

TRANSGRESSING BORDERS, DECONSTRUCTING THE NOTIONS OF INDIAN DIASPORIC WOMANHOOD IN *THE LOWLAND*

Dr. Stella Steven

Assistant Professor of English

Karnatak University's Karnatak Arts College,

Dharwad -580001

Karnataka. India

sstellasteven@gmail.com

Abstract

Jumpa Lahari's first three works of fiction focus to bring out the Indian diasporic women like Mrs. Sen, Ashima and Chitra as following conventions who remain in the confines of domestic diasporic image, despite travelling to the USA. In her second novel The Lowland, Lahari breaks away from conventional notion of Indian Diasporic Womanhood established historically by nation and patriarchy and presents a unique and complex character, Gauri. The radical re-representation is achieved through Gauri, who challenges the conventional notions of Indian Womanhood; and transgresses the physical, ideological and socio-cultural boundaries that are constructed to contain women. She presents Gauri as a politicized, culturally-aware and non-heterosexual woman who refuses to be limited by conventions, giving space for individual representation and who effectively alters the perceptions and understandings of Indian diasporic womanhood. Gauri challenges the 'gendered space' allotted to women in immigrant lands through her violation of accepted norms of the society. In this paper, an attempt is made to find how Lahari succeeds in portraying Gauri as a new representative of Indian Diasporic Women, who subverts and transgresses the borders to deconstruct notions of immigrant Indian womanhood.

Keywords: Diaspora, Indian Womanhood, transgressing borders, deconstruction

Every country has its own socio-cultural ideologies and constructs on the basis of which is shaped the lives of the people. In a male dominant patriarchal hegemony based society the lives of women is often controlled and ruled or dictated by rigid, orthodox, traditional limitations. These limitations are the physical, psychological, socio-cultural boundaries that women are not supposed to overcome or transgress. Women have been assigned the secondary role of being subservient to man and this continues in traditional societies. The existence or identity of a woman has never been given due importance. This stereo-type image of woman is glorified and appreciated where she will remain to serve the dominant society by killing herself. In India in the ancient Vedic period women enjoyed all that rights and were educated, had power and prestige; and lived with equality to men. Later, stages of Indian history shows that due to foreign invasions, the status and position of women changed

and gradually they were put behind the four walls and denied all fundamental rights and privileges. "One is not born a Woman, But Becomes One". The statement in question was made by the female existentialist philosopher Simone De Beauvoir in her book called the 'Second Sex'. It alludes to the notion of women that is brought about by societal and physiological conditioning. Hence Womanhood is something that is attained by a woman rather than something innate. An Indian woman's life is conditioned by several restrictions and limitations that cater to the domestic image of wifehood and motherhood. Women were expected to follow a particular traditional image that was defined by patriarchy and nation. This image is the Indian womanhood image, the domestic image, where women are not allowed to cross the borders defined for them. The Indian womanhood gives the woman the role of being a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother, a good caretaker of the family who sacrifices her 'self' and only lives for the well-being of the family. Socio-cultural expectations of the society or family expect women to live a life of denial of their identity and welfare. When a woman thinks of her self, it is considered as selfish and ungaining attitude towards the family and society. They have to adhere to the stridharma or the pativrata dharma which is the characteristic of female sexuality. Only then a woman receives value or recognition and is applauded. One can very well notice that Indian womanhood has undergone and is also undergoing suffering with violence and atrocities conducted by the patriarchal system which considers it as a due privilege.

In the present century, educated women are more burdened with playing multiple roles where they are not permitted to cross their limitations and ignore their womanly duties and responsibilities. In the late twentieth century as well as the present millennium, Indian immigrants in foreign lands have increased. Indian men have gone and go in search of better prospects to countries like US, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, African Continent, Middle east, etc. Indian communities abroad have had to experience the diaspora and like-wise suffer alienation, nostalgia, displacement and hybridity as well as new 'space' notion. Female Indian immigrants get the opportunity to go abroad with their families or by getting married. The women in the diaspora have had to experience not only the suffering but also the double burden of maintaining an Indian identity, culture and traditions as well as getting adjusted to the new culture in the foreign lands. The husband or the extended family considers that the woman has to be the bond in keeping the old generation and the new generation connected with the native culture and traditions. In this way an Indian woman has to play her roles of being a perfect wife, companion and mother as the notion of Indian Womanhood is based on the image of Sita and Savitri as well as the ideals of manusmriti. The Indian woman has internalized all these notions that cater to the domestic image of woman. In the era where feminist and western ideologies have been in abundance, Indian women especially the middle class educated women have to fight for their emancipation to establish their identity and also live for themselves. Like-wise, the life of Indian immigrant women has become a challenge as they not only have to cross physical borders but also cross

the ideological boundaries and maintain the ideal image of Indian womanhood to make a survival in the new homes.

