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Redefining Womanhood: A Post-feminist Interpretation of Jhumpa Lahiri's Whereabouts

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Jhumpa Lahiri's whereabouts in the light of a post-feminist perspective, which involves the re-definition of womanhood in the light of autonomy, loneliness, and personal choice in the context of an individualistic, consumer-oriented world. The tension between personal agency and structural inequalities has persisted over time, and using post-feminist theory, Empowerment Theory (Solomon, 1976), and feminist praxis offered by Sara Ahmed (2017), the paper analyses the debate of personal agency and structural inequalities. With the help of the qualitative analysis of texts, the study claims that although the unnamed protagonist represents the post-feminist standards of independence and self-emancipation, her autonomy is complemented with emotional aloofness, precarity, and unresolved attachment to patriarchal and familial systems. The novel, therefore, disrupts the post-feminist fantasy of absolute freedom that can be gained only by individual choice. Some contextualization: placing *Whereabouts* in the context of larger feminist literary discourses, the given study puts forth the notion of the necessity of global feminist awareness and personal empowerment, which is especially acute in the realm of world politics and South Asian literature, where structural imbalance is still a dominant issue.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issues of womanhood construction have been under scrutiny by feminist literature studies since the eras of Victorian ideals of domesticism through to the current portrayal of female independence and self-determination. Post-feminism as a controversial concept in recent decades irrevocably predicts a trend of individual decision-making, empowerment, and self-fulfilment, and tends to obscure the structural imbalances of society, such as patriarchy, classism, and racism (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). The literary location that suggests that it is possible to explore these tensions is The Jhumpa Lahiri *Whereabouts* (2018). The novel introduces a middle-aged, nameless woman, struggling with loneliness, a career in an unnamed city in Europe, foreshadowing the concept of being alone as freedom and as a heavy load.

The focus on individual agency, as opposed to collective struggle, and the posing of empowerment as an individual creation, as opposed to a political initiative, is a common way of characterising post-feminism (Gill, 2007). According to the critics, these types of narratives coincide with neoliberal ideologies that emphasise self-responsibility and consumption and ignore a critique of the system (McRobbie, 2009). Sara Ahmed (2017) refutes this depoliticisation and states that feminism needs to be a practice of living, collective, and resistance. This paper locates *Whereabouts* in the center of these controversies by claiming that this novel perpetuates and objectifies post-feminist ideologies.

Applying the post-feminist theory with the Empowerment Theory and feminist ethics mentioned in Ahmed, this paper will focus on how *Whereabouts* challenges womanhood, combining the concepts of solitude, choice, and autonomy to explain the measures of structural and affective constraints on post-feminist liberation. The qualitative textual analysis taken in the study explains the functioning of individualism inherent in a neoliberal structure and how narrative topics of self-identity, belonging and solace support and challenge the discourse of post-feminism.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The work stands out as an interdisciplinary work crossing feminist theory, literary works and social critique. It is a contribution to post-feminist literary criticism because it brings out a subtle interpretation of *Whereabouts*, which anticipates both empowerment and alienation. Also, with references to the Empowerment Theory and the feminist praxis of Sara Ahmed, the paper opposes the reductionist interpretations of post-feminism that overlook emotional labour and structural limitations. The study is specifically applicable to South Asian and global feminist settings, in which personal freedom usually exists in balance with profoundly patriarchal values.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although the topic of post-feminism and the liberation of women attracts much scholarly interest, the role of modern literature in both extolling and critiquing the post-feminist empowerment has received little scholarly attention. Existing interpretations of *Whereabouts* tend to center on loneliness and self-awareness without proper determination of these aspects to the context of post-feminist and neoliberalist. This research paper fills this gap by looking at the question of whether personal agency can be regarded as the sole element of true emancipation or whether structural inequalities do still inform the realities that women live.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Neoliberal Individualism and Post-Feminism

Post-feminism is largely interpreted as a cultural or ideological setup that anticipates individual choice, free will, and self-fulfillment as it assumes that the political objectives of feminism are

basically accomplished (Gill, 2007). The following would belong to post-feminism, which, according to McRobbie (2009), continues to interfere with the feminist message to its benefit, since gender inequality is no longer viewed as a structural unfairness, but a personal accountability. Gill (2016) also adds that the post-feminist discourse concurs with the neoliberal rationalities in that it focuses on self-control, emotional labor, and product entrepreneurship. This alignment is criticized by Rottenberg (2018), who states that neoliberal feminism has made empowerment an individualized project that is not attached to collective struggle.

