely and baffled as far as self-recognition is concerned. Her self-chosen path proves a failure and cannot make her happy. In the end, she accepts the denial of her relationship with Subhash and Bela a worse 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" (242).

To encapsulate, it is observed that immigration from India to America strengthened and empowered Gauri to fulfill her ambitions and achieve her target of becoming self-reliant individual but the price she pays is irrecoverable. "*What she'd done could never be undone*" (242). Though Gauri regrets her insensitive behaviour but the damage done is irreparable and she cannot be forgiven for the injustice she had done to both father and daughter (Kanthi, 209). In my opinion, Gauri had tortured her daughter, Bela, by overlooking and abandoning her without any provocations. However, she had realized her behaviour but it was too late to correct and cure the fragmented loss of mother-daughter and familial bondage.

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