In today's global world, many women writers of Indian origin forming the diaspora have contributed immensely to literature by bringing out the diasporic, immigrant and transnational experiences. Jhumpa Lahiri is one such writer who with only four works of fiction has received commendable recognition and popularity by bagging prestigious awards for the work. Jhumpa Lahiri first three works of fiction focus to bring out the Indian diasporic first generation women like Mrs. Sen, Ashima and Chitra as following conventions who remain in the confines of domestic diasporic image, despite travelling to the USA. Her second novel *The Lowland*, published in 2013, won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature (2014). In the novel Lahiri breaks away from conventional notion of Indian Diasporic Womanhood established historically by nation and hetero-patriarchy and presents a unique and complex character, Gauri. The radical re-representation is achieved through Gauri, who challenges the conventional notions of Indian Womanhood; and transgresses the physical, ideological and socio-cultural boundaries that are constructed to contain women. She presents Gauri as a politicized, culturally-aware and non-heterosexual woman who refuses to be limited by conventions, giving space for individual representation and who effectively alters the perceptions and understandings of Indian diasporic womanhood. Gauri challenges the 'gendered space' allotted to women in immigrant lands through her violation of accepted norms of the society.

The paper concentrates at the conservative roles which women especially Indian are expected to don and the sensational digression that Gauri takes. Life is worth living for others however she would not consider the feminine prototype and chooses the "less trodden path" thus abandoning her home and family to fulfill her academic pursuits. Gauri, as a wife and as a mother does not conform to the established notions of Indian Womanhood. She transgresses and deconstructs the notion of Indian diasporic womanhood based on the expectations of being a dutiful daughter-in-law, a good wife or a *sahadharmini*, a loving and sacrificing mother. In this paper an attempt is made to find how Lahiri succeeds in portraying Gauri as a new representative of Indian Diasporic Women, who subverts the diasporic gendered conventions and transgresses the borders to deconstruct notions of diasporic Indian womanhood.

The novel is a story of two brothers Subhash and Udayan Mitra who live in Tollygunge, Kolkata. Udayan marries Gauri when Subhash is in Rhode Island, USA pursuing research. *The Lowland* also emphasizes on the female protagonist Gauri who falls in love with and marries Udayan Mitra. Through the novel the life of Gauri passes through the phases of being an orphan daughter, a youngest sister, a lover, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a widow, a wife again, a mother and an enlightened, empowered, independent individual who finds self-identity and fulfillment through which the notion of Indian diasporic womanhood receives a setback.

After a short time of Gauri's 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 the United States to mourn his younger brother's death and to console his parents. It is seen that Gauri receives discrimination by her mother-in-law, though she is 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. She receives Gauri coldly and treats her badly because her marriage was not an arranged one with Udayan. The in-laws refuse to talk to her or acknowledge her presence in the house as they do not 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 also by women.

Gauri is saved by Subhash from the discrimination and continuous harassing inquiry from the police and the investigation agencies. She gets an opportunity to escape from all this as Subhash decides to take the place of his brother Udayan and decides to marry Gauri and take her to USA. Gauri gets to be convinced that she could have a normal and new life in USA and that she could pursue her studies also. For a young widow a very soon second marriage is a new challenging happening in an Indian context. To get rid of the 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. As a wife to Subhash his parents do not accept Gauri and his mother warns him that Gauri is "too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother." Here one can notice that women or traditional mindset does not happily accept a young woman to remarry and free oneself from the bondage of widowhood. Choosing to marry Subhash, Gauri readily transgresses the physical as well as socio-cultural boundaries of India and goes to America. Gauri is eager to embrace whatever the adopted land offers. It is signaled that Gauri is willing to join the new community from the first months of her life in America.

