
Emergence of New Woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novels *'The Namesake'* and *'The Lowland'*

Dr. Punam V. Barabde

Associate Professor in English, Shri Shivaji Science College, Amravati

Paper Received on 06-11-2024, Accepted on 09-12-2024
Published on 10-12-24; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2024.9.4.420

Abstract:

Lahiri's women characters mark the journey of the emergence of new women. Her novels portray women as those who break the rules of masculinity and redefine their gender roles. Society assigns traits like love, sacrifice, obedience, patience, and loyalty to the 'ideal woman' and 'independent nature towards men.' In fact, these features are unmatched by the characterization in her fiction. At the same time, Meanwhile, female protagonists are more assertive, authoritative, and decisive. The leading female characters shrink the responsibility to match society's expectations of being a dutiful wife, a caring mother, or a devoted daughter. Instead, they focus on building their own identity in society. In this research paper, an attempt has been made to explore the characters of Moushumi and Bela as representations of the new woman.

The characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, such as Moushumi and Bela, have the spirit and courage to come out with pride, breaking away from the shackles into which the ideal woman has been forced to live for centuries. In the quest for freedom, they think that there is no harm in having sexual pleasure with a man of their choice. In pursuit of obtaining her status, dignity, and self-dependence, they dare to struggle against time immemorial's formidable boundaries. They need freedom, self-respect, justice, equality, dignity, compassion, and other egalitarian values. They want education, a professional career, and equal rights with men. Their behavior threatens social order and rebels against acceptable norms.

Keywords: New woman, Self-dependence, Rights, Rebel, Culture, Married life

Introduction :

In this era of globalization of communication, information technology and in a world wide web culture a major change has taken place. Now woman's decision for late marriage, her educational achievements, choice of challenging and innovative careers have proved that she is no longer the second sex. On the contrary it means that she has emerged as new woman.

As a result, we see an improvement in the status of women. In the modern era, the constitution has also provided equal status to women and men by removing inequality. In the twentieth century, socio-political and economic forces brought about awareness among women who took up new roles in social, political, and economic life. In the post-colonial era, the portrayal of women in Indian fiction in English underwent a radical change. The conventional ideal woman is replaced by the 'new woman'. She raises her voice against traditional orthodox concepts and values, which create hurdles in the way of decent work and freedom of the soul. In most of Lahiri's work, she discusses migration experiences, the integration of conflicts across cultures, differences in family life, and the complexities of generations. As a new woman growing up outside India, she has a real problem with the mix of Indian-American culture. She tries to describe Indian culture based on her limited knowledge.

In 'The Namesake', Ashima is disheartened to see the separation of Gogol from Maxine. This break off is occasioned by Gogol's growing awareness of filial duty and his sense of responsibility. Ashima cannot bear Gogol living a lonely life. She wants that he should marry someone from his own background. So, she suggests that he should meet Moushumi whom he has known since childhood.

Moushumi is one of the major characters in the novel. She is the daughter of a Mazoomdar couple who, like Gogol's parents, belong to India but are settled in the USA. She is a beautiful, sensuous, and intellectually accomplished girl. They meet at a bar and develop intimacy. She is a studious type and always brings books to read during her free time. Even when Gogol meets her at a bar, she is engrossed in her book. After that, they develop a liking for each other and believe that they are compatible. As a result, they decide to marry. Once married, however, they find that they are not compatible.

Moushumi is from Gogol's world, and he is from hers. They have a set of cultural experiences and know what kind of pressures, customs, and anxieties the children of Bengali parents feel in the United States. Thus, they share the same background. They also imbibe the liberal spirit flowing so freely in America. But as compared to Gogol, Moushumi is a step ahead. She is ready to marry Gogol as her parents have agreed to tie the nuptial bond between them. It is almost like any other arranged marriage, and it goes on well for some time. Unintentionally, once she discloses the secret that Gogol, now known as Nikhil, has actually changed his name. Gogol does not like it. As time goes by, differences start arising between Gogol and Moushumi. There is no provocation from Gogol's side, but Moushumi simply gets bored of one man in her life. Moushumi revolts against the restrictions imposed on her privacy to break free from the clutches of tradition. She is portrayed as a personification of a new woman who is confident and courageous to live independently in society.