5.2 Reconstructing Womanhood in Feminist Literature Studies

The feminist literary work has been chronically tracking the shift of the womanhood that cherished the Victorian consideration of householdness towards autonomy and selfhood up to modern times (Caine, 1997). Heilman (2006) emphasizes the process of globalization of the New Woman trope, illustrating the manner in which modern literature balances culture-specificity and feminist desire. According to Sato (2003), modern literary portrayals of women tend to tread between opposition and conformity as grounds of unfulfilled tensions between tradition and modernity. These works highlight that redefined womanhood is not a static entity but a long process of negotiation that is determined by socio-cultural factors.

5.3 Female Subjectivity of Jhumpa Lahiri

Hegemonic writing on Jhumpa Lahiri often dwells on the questions of displacement, interiority, and emotional restraint (Banerjee, 2015; Gopal, 2019). Although the previous novels are focused on the diasporic identity, *Whereabouts* changes the focus to loneliness and contemplative independence (Chaudhuri, 2020). Nevertheless, there is a gap in current literature in the context of locating the novel in post-feminist discourse, and its provision of a critique of neoliberal individualism and gendered autonomy has remained unattended.

5.4 Feminist Praxis and Sara Ahmed

In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Sara Ahmed transformed the understanding of feminism as an effectual, ethical, and collective practice. Ahmed criticizes the discourse of empowerment where individual happiness is placed too high and emotional labor and systemic limitations are disregarded. She demonstrates that feminist action should remain political, an issue that questions the depoliticisation of the post-feminist culture.

5.5 The Structural Inequality and the Empowerment Theory

Solomon's Empowerment Theory (1976) is a notion of conceptualizing empowerment as a process that brings together the agency of an individual and structural change. According to Zimmerman (2000) and Perkins and Zimmerman (1995), it is seen that empowerment without systemic change can bring back inequality. Such a framework is specifically applicable in the analysis of *Whereabouts* in which the individual autonomy is combined with fixed emotional and social limitations.

5. Research Gap

Although post-feminist theory has been extensively utilized in media and popular cultures, little has been done in applying the approach to literary texts in the modern context, such as *Whereabouts*. In addition, very limited research combines the Empowerment Theory and Ahmed's feminist praxis to challenge the emotional price of autonomy.

6. Research Objectives

1. To examine how *Whereabouts* explores the theme of autonomy and self-emancipation in a post-feminist approach

2. To analyze the way in which individualism is created by using neoliberal consumer culture in the novel

3. To develop the theme of tension amid self-identity, belonging, and solitude in the redefinition of women

7. Research Questions

1. What does *Whereabouts* say about personal choice and autonomy in the re-invention of womanhood?

2. How does neoliberalism affect the empowerment of the protagonist?

3. How do subjectivities expressing self-identity, belonging, and solitude complicate post-feminist ideals?

8. Research Methodology

This paper utilizes the method of qualitative textual analysis, close reading, to interrogate the narrative structures, characterisation, and patterns of themes. Analytical theories are post-feminist theory, Empowerment Theory, and feminist ethics developed by Ahmed.

9. Theoretical Framework

The paper will use an interdisciplinary theoretical approach as an integration of post-feminist theory, the theory of empowerment, and feminist phenomenology by Sara Ahmed to analyze how womanhood is represented in Jhumpa Lahiri in her book *Whereabouts*. The main point of analysis is post-feminist theory, which relies on the work by Gill (2007), McRobbie (2009), and Rottenberg (2018). Post-feminism conceptualizes women as independent, self-directed people who use individual choice instead of group politics. In this context, the categories are independence, emotional self-control, and personal fulfilment, which are put as indicators of empowerment. Leveraging this lens will help the study to challenge how the novel reflects female autonomy and, at the same time, reveal the neoliberal contexts in which it cannot effectively transform itself.

To further create this analysis, a theory of empowerment, specifically the model proposed by Barbara Solomon, is also used to make a distinction between the symbolic or perceived empowerment and the substantive empowerment. Access to social resources, involvement in decision-making, and structural change are key aspects of empowerment that the empowerment theory stresses are vital in real empowerment. In being applied to *Whereabouts*, this framework demonstrates the isolation and self-reliance of the protagonist as due not to an encounter with the power of social or institutional forces, but an internalized sense of power. This stress shows the distinction in the agency of the individual and the constraint of the structure in the post-feminist writings about womanhood.

