

The Character of Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*: A Feminist Reading

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The Indian American diaspora writer Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* (2013) deals with, among others, the life of Gauri in India and the U.S. The text is eloquent upon the patriarchy, freedom, individualism, and other experiences that a woman experiences in her life. The character of Gauri is portrayed by situating her in the traditional society of India and the modern society of the U.S. Her character becomes more interesting when she becomes a diaspora woman. This paper is an ardent attempt to trace Gauri 'in-between' the two worlds and show her transformation. A feminist reading along with observations on the diaspora studies helps shed light on the character of Gauri with all niceties.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*, Patriarchy, freedom, individualism diaspora,

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) is a novel and her fourth work. The work seems to talk about diaspora at a crossroads of various ideologies which determine their subjectivity constitution. Among them feminism is a key ideology that is quite obvious in the text that finds manifestation with the character of Gauri. A feminist reading of the text along with postcolonial observations on diaspora brings the point of the paper to the fore.

Objective of the Paper

The objective of the paper is to offer a feminist reading of the character Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*.

Discussion and Interpretation

The life of Gauri is very nicely portrayed in *The Lowland*. At the very early stage of the story she is the newly married wife of Udayan. Suddenly her life takes a dramatic turn with the death of Udayan. Subhash, Udayan's brother who is in the U.S. pursuing Ph.D. comes to Calcutta soon after he has received the letter containing the information. He had a very friendly relation with Udayan and can sense the impact of his death upon the family. Soon after his arrival in Calcutta he observes the pathetic plight of Gauri, the widow of Udayan, a pregnant,

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observing the traditional customs of widowhood set by patriarchy. Subhash is appalled by the covert design of his parents to drive her out of home. Subhash cannot digest the sort of maltreatment and cruelty meted out to Gauri by his parents, and decides to rescue her from her hellish existence by marrying and bringing her to the U.S. Gauri initially resisted but later agreed to the proposal because Subhash tells her of having a father for the coming child and “In American it could be raised without the burden of what had happened.” (Lahiri 119). In this regard, he points out the advantage of living in America without aspersions and ignominy cast by others in India. Subhash tells her that she still loves Udayan, but it does not matter at all to him. He urges her not to care about what the people say and how his parents react to it. He convinces her that in America “it would all cease to matter” (119). The baby needs a father; Subhash will be his father, and he will be brought up in the U.S without any stigma. Besides, Gauri will be able to continue her studies and define an identity which is not possible in Calcutta. Having said this Subhash actually points out the limitless possibilities that life in the U.S holds for her.

In an unknown country, Gauri had sense of independence through Subhash since the very beginning. Subhash accords her an independent space; he leaves her at the apartment with some dollars, departmental telephone number, the key to the apartment’s mailbox and the key to the door. In the liminal space Subhash gives her freedom every possible way to make her feel comfortable in the new country. He extends her this support to make her forgetful of her problems and disgrace of widowhood. Gauri, as promised earlier by Subhash, finds an openness and acceptance of everything that is denied to her in India.

Taking advantage of the freedom in America Gauri also lets loose to enrich herself as per her own choice and priorities. Having overcome her initial inertia she goes out and walks around the university campus. Her first individual foray into the campus is indeed a journey of self discovery in which senses the possibilities of her liminal existence. She sees many things which she is going to imbibe in her coming life. She finds men wearing jeans and jackets while women wearing black tights and woolen coats, smoking and talking. She buys cream cheese, something she has not tasted so far. She explores departmental complex, sees the class rooms and chambers of professors. In the process she comes across the philosophy department, the subject of her graduation in Calcutta. Her arrival in the philosophy department is going to be the turning point of her life. She sees the syllabus and attends a philosophy class. Having experienced the aura of intellectuality in the class she decides attending the class henceforth twice a week. She also participates in deliberation much to the attention of the professor.

In the initial days Gauri is found to be reading the campus newspaper which introduces her to many radical issues of the day and which find manifestation in her later subjectivity.

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Gauri's self-indulgent subject position in her later life in America, to a great extent, is shaped by this campus newspaper. Ideas like obsession with individual identity at the cost of family life, foray into lesbianism and openness to heterosexuality which are going to subjectify her selfhood in here coming days are all figure prominently in the campus newspaper. In the backdrop of her misfortunes in India, the newspaper transforms her from being a victim of curse and parochialism into an empowered and radical woman who can determine the course of her own life.

Gauri's first unburdening of her traditional Indian subjectivity finds expression in her donning new hairstyle and dress. The woman who has been wearing saris with long hair since her becoming fifteen now goes for donning new look on western style. She cut her hairs and their clumps were placed on the dressing table. Similarly, all her saris, blouses and petticoats were placed in one corner of the house in scraps either in ribbon or cut into various sizes or shapes much to the surprise of Subhash who finds "She had destroyed everything." (141). It is an attempt on her part to mimic the people she sees in the campus and in the campus newspaper for which she goes for a complete image makeover.