After marriage, Moushumi refuses to change her maiden surname and still addresses herself as Moushumi Mazumdar to retain her independent identity. She is a chain smoker, and Gogol soon finds himself resenting its stale smell in her hair and on her fingertips. But Moushumi is a new woman who is not ready to be a passive spectator dominated by her male partner. She revolts against established norms. She is not satisfied with her life within the four walls of her house. The smooth shade of her family roof no longer gives her rest and consolation. No longer is her sweet home the center of her attraction. She prefers to walk out and claims to be man's equal. Jhumpa Lahiri describes her as follows:

“ Sometimes she would sit at a restaurant alone, at the bar, ordering sushi or a sandwich and a glass of wine, simply to remind herself that she was still capable of being on her own. This assurance is important to her; along with Sanskrit vows she'd repeated at her wedding, she'd privately vowed that she'd never grown fully dependent on her husband.”¹

She wants to reassure herself that she can still be independent. Her mental conflict arises due to her individualistic attitude. Moushumi reveals her past love life to Gogol. Whereas during her college days, she did not dare to strike up a relationship in reality with anyone, she rather repents after she passed out of college. After moving to Paris, she puts down all her defenses. She allows herself to be won over by men of

different nationalities and ages. There are Germans and Persians. Italians are among them, but most of all, they are French. She continues being sexually promiscuous. These are days when she sleeps with one man after lunch and another after dinner. In this case, no moral considerations come her way. Thus, she is a weak-willed creature. She has trained herself to follow nothing else but her own instincts. Santwana Haldar aptly describes her, ``She is a New Woman who believes in the freedom of sex life and is not ashamed to confess it.’’²

Moushumi's first wedding anniversary is memorable because she has cleared her ABD, which means she has only now been able to submit her dissertation for the Ph.D. in French. Moreover, she has been getting teaching assignments for one year in France. There, the streak of independence in her character asserts itself, and she indulges in some harmless activities to assure herself that she is a master of her own self. After completing her work in France, she joins New York University as a teacher. She has stayed in New York for two years, supporting herself with mofussil jobs. She stays in Paris but comes to New York for the sake of her lover.

Fate brings an old acquaintance, Dimitri, to her, and she starts meeting him secretly. Much ado about an extramarital affair is not done either in American culture or in the Indian. Even though she experiences Gogol as a caring husband, she maintains a relationship with her first love, Dimitri. When she starts having sex with Dimitri, Gogol does not suspect anything in the beginning. But when she realizes that whatever she is doing is wrong, she wonders whether she is the only woman in the family ever to have betrayed her husband and to have been unfaithful. Gogol also noticed that the frequency of Moushumi's meetings has increased. One day, Moushumi herself reveals her affair to Gogol during a train journey. He becomes so disturbed and tormented. Gogol expresses his pathetic condition as follows:

``He felt the chill of her secrecy, numbing him, like a poison spreading quickly through his veins. He'd felt this way on only one other occasion, the night he had sat in the car with his father and learned the reason for his name. That night, he'd experienced the same bewilderment and was sickened in the same way. But he felt none of the tenderness that he had felt for his father, only the anger, the humiliation of having been deceived.’’³

Loyalty makes the strong foundation of every relationship. A deceitful spouse kills the trust of the loyal partner, making it difficult to trust the cheating partner once again. Getting over the shock of an extramarital affair is the toughest thing to do. Causes of extramarital affairs by ex-spouse become an emotional burden for the victim, who cannot forget the devastating experience of infidelity and enters into a self-victimization mode. Sometimes, it takes decades for them to trust someone once again. Even after a year of this happening, Gogol clings to a sense of failure and shame. But then he realizes that he cannot blame her for being unfaithful to him. For he, too, has acted on the same impulse. Coming from the same cultural background, Gogol and Moushumi are supposed to make the marriage a roaring success.

As a result, the marriage is in difficult situation in 1999, Gogol and Moushumi go in for a divorce. The cause is her betrayal. The trauma of finding a suitable companion for Gogol becomes an impossible situation. However, his wedding with Moushumi eventually turns out to be a failure one. In matters of love Gogol suffers a lot.

Thus, the husband-wife relationship is no longer a harmonious blending of love and warmth, sentiments and emotions. It is not the true union of two souls and two bodies anymore. Moushumi's relationship with Gogol is very soon doomed, and she decides to return to her first love. Their relationship, which developed in America's multicultural milieu, ends in divorce. Like Rahel of 'The God of Small Things,' Moushumi can not be faithful to a relationship. She does not develop love for Gogol, even though she marries him out of her free will. She is still drawn to her old love, Dimitri. In the words of Jagdish Batra:

“ Moushumi is, thus, a typical postmodern rootless girl. For her, there is no question about getting tied to a Centre. Neither family nor culture can bind her. What is more, she shows a disconnect with her own self. Therefore ,she acts erratically.”⁴

A partner's frailty can have serious consequences for the relationship. The betrayed partner feels a deep sense of despair and loss of trust. The discovery of an extramarital affair can lead to a breakdown in communication and a loss of intimacy in the relationship. In some cases, the damage caused by an extramarital affair may be irreparable, and the couple may decide to end the relationship.