When one considers how Gauri experiences the early immigrant life in America, like the life journey of an Indian woman in America as depicted in *The Immigrant* (Kapoor) it feels like déjà vu. When Gauri goes to Rhode Island living with Subhash she is not expected to perform any wifely duties nor does she take up to do much like serving food to Subhash or anything much. A gradual change of shedding the saris for western clothes, taking the first step from the four walls of the house out into the world, finding solace in library and books and finally finding a way to breakout and reinvent herself. Gauri's experience follows the same vein but to a more drastic effect. The first time Gauri wants to go out for a walk in Rhode Island, she tries the dress that her husband has recently bought for her. She "put on her winter coat over her sari" (122, TL). This is apparently how no one looks like in America. Women either wear leather coats if they are Americans or saris if they are Indians, and not both of them at the same time. She herself starts to feel the severity of her being different. Once in the campus lounge, she starts a small talk with an American girl whose "body was

unencumbered by the yards of silk material that Gauri wrapped and pleated and tucked every morning into a petticoat... Gauri felt ungainly. She began to want to look like the other women she noticed on the campus, like a woman Udayan had never seen" (126, TL). She senses the urge to liken herself to the American girls whom she sees on campus. What she needs is to "adopt an identity in the U.S. that transcends national boundaries" (Alfonso-Forero, 39). "For the sake of retirement, for the sake of simplifying the end of her life, she would need to become an American" (216, TL). For instance, she copies what other American married women do, "adopting the Western custom of wearing a wedding band during the day" (TL, 218). She feels the need to chop her hair into a blunt modern style, which Subhash does not like and chooses to wear western clothes, attending philosophy classes in slacks, longing more and more to be lost in the ancient thoughts of others. Gauri well exemplifies "the victimized "third world" woman who is liberated by her adoption of an American identity" (Alfonso-Forero, 35). This is usually not expected from an Indian wife as she will be expected to adjust to the immigrant land not by giving up the cultural practices of Indian Womanhood but by learning to balance in the new home. Gauri continues with her pregnancy and bears Udayan's child, a daughter.

Here one 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. One can notice that a woman is expected to be a mother completely and not consider giving priority to her desire.

As a mother she is negligent of her duties towards her child, Bela and does not even feel love towards her child. She is jealous of Subhash for being the father and not Udayan. She was a 'bookish girl' who is more concentrating on reading books on German philosophy, attending classes in the campus and visiting the library regularly. 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."

(175, TL). 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." (160, TL), and that "She's too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother." (114, TL) The issue of separating was not discussed since the point of their marriage was Bela. Gauri is blamed to have 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.

Gauri, with support from Subhash, pursues her higher studies and goes to Boston for her Doctoral programme and does not fulfill the commitment as a parent. Subhash takes up the role of a mother for Bela and Gauri's attitude angers him. Gauri, unlike typical Indian mothers, dedicates all of her time to her studies and neglects her little daughter (186, TL). She speaks of her Ph.D. dissertation "as she might speak of an infant, telling [Subhash] that she worried about the pages being blown out an open window, or being destroyed by a fire. She said it worried her, sometimes, to leave them unattended in the house" (188, TL). An Indian mother is expected to fulfill her motherly duties and work round the clock for the welfare of the family. When Bela visits India her grandmother finds that Bela does not tie her hair but leaves it free and so asks her if Gauri has not taught her to wear her hair properly. Especially a mother in the immigrant land is expected to fulfill the cultural obligation which is not done by Gauri who prefers to work for her self-development and self-fulfillment. One thing that strikes any reader is of Lahiri's courage to write about a mother who is incapable of loving her own children, whose maternal instinct is not an instinct but an attempt, whose priority is in intellectual pursuit but not child bearing. It breaks the mould of a stereotype image of a loving mother. She is with Bela and yet not with her at all. She was supposed to have put her as her first priority but she wouldn't.

Gauri suffers inner turbulence that is, part of it is due to missing Udayan, and part of it is not completely accepting Subhash, never comes to rest. This leads her to decide to go away in pursuit of that which would make more meaning to her. The conventional image of Indian diasporic womanhood is subverted by Gauri when she chooses to abandon her young daughter and her husband whom she could not love, to pursue an academic career in a college in California. When Subhash along with Bela came to Calcutta three months after his father's death, she goes away leaving only a letter to inform of her decision to Subhash. Leaving them, she feels that she had been given what she has demanded, granted exactly the freedom that she had sought.