Actually, Subhash is completely taken aback by the assertiveness of Gauri just after a few days in America. On being asked the reason behind the shortening of her hair and disposing of her saris, blouses and petticoats; she simply replies that she has got "tired of" (141) them. Having said this she clearly signals her roadmap of undertaking those tasks that will suit to her temperament and individuality; and America, being the promoter of individual liberty becomes an ideal and fertile site for her. Henceforth, she is going to define her individual identity according to her own preferences and capabilities regardless of others opinion, leave alone the concern of the ancestral land.

The mismatch in the marriage of Subhash and Gauri seems to be apparent since the very beginning. Both of them do not find a common ground on which they can mutually sustain their lives. They cannot relate with each other on many issues particularly in terms of family and career in liminality. In the meantime, the birth of Bela, Udayan's child, aggravates the situation further paving the way for ultimate separation. Both of them realize the intrinsic difference of their subject positions, and there is little hope of reconciliation.

The incompatibility of their conjugal life crops up for the failure of recognizing each other's subject positions in liminality. If Subhash considers Gauri to be an irresponsible wife and mother, Gauri finds Subhash not to be concerned with her inner soul which was recognized immediately by her lover and the first husband Udayan in the days of courtship. Hence, she had

ready compatibility with Udayan who recognized her worth and love of “Autonomy” (57) unlike Subhash.

In the meantime, the recognition of her merit and diligence in the department, and its support further encourages her to carry out her studies against all odds and constraints of time. In the department Gauri unsolicitedly puts across her scholarly opinions on matters like antipositivism, praxis, immanence and the absolute. The participants in the discussion are surprised to see Gauri’s grasp over the topics and feel enlightened when Gauri proves them wrong. Her professor Otto Weiss also gets impressed with her performance and lauds her performance in the department. He invites Gauri to his office after she writes a comparative study of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. There are some areas in the work that immediately catches the eyes of Weiss to such an extent that he cannot but call it “ambitious material” (165) and calls her “an intellectual” (166). He asks her about her family, and she tells him everything of his life. Despite her troublesome life and unsettlement in America, Weiss keeps on encouraging her to pursue higher courses and asks her to pursue Ph.D. From interaction he senses Gauri’s area of interest which is not offered in that university. But Dr Weiss assures her that he would arrange everything for her doctoral programme at another university which will require her to commute for a few years. On such arrangement Gauri can write her dissertation from anywhere she likes. Weiss even tells her that he will like to be a member of her committee when the time comes. Weiss’s encouraging words and guidance have strengthened her morale to doggedly pursue her studies. It also gives meaning to her otherwise dull and insipid life at the apartment. Henceforth, amidst loneliness and isolation, displacement and dislocation, she finds her study to be the sole purpose of life.

So far Gauri’s subject position seems to become more individualistic and she starts boldly asserting it regardless of the fate of Bela and Subhash. Her struggle in ‘in-betweenness’ takes away the softness of the mother in her and renders her callous and insensitive to Bela. Gauri’s individualistic subjectivity takes a toll in her family life, and Bela appears to be the worst victim. She treats six year old Bela very callously when the latter wishes to remain at home in a rainy day instead of going to classes. Her words to Bela “Don’t make a scene, Bela. Don’t be coward” (170). Through this reprimand Gauri wishes to project herself to be a brave lady doing some remarkable thing on foreign soil. She becomes restless to inform Bela of her witnessing of Udayan’s death and to inform her of Subhash, not being her real father. Gauri’s behavior makes Subhash’s plight very precarious as he feels betrayed and disgraced by her. The person who sacrificed a lot and incurred the wrath of his parents is now sunk by the very lady whom he retrieved from the curses of widowhood. He tells Gauri that it is not the appropriate time to tell Bela the truth of her parenthood as it may hamper her psyche a lot.

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At this time, Gauri's boldness seems to surface in heterosexual matters as well. This change of behavior in liminality was beyond imagination for Gauri when she was in Calcutta. Subhash is her second husband but suddenly she gets attracted to another man, an unknown man. Though she assumes the man to be a professor, she is clueless about his department. She comes across him on her way to her German class. This unknown man who is in his fifties, initially appeared not appealing to Gauri, but she gradually she has developed a strong crush for him and wishes to possess him sexually.

Though she ultimately withdraws from this man, her pursuit of this unknown man shows the kind of freedom she is enjoying in her liminal subjectivity in the U.S. It also shows the level of individualism she is celebrating abroad as against her reclusive, isolated and restrained life in India. The freedom that she enjoys in the U.S virtually liberates her from sexual stereotypes in India. In this regard, she has become a woman of decision as well, and hence she stops chasing the man after some time and takes an alternative route not to see him.