Lahiri's fiction prepares a space through which second-generation women choose to fight and protest. They are against the existing traditional and culturally accepted norms and currents of society. Her fictional world suggests that she is not merely documenting the reality of the present-day world, but she has used her fiction as a medium for the exploration of a new woman's rebellion. The new woman has waged war against the restrictions imposed on her privacy and fought the opposition along with certain conservative forces in society. There is the re-definition of values and restructuring of relationships.

Jhumpa Lahiri seeks to deconstruct the image of woman and takes efforts to debunk stereotyped images. The ability to construct a mere progressive image of woman through Moushumi, the second generation Indian immigrant of the novel is what makes her writing feminist in nature.

Marital affair is something that is not appreciated in American nor in Indian culture. Thus, this leads us to the very concept of the 'new woman.' The new woman that has been explored in 'The Namesake' reveals that 'she' is not the 'ideal' or the 'best' woman. She is now in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society and exploring her true potential along with the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs. Her break-off with Moushumi is symbolically indicated at the beginning of their conjugal life when she refuses to accept Gogol's surname.

In this way Lahiri's first novel 'The Namesake' succeeds in accounting for the wayward ways of Moushumi as a new woman. Her journey of life starts from a reserved and a shy girl at school to an unrepentant flirt post college. The obedient Bengali girl has been thoroughly Americanized and has emerged as a new woman under the pressure of host culture.

Bela is another female protagonist who is regarded as a new woman in the novel 'Lowland'. Her bringing up and heredity make her a decisive character in the fiction. In Rhode Island, she was born and brought up on foreign land having foreign language, foreign learning, and foreign cultural ethos. She is never asked or forced to pursue her native cultural ethos by her mother Gauri.

Gauri's horrific decision to leave her family shocks Bela's life. The terrible

separation from her mother leaves a deep impression on her throughout her life. Initially, Bela struggles to overcome the shock. She is introverted. Gradually, she learns the lessons of detachment from her life. Her acceptance of the truth changes her and gives her a different outlook on life. She has been learning Spanish since her seventh grade. She creates her own world with her coming of age. Even Subhash, who plays the role of a father for her rearing, hesitated to interfere in her private life. Bela adopts her American dress code. Jhumpa Lahiri says about Bela's dressing style: "A tattoo that was like an open cuff above her ankle. A bleached section of her hair. A silver hoop in her nose."⁵

At the age of 21, she becomes independent because she gets a job on a farm as an agricultural trainee in the field. Only on certain occasions, like during Christmas or in emergencies, did she visit her father. During her visit, she never told him when she would return again or where she would go. Her accepted path is "a rootless path."⁶ But Subhash learns to accept Bela's unconventional, independent life. He never tries to interfere with her Americanized life. However, he always worries for her, especially about her possible future marriage.

After adopting herself to the American culture in the United States, she establishes relations with all sorts of people without settling down with anyone. She gives birth to a child, Meghna, but does not stick to the girl's father. Seeing the troubled marriage of her parents has the worst impact on Bela, who straight away denounces the system of marriage. As a new woman, she thinks for having children, it is not necessary to get married to someone. She has independent views and loves to work for the cause of the destitute and the poor. Her assimilation with American cultural ethos results in her being a fatherless daughter in her rootless, homeless, nomadic life.

Bela, who is brought up almost entirely by Subhash, does not inherit his passivity and discretion. On the contrary, her character reveals the rebellious urge of her biological father. As the novelist states, "She could be self-righteous."⁷ Like Udayan, her work starts merging with a certain ideology. She becomes extremely individualistic in choosing the career she prefers. Bela likes to work as an environmentalist and sometimes even as a farmer. She prefers to live as a nomad without a fixed address and no insurance. The emptiness in her life transforms her into a hybrid tradition but somewhat queer. In this way, Bela displays an indomitable feeling and faces the challenges of her life with confidence. As a result, she has emerged as a new woman of the third generation of the

Mitra family.

Bela establishes an existence away from Subhash—a fact he learns to grow accustomed to. He also considers Bela's desire to leave home to 'find herself'. Bela tries to rebel like Gauri by breaking all her relationships with her parents. Like Gauri, Bela chooses to defy tradition in her own way by becoming an unwed mother. Her decision is accepted and embraced by that Subhash.

