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Negotiating Gender Roles: A Feminist Reading of Women in Jhumpa Lahiri's Work

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Abstract

This paper presents a feminist reading of women in Jhumpa Lahiri's selected works, focusing on how female characters negotiate socially constructed gender roles within domestic, cultural, and emotional spaces. Lahiri frequently portrays women positioned within traditional frameworks of marriage, motherhood, and familial responsibility, where patriarchal expectations restrict autonomy and self-expression. Rather than dramatizing overt rebellion, her narratives emphasize subtle forms of resistance expressed through silence, emotional withdrawal, introspection, and private acts of choice. The paper examines the psychological impact of these gendered expectations, highlighting women's inner conflicts, isolation, and struggles for selfhood, particularly within diasporic contexts where cultural norms are intensified. Through a feminist lens, the study analyses how women internalize, question, and gradually renegotiate prescribed roles, transforming everyday experiences into spaces of negotiation rather than passive acceptance. By foregrounding interior life and emotional awareness, Lahiri challenges conventional notions of feminist empowerment based on visible defiance. The paper argues that her fiction offers a nuanced feminist perspective in which agency is exercised quietly but meaningfully, thereby enriching feminist literary discourse and deepening our understanding of female subjectivity in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Patriarchal, Psychological, Responsibility, Introspection, Gender roles, Feminist perspective

Introduction

Gender roles have long shaped the lived experiences of women, particularly within social structures that privilege tradition, conformity, and emotional restraint. Literature, as a reflective and critical medium, offers valuable insight into how women negotiate these roles within both private and public spheres. The writings of Jhumpa Lahiri provide a compelling space for such an inquiry, as her narratives consistently foreground women whose lives unfold within ordinary domestic settings yet are marked by profound psychological complexity. Lahiri's female characters are often situated at the intersection of cultural expectation and personal desire, where prescribed roles of wifehood, motherhood, and filial duty subtly but powerfully govern their choices. What distinguishes Lahiri's portrayal of women is her emphasis on interiority rather than overt resistance. The conflicts her female characters face are rarely expressed through open confrontation; instead, they manifest as emotional withdrawal, silence, reflection, and quiet dissatisfaction. From strained marriages to solitary moments of self-awareness, Lahiri reveals how women respond to patriarchal norms not by rejecting them outright but by negotiating their meanings within the confines of everyday life. These negotiations expose the psychological cost of gendered expectations and highlight the tension between social obligation and individual identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction occupies a distinctive position in contemporary Indian-American literature for its restrained prose, emotional subtlety, and penetrating insight into the everyday lives of individuals shaped by migration. While her narratives are often celebrated for their exploration of displacement, memory, and identity, a feminist reading reveals that gender is a central axis around which these experiences unfold. Lahiri's women characters consistently negotiate prescribed gender roles rooted in patriarchy, tradition, and cultural expectation, particularly within the context of marriage, motherhood, and domestic responsibility. Rather than presenting dramatic acts of rebellion, Lahiri foregrounds quiet negotiations, emotional endurance, and gradual self-realization, thereby offering a nuanced feminist critique of how women inhabit, internalize, and occasionally resist patriarchal norms. Her fiction demonstrates that gender roles are not fixed categories but evolving constructs shaped by cultural continuity, diasporic disruption, and individual agency.

Feminist literary criticism provides a critical framework for understanding how Lahiri's narratives interrogate women's social positioning. Feminist theorists argue that patriarchy operates not only through explicit domination but also through

normalized expectations embedded in everyday practices, especially within the family and private sphere (Geetha 3–6). Lahiri's fiction exemplifies this insight by portraying domestic life as a site where gender ideology is subtly reinforced and contested. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, the emotional burden placed on women is evident in Mrs. Das's confession that *"nothing had prepared her for the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood"* (Lahiri 44), revealing the unspoken pressures of feminine duty. Similarly, *The Namesake* depicts Ashima's life as shaped by sacrifice andrelational obligation; her identity is marked by a persistent sense of displacement as she feels *"a perpetual feeling of being a foreigner"* even within her own home (Lah iri 49). In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri portrays women whose lives are governed by habits of accommodation rather than choice, revealing how domestic expectations encourage emotional self-effacement (Lahiri 62). This feminist tension is most forcefully articulated in *The Lowland*, where Gauri's resistance to prescribed maternal roles exposes the psychological cost of gendered expectations; she recognizes that motherhood *demanded "a surrender of self she could not endure"* (Lahiri 233). Yet Lahiri avoids simplistic portrayals of oppression, instead emphasizing the psychological complexity of women who negotiate these roles with ambivalence, resilience, and self-awareness.