Gauri's individualistic subject position seems to become more vivid when she is about to start her PhD programme in Boston University, away from MIT. She is herself aware of the fact that she will have little time for the family, and "without Bela or Subhash, her life might be a different thing" (174). But she is in a way ready to experience that difference in life given her ambition and the pressure of work. She is in her "private race" (174) to give a name to her talent with perseverance that has already been recognized by expert like Otto Weiss. She accompanies Subhash to America leaving her bitter past to fulfill her dream of higher education. In India, nobody including Udayan and Subhash talked to her about PhD. But in America, an American professor opened her eyes for it, and also stands by her extending all out support and encouragement. She now realizes that securing a PhD and succeeding in academics is a kind of her version of dream of success. To realize the dream she is determined to undertake labor, and she cannot afford to become lax at any point of her endeavor.

But in the process Gauri forgets her immediate and fundamental duty of being a wife and mother of a six year old girl who has also just started her schooling and needs to be attended by parents. The freedom that she enjoys in America in terms of her family and academic life not only empowers her but also kills the human side of her personality, an increasingly insensitive woman to her own family "Disoriented by the sense of freedom, devouring the sensation as a beggar devours food." (174)

When Gauri formally begins her Phd in Boston University, Subhash raises no objection to it. Gauri's arrangement of undergraduates as babysitters for Bela is also not opposed by him although he is opposed to the very idea of babysitter for Bela. Though she is "creating a disruption" (176) at the family through her pursuit of individualistic goal and wishes to spend time according to her own choice, he stops questioning on it. He, on the one hand, concedes space to her excellence; and on the other realizes the uselessness of his words to a person who is rendered selfish by her individualistic pursuit of goals. In this regard, liminality in the U.S forms autonomous subject positions both for Subhash and Gauri. Because, Gauri too, is never found to be concerned about the intellectual labour and scientific research of Subhash, rather she rented his pursuits and schedules. Though they are a couple, they are polarized in their respective subject positions rendering each other alone and uncertain. Worst victim of their polarization is their daughter Bela who is yet to know what her dream is; and ironically, she is the reason of the marriage between Subhash and Gauri:

Apart from Bela, Gauri's pressing concern of money is also responsible for staying with Subhash despite the acrimony. The money provided to her by the university is not sufficient for her, and hence she is dependent on Subhash like Bela. This dependence on Subhash drives her to become more individualistic and self-sufficient, and she asserts her individualistic subjectivity when she leaves him and Bela after appointment in a college in California.

Gauri cannot afford to lose the opportunity of pursuing the career of an academic in California in the backdrop of her tragic past when she had to lead an isolated and cursed life of widowhood in Tollygunge. On the other hand, she virtually leaves that man who freed her from the curse and bondage of widowhood, and promised her of higher education in the U.S. She even leaves her only daughter from her first husband whom she had loved very much. In her liminal subject position she can compromise with her family life but not with her career. That is why, she does not feel any responsibility towards her twelve year old girl Bela and goes to California for her own career's sake. She has done this despite her knowledge of uncertainty that will loom over the lives of Subhash and Bela in Rhode Island, and also in her own life in California. For, displacement and separation trigger liminality that is always characterized by unsettlement, dislocation, and uncertainty as seen in her letter.

My address is uncertain, but you can reach me care of the university. I will not ask anything else of you; the money they offer will be enough. You are no doubt furious with me. I will understand if you do not wish to communicate. I hope that in time my absence will make things easier, not harder, for you and for Bela. I think it will. Good luck, Subhash, and good-bye. In exchange for all you have done for me, I leave Bela for you. (212)

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Gauri's twenty years of lonely life in California seems to reveal how she increasingly experiences her own subjectivity being pervasively constituted by disillusionment and remorse of what she has done to her own family. She herself finds her existence lonely in California to be meaningless without happiness of mind, gratitude to Subhash, and love and care to innocent Bela. Her own perception of herself as successful woman boomerangs on her as she starts considering her to be an inhuman entity. Her pursuit of individual interest in a country that supports and promotes her individualism, takes away the tenderness of all that is humane, and it is at this inhuman entity she herself situates her subjectivity much to her own shame and remorse.

In California she works at many colleges – after working at a California college, she teaches in Santa Cruz, San Francisco, and then finally in Southern California. However, the freedom she gets at California seems to change and empowers her a lot. Her liminal subject position in California helps her experience different unknown and unattempted things of her life because liminality or 'in-betweenness' becomes "a place of immense creativity and possibility" (McLeod 215). Her change is noticed in her not being reclusive and reticent, but an "approachable" (Lahiri 233) and friendly lady. She, who does not realize the role of a wife and mother in Rhode Island, now tries to understand her new role as "mentor" (233) apart from becoming professor. The woman who never