Gauri pursues an independent life, teaching at various places and take up serious responsibilities that come with the job. After years of teaching she got settled in southern California, in a small college mainly meant for undergraduates. Her job was not only to teach students but also to mentor them. She was expected to be approachable and to maintain generous office hours. This obligation to be open to others and to forge alliances had in the beginning brought an unexpected strain. But she was quite successful with her colleagues and

students. Yet she preferred isolation because it offered its own form of companionship: "the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of evenings" (237, TL). When desire eventually began to push its way through, she sought friendships with men but she had never allowed herself to reach the point where they might complicate her life. One more transgression adopted by Gauri is of the psychological and socio-cultural milieu, which is not permitted by Indian society. After years of living on her own, in spite of her being on the guard, Lorna, a graduate student, who came to Gauri seeking an outside reader for her dissertation, unravelled her leading to the exploration of their own female bodies. "She had no recollection of crossing a line that drove her to desire a woman's body" (220, TL). This happens to be a short fling which ends as Lorna shifts elsewhere to work. Gauri in America enjoyed the individual liberty to take lovers of either sex; something that she could not have thought or dreamed of in India. This is surely an act that deconstructs the notions of Indian womanhood.

As an Indian woman, Gauri rejects Indian practices and adopts many western practices like food, clothes. At her old age, "in California, Gauri has her toast and fruit and tea" (253, TL). She no longer cooks rice, samosas, or other Indian food full of curry. Instead, she fancies eating fast food, toast with cream cheese, and other kinds of Western cuisine, the food she knew nothing about when she moved to America. When she first tasted cream cheese, she ate it all "[n]ot knowing it was intended to be spread on a cracker or bread, savoring the unexpected taste and texture of it in her mouth, licking the paper clean" (123, TL). At the end of the novel, we can see Gauri has to live her life lonely. She chooses to live in the United States forever and never to return to her homeland. "In any case, California was her only home. Right away she had adapted to its climate" (216, TL). She also is brave enough to grant divorce to Subash though it is after more that thirty years of separation from him.

While all other characters in *The Lowland* follow a predictable path, it is Gauri who comes across as the most complex, unpredictable character whose thoughts and feelings are opaque from all - even from her own daughter, Bela. Her 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 conversions and hence her wifely as well as her motherly image gets tarnished. She transgresses the physical, psychological and socio-cultural boundaries to work for her self-attainment through which she deconstructs the notions of Indian diasporic womanhood.

Navigation of physical and socio-cultural space is one of the diasporic characteristics and Jhumpa Lahiri deals with it in *The Lowland* in a commendable way through the protagonist Gauri. One may find Gauri as a selfish character who forsake her duties as a wife, as a mother and appears as an ungrateful person, who returns all the favours done to her with a chilly disregard and does not hesitate to transgress the ideological borders. But one finds

that Lahiri has created Gauri in such a manner that she brings out the reality of the practical world. The character of Gauri transgresses borders and flaunts all the conventions of Indian diasporic womanhood in order to realize the worth of her life, to form an identity, to find self-realization and self-attainment through the pursuit of her dream and career to achieve emancipation. Though she fails in being happy, finally being lonely, she realizes the guilt of forsaking her daughter. This happens to be understood that one has to lose something in order to achieve something. Many Indian women in diaspora get to experience this at the cost of their happiness and lives. But one gets to see that Lahiri has been bold in creating the character of Gauri who becomes a radical representative to challenge the notions of Indian Diasporic Womanhood.

Works Cited:

- Alfonso-Forero, A. (2011). *Translating Postcolonial Pasts: Immigration and Identity in the Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee, Elizabeth Nunez, and Jhumpa Lahiri*. University of Miami. ALLS 7(2):41-47, 2016. Print.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa, *The Lowland*. Noida: Random House India, 2013. Print.
- Kapur, Manju. *The Immigrant*, Noida: Random House of India, 2011. Print.

Web References:

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lowland
2. <http://www.indiandiaspora.nic.in/>
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/12/lowland-jhumpa-lahiri-review>
4. http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/1827/8/08_chapter2.pdf
5. <http://englewoodreview.org/jhumpa-lahiri-the-lowland-a-novel-feature-review/>