Diasporic feminist theory further illuminates the gendered dimensions of Lahiri's work by demonstrating how migration reshapes, yet does not dismantle, patriarchal structures. Immigrant women often experience what scholars' term "double marginalization," facing subordination within both patriarchal family systems and the dominant culture of the host society (Islam, 2007 93–95). Lahiri's fiction repeatedly illustrates that migration frequently intensifies women's domestic and emotional responsibilities, positioning them as preservers of cultural continuity in unfamiliar environments. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, women's isolation within diasporic marriages is evident when Mrs. Sen's life becomes confined to domestic rituals, her world reduced to *"the apartment and the streets around it"* (Lahiri 113). Similarly, *The Namesake* portrays Ashima as the emotional anchor of the immigrant family, burdened with sustaining tradition while feeling profoundly displaced, described as living with *"a constant sense of exile"* (Lahiri 49). In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri reveals how immigrant women internalize expectations of endurance and sacrifice, shaped by *"a lifetime of putting others first"* (Lahiri 61). This tension reaches its most explicit articulation in *The Lowland*, where Gauri's migration exposes the limits of diasporic freedom; despite geographical movement, she remains constrained by gendered expectations that restrict her autonomy and self-expression

(Lahiri 234). Through such portrayals, Lahiri underscores that migration complicates women's lives by layering cultural responsibility onto existing patriarchal burdens rather than alleviating them.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri offers a series of intimate narratives that expose women's emotional isolation and constrained agency within both traditional and diasporic contexts. The character of Mrs. Sen exemplifies the gendered nature of immigrant displacement. In India, her identity as a homemaker was sustained by extended family networks and communal interaction; in America, the same role becomes isolating and psychologically suffocating. Mrs. Sen's longing for her past social world is evident when she remarks, *"Everything is there… Here, there is nothing"* (Lahiri 118), a statement that encapsulates her profound sense of cultural and emotional loss. Her dependence on others for mobility further reinforces her vulnerability, as she admits, *"I cannot drive"* (Lahiri 112), symbolizing her lack of autonomy in the host society. The domestic space that once provided identity and stability now becomes confining, marked by her repetitive routines and emotional withdrawal. Lahiri underscores this suffocation through quiet detail, noting that Mrs. Sen spends her days *"sitting on the living room floor, surrounded by newspapers and vegetables"* (Lahiri 113), emphasizing her stagnation and isolation. Her inability to adapt to American norms demonstrates how traditional gender roles, when transplanted into Western settings, can intensify women's vulnerability rather than offering security (Postcolonial Web 2–3). Lahiri's portrayal suggests that domesticity is not inherently oppressive but becomes constraining when stripped of social recognition and collective support. Feminist critics similarly observe that such representations highlight the persistence of patriarchal expectations across borders, revealing how women's marginalization is reproduced even in supposedly liberating environments (Sinha 57–59).

Other stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* similarly depict women negotiating marital dissatisfaction, emotional neglect, and unfulfilled desire. Lahiri portrays marriage as a gendered institution in which women are often expected to absorb emotional strain in silence. These narratives challenge the romanticized ideal of marriage by revealing its uneven distribution of power and emotional responsibility. Through understated storytelling, Lahiri exposes how women's needs are frequently subordinated to familial stability, reinforcing feminist critiques of marriage as a site of gender inequality.

The negotiation of gender roles becomes more pronounced in *The Namesake*, where Ashima Ganguli's life reflects the emotional costs of traditional womanhood in

diaspora. Ashima enters marriage through an arranged system that prioritizes duty, adjustment, and familial compatibility over personal choice. In America, her identity becomes deeply tied to her roles as wife and mother, reinforcing a gendered division of labour in which emotional caregiving and cultural preservation fall disproportionately on women. Scholars note that Ashima's early alienation reflects benevolent sexism, wherein women are idealized for nurturing qualities while being denied autonomy and self-definition (Chatterjee 41–44). Lahiri portrays Ashima's loneliness not as personal failure but as a structural consequence of gendered expectations within immigrant life.