Living a Feminist Life by Sara Ahmed (2017) also contributes to the enrichment of said frame through the foregrounding of affect, embodiment, and resistance in everyday life. The preoccupation of Ahmed with the feelings of discomfort, loneliness, and rejection allows interpreting the withdrawal of the protagonist as an emotional reaction to normative appeal to femininity, rationality, and productivity. These theoretical views, put together, enable the study to critically explore how *Whereabouts* redefines the meaning of womanhood in relation to a complicated agency, effect, and limitation in the contemporary post-feminist culture.

10. Discussion

Jhumpa Lahiri presents a nuanced yet incisive account of a post-feminist woman, predisposing independence, solitude, and self-delimitation in a life of choice without revealing their emotional and structural constraint. The novel, however, through the nameless female character, introduces the reader to a woman who seems to possess post-feminist values of economic self-sufficiency:

she is financially independent, a career woman, strategically not interested in marriage or motherhood. These decisions are in line with post-feminist narratives on the issue, where empowerment is viewed as personal agency and self-realization, opposed to a communal fight (Gill, 2007). Nevertheless, Lahiri does not make this story an easy one, showing the emotional expenses and the social insecurity that comes along with this kind of autonomy.

Loneliness forms the structural component of the life of the main character that serves as a place of freedom and a place of emotional exposure. Her isolation of close relations and family activities adds to a post-feminist focus on self-control and emotional self-enclosure. However, this isolation is not that shown as pure liberation. Rather it is characterized by omnipresent loneliness, nostalgia, and a painful sense of being deprived. This conflict depicts how Post-feminism as a discussion in the book by McRobbie (2009), glorifies independence, but obscures the truth by not revealing the decline of a support system. Lahiri story, therefore, loses the post-feminist belief that autonomy automatically leads to fulfilment.

The fact that the novel is fragmented also serves to drive this criticism. Written with short and fragmented chapters, *Whereabouts* reflects the occurrence rhythms of the neoliberal life, which is characterized by mobility, temporary and detachment. The portrayal of movements of the protagonist in the open spaces, such as cafes, streets, classrooms, and markets, is used to point out the commodification of daily life. These are spaces that help one to be independent, but do not often result in a lifetime of belonging. According to Gill (2016), neoliberal post-feminist subjects are stimulated to develop a sense of independence but to deal with a lack of emotional satisfaction on the down-low. This state is aggravated by the minimalistic writing style used by Lahiri, which makes the emotional isolation of the main character evident and not resolved at all. Notably, *Whereabouts* puts personal agency in the context of a larger generational and structural environment. The unequal distribution of empowerment lies in the contrast between the main heroine and her mother. The protagonist is blessed with education, a strong financial position, and social mobility; in contrast, the life of her mother is determined by the lack of opportunity and patriarchal restrictions. Such a generation gap indicates that the idea presented by Rottenberg (2018) is that neoliberal feminism tends to make individual success stories more prominent but ignores systemic inequality. Lahiri challenges this erasing with a personal liberty, which creates histories of gendered restriction and, consequently, empowers itself as contingent and not universal.

The fact that Sara Ahmed gives a feminist praxis is vital in examining the affective aspect of the autonomous nature of the protagonist. As Ahmed (2017) underlines, uncomfortable feelings, loneliness, and rejection are politically relevant, showing the boundaries of the normative happiness scripts. The emotional discomfort of the main character in *Whereabouts* is a kind of silent protest against cultural trends of being female, loving, and productive. Her nonconformity does not lead to empowerment devoid of struggle, but it caused tension that disturbed the post-feminist slogan of liberation without grounds. This relational resistance opposes depoliticized conceptions of choice, projecting in advance the emotional work involved in maintaining the independence.

In the eyes of the Empowerment Theory, the autonomy of the main character is a partial and weak manifestation of empowerment. Solomon (1976) defines empowerment as a process that integrates individual agency along with social resource accessibility and transformation in the structure. Although the main character is in charge of her own life, she does not belong to group networks and institution. Zimmerman (2000), cautions that the individual level of empowerment

would only serve to reproduce loneliness, as opposed to attacking inequality. This risk is apparent in the story by Lahiri, which shows that being self-sensitive and not social may result in emotional stagnation instead of being free.