As a popular young writer of Indian background, Lahiri is a kind of representation of crossing the line between two cultures. In 'The Lowland,' Lahiri gives a different perspective on Indian culture, especially through Bela's character. In this novel, Lahiri also depicts the problems of Indian Americans while embracing Indian traditional culture. In this novel, Lahiri tries to present something new in her writing. She moves away from her characteristic approach. She prefers an intellectual husband and a traditional wife. But she offers a new character with new ideas through Bela's personality. Through the picturization of Bela, Lahiri challenges her reader to understand the value of marriage and parenting. Unlike the previous analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's work, the author brings a new focus.

The female characters of Jhumpa in the novels 'The Namesake' and 'The Lowland' devalue the patriarchal system. They break the myths of femininity and motherhood. They compromise family ties to assert their place in society, their independence, and their identity. They fight bravely and resist the various challenges in a relationship. These women exercise their freedom of choice. It is observed that Lahiri's women characters emerge as survivors in the land called the melting pot of multiculturalism.

New women play an important role in the diasporic experience. In Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, the emergence of new women is evident in the growth of female characters. In the process of emergence, a kind of negotiation is revealed when foreigners have to face a mediating situation. The female characters face the confrontation of traditional and modern culture. The immigrants leave an old world to step into a new American society. Both the old and the new worlds are important. The new world is a world where these women need to adapt to the new environment and inevitably run away from some of its social structures. The old world, too, becomes synergic as people become

nostalgic about their original land. The negotiation processes between the characters are fluid and run differently. It is based on their historical experience, beliefs, education, and the modern life they accept. Women migrants select, shift, and modify to adapt to the environment. New women play a big role in the negotiation process and choose values that may not suit the old world.

Moushumi and Bela adopt American culture and raise their voice against social and cultural Indian principles that curb their liberty. The new women that Lahiri portrays in her fiction are clear and prudent in their actions and thoughts. She depicts a new woman who drinks, smokes, dates with men, and does whatever she wants. The phrase `power of nature` refers to the new woman's potential that she possesses in changing times. Jhumpa Lahiri does not consider this new woman as bad, nor does she hate her. On the contrary, she justifies her free and modern behavior in the context of the emerging new world. Thus, an Indian diasporic woman's new perception of having her own identity lends a voice to her disappointment and alienation in a masculine world.

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction reveals a successful attempt to bring out the new woman who is concerned with the maze of domestic chores and accepts an unconventional decision to keep her `individuality` and her self-esteem intact. Her female characters notice new and essential discoveries about themselves, resulting in a sobering effect. They succeed in finding a sense of fulfillment in their relationship to the world. Their inner potential enables them to resist unjust social pressure. The women in her fiction, however, liberated, educated, assertive, or confident, do not totally rule out the idea of marriage from their lives. Thus, today's new woman is well on her way in quest of her identity. Inheriting cumulative wisdom from her predecessors, she is now competent enough to call a spade a spade. She has a strong affinity for tradition but a stronger attachment to self-respect and individuality.

The emergence of a new woman or a radical role change in women's characters is a byproduct of the diasporic experiences that they have to face. Jhumpa Lahiri has meticulously penned the overhauling of the psyche of women. Her fiction vividly depicts the emergence of such new women.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a phenomenal writer in a way that her female characters perfectly demonstrate a new modern outlook towards life. They represent Indian diasporic

women of the 20th century who are empowered women and are equal to men in all aspects.

Conclusion:

Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri's concept of a new woman transcends the limits of economic or social freedom. It relates to her mental and emotional attitude and well-being. It deals with infatuation and obsession across the gulfs of religion, marriage, legitimacy, and conventions. Through her fiction, Jhumpa Lahiri reveals how her female characters, such as Moushumi and Bela, the woman immigrants, devalue the patriarchal setup and emerge as new women. They break myths of womanhood. They compromise family ties to assert their position in society, independence, and self-identity. They are self-independent. They are shown courage while facing various challenges in relationships, including marital life. They believe in assimilation and acculturation. They are no longer mere helpmates at home but competent ones who can demolish the dominance of men, changing the traditional age-old scenario. Their extramarital affairs reveal their courage to break the traditional and moral values in society. Moushumi is way ahead of Bela by smoking and drinking in public.

The second generation of new women, such as Moushumi, is one of those who are more interested in self-satisfaction than the better half's contentment. As a result, her second-generation women immigrants have emerged as New Women. Jhumpa Lahiri wants to discuss Moushumi's and Bela's actions and ideas from a postmodern new women's feminist perspective.

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An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal Impact Factor: 8.16(SJIF)Vol-9, Issue-4(Oct-Dec),2024
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI),
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How to cite this article?

Dr. Punam V. Barabde "Emergence of new woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novels `The Namesake` and `The Lowland`" *Research Journal Of English (RJOE)*9(4),PP:410-420,2024, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2024.9.4.420