At the same time, *The Namesake* traces Ashima's gradual transformation as she learns to navigate public spaces, develop friendships, and assert independence. Initially confined to the domestic sphere and overwhelmed by cultural dislocation, Ashima experiences America as a space of profound loneliness, feeling that *"being a foreigner… is a sort of lifelong pregnancy— a perpetual wait"* (Lahiri 49). Over time, however, she begins to move beyond isolation, forging social connections and acquiring confidence through everyday acts of adaptation. Lahiri notes that Ashima eventually learns to do things alone, including traveling independently, signalling a quiet but significant shift toward autonomy*: "For the first time in her life, Ashima is completely on her own"* (Lahiri 276). Her evolution challenges the assumption that empowerment must be radical or oppositional. Instead, Lahiri suggests that feminist agency can emerge incrementally through endurance, adjustment, and self-recognition. Ashima does not abandon tradition but redefines her relationship to it, choosing to live between cultures rather than be confined by either. This balance is evident when she decides to divide her life between India and America, accepting mobility as empowerment rather than loss. Through Ashima, Lahiri illustrates how women negotiate continuity and change within patriarchal frameworks, asserting independence not by rejection but by reinterpretation.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri extends her feminist exploration by focusing on intergenerational relationships, particularly between mothers and daughters. These relationships become crucial sites for examining how gender roles are transmitted, internalized, and contested. In stories such as "Hell-Heaven," the mother embodies cultural loyalty and patriarchal values, while the daughter represents hybridity and resistance. Aparna's internalization of restraint and emotional sacrifice is evident in the narrator's observation that her mother had learned to endure disappointment quietly, having been raised to believe that *"a woman should not need to say anything at all"* (Lahiri 66). This silence becomes a mode through which

patriarchal discipline is preserved within the domestic sphere. In contrast, the daughter's growing critical awareness exposes the costs of such obedience, particularly when she recognizes that her mother's rigidity masks unfulfilled desire and loss. Feminist scholars argue that Lahiri reveals how women themselves can become agents of patriarchal reproduction, enforcing norms that once constrained them (Kashyap & Singh 74–76). Yet Lahiri resists moral simplification, portraying these dynamics as emotionally layered rather than accusatory. This complexity culminates in the daughter's retrospective realization that her mother's life had been shaped by renunciation, marked by the painful recognition that *"she had spent years waiting for something that had never come"* (Lahiri 84). Through such moments, Lahiri frames maternal authority not as cruelty but as a survival strategy forged through displacement, nostalgia, and constrained choice.

The Lowland presents Lahiri's most radical interrogation of gender roles through the character of Gauri. Unlike earlier protagonists who negotiate tradition from within, Gauri actively resists normative expectations of marriage and motherhood. Her emotional withdrawal and intellectual pursuit mark a decisive break from the cultural ideal of feminine self-sacrifice. This resistance is evident in her early rejection of domestic belonging, as she experiences marriage less as fulfilment than as confinement, feeling that *"she had never wished to be a wife"* (Lahiri 128). Motherhood, too, fails to produce the expected affective attachment, and Gauri admits to herself that *"the role she was meant to play did not come naturally to her"* (Lahiri 151). Feminist critics interpret Gauri's refusal to perform prescribed maternal and wifely behaviours through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, arguing that her non-compliance exposes femininity as a socially enforced script rather than an innate essence (Poudel 112– 115). Gauri's turn toward philosophy and solitary intellectual labour further underscores this disruption, as she seeks meaning beyond relational identity, choosing thought over nurture. In rejecting emotional obligation as the primary measure of womanhood, Gauri embodies a form of feminist agency that is unsettling, ethically ambiguous, yet deeply subversive, compelling readers to confront the limits of culturally sanctioned femininity.

However, Lahiri refuses to romanticize Gauri's resistance. Her choices result in emotional alienation, moral judgment, and fractured relationships, underscoring the social costs women face when they transgress patriarchal norms. This ambivalence strengthens Lahiri's feminist vision by acknowledging that agency within patriarchal systems is rarely free of consequence. Scholars argue that Lahiri's portrayal of Gauri reflects the contradictions of feminist liberation within conservative

cultural frameworks, where autonomy is often punished rather than celebrated (Kavitha & Neeraja 94–96).

Across Lahiri's oeuvre, patriarchy functions not as an abstract ideology but as a lived reality embedded in everyday interactions, emotional responsibilities, and familial expectations. Feminist theorists describe patriarchy as a system maintained through cultural consent rather than overt coercion (Geetha 9–12). Lahiri's fiction vividly illustrates this process by showing how gender roles are internalized and reproduced even by those they constrain. Yet her narratives consistently foreground women's capacity for reflection and transformation, suggesting that resistance can coexist with limitation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, a feminist reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's work reveals a sustained meditation on women's negotiation of gender roles within shifting cultural landscapes. Her female characters are neither passive victims nor idealized symbols of empowerment; they are complex individuals navigating emotional, cultural, and ethical dilemmas. By foregrounding the private sphere as a site of political significance, Lahiri bridges the gap between personal experience and structural inequality. Her fiction demonstrates that gender justice is not achieved solely through dramatic rebellion but through continuous, intimate negotiations of identity, belonging, and selfhood. In illuminating these quiet struggles, Lahiri makes a significant contribution to feminist literary discourse, offering a deeply human exploration of women's agency within— and against—the enduring structures of patriarchy.

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