Finally, *Whereabouts* does not disapprove of autonomy, or romanticize forms of belonging which are traditional. However, it defines womanhood as a constant compromise in terms of body to be free or attached, independent or vulnerable. The fact that Lahiri does not give narrative resolution strengthens this ambivalence forcing the reader to address contradictions of post-feminist life. The novel criticizes the fantasy of neoliberal neo-liberalism of the fullest form of self-emancipation and at the same time the need to choose personally in opposing the patriarchal order. In predicting solitude as empowering and destabilising, *Whereabouts* demands a reworking of the concept of empowerment which incorporates individual agency with sacrificed feminist awareness.

Through this, the novel by Lahiri adds value to the modern feminist literature. It provides a challenge to complacency among post-feminists by demonstrating that there are emotional and structural costs of autonomy and putting back into perspective the significance of relationships, memory, and social contextualism in redefining womanhood. By expressing the issue of solitude and agency in a very subtle way, *Whereabouts* promotes the idea that feminist frameworks, which go beyond individualism and move more clearly in the direction of inclusion and sustainability of empowerment, are crucial.

11. Findings

This paper concludes that *Whereabouts* makes post-feminist independence an ambivalent, multifaceted affair instead of unquestionable liberation. The self-emancipation of the protagonist is the one based on choice, solitude, and financial independence and corresponds to post-feminism principles; however, it is always defined by the alienation of emotion, memory, and structural precarity. Her independence demonstrates unsuccessful attachment to paternal and family pasts in a way that indicates that a person can hardly be empowered unless a group of people is aware of whether they are women. The novel reveals the neoliberal feminism that associates empowerment with self-management, disregarding social support and inequality within the system. In this way, Lahiri satirizes the post-feminist fantasy of the freedom that can be attained only by making personal choice.

12. Recommendations

Future studies ought to be comparative and interdisciplinary to explore post-feminist images of womanhood in a wider range of cultural and geographical settings. Researchers could investigate the transformation of autonomy narratives in modern literature through digital media, consumer culture, and intersectional identities. It is also possible that in the future, further research may focus on how collective feminist movements might help in counteracting neoliberal individualism and in strengthening structural empowerment. A comparative study conducted on *Whereabouts* as opposed to other recent novels involving lonely female characters would help strengthen the comprehension of the reproduction and also critique of the notion of post-feminist subjectivity. The literature results might also be confirmed by collections of experiences of women.

13. Limitations

The research has weaknesses as it is restricted to one literary work and the application of one theoretical concept, which limits generalization on post-feminist literature. The interpretive, qualitative approach can lead to other interpretations of the isolation and independence of the main character. The fact that there is no empirical material also restricts the possibilities of

quantifying the effects of the post-feminist discourse on the actual experiences of people. Future studies may include comparative analysis, empirical studies, or intersectional frameworks to elaborate these studies and author a more holistic insight into post-feminist womanhood.

14. Conclusion

In *Whereabouts*, Jhumpa Lahiri presents an expression of an indirect but emphatic critique of the post-feminist reformulation of womanhood by revealing the emotional and structural constraints of autonomy reached only by personal decision. The isolated existence of the unnamed protagonist accentuates the fact that empowerment, when being organized according to the principles of neoliberal rationalities, frequently requires emotional regulation and acceptance of solitude. The lack of anxiety, nostalgia, and unresolved family relationships does not make her independent, and it is evident that the structures of patriarchy persist even when the individual appears to be self-reliant. Such tension is highlighted by the minimalistic style of narration used by Lahiri because the inner world of the main character promotes the idea that independence itself is not able to erase the emotional imprint of the gendered expectations. The novel consequently disrupts jubilant histories of independence through an act of pre-emption in memory, feeling, and the long-lasting power of social limits.

Meanwhile, *Whereabouts* does not reject the importance of autonomy or self-emancipation. Rather, it introduces womanhood as a continuous bargaining of free and belonging, loneliness, and relationships. Combining the post-feminist theory with the Empowerment Theory and the feminist praxis created by Sarah Ahmed, this paper manages to prove that true empowerment must involve agency of individuals, as well as a sense of feminist consciousness. The novel by Lahiri has provided support to contemporary feminist literature by engaging with the post-feminist complacency and also reinstating the need to be critically structured in the endeavor to liberate women. Finally, *Whereabouts* gives a hint that the redefinition of womanhood is not a set goal but an ongoing process, which is determined by an individual choice and emotional labor as well as social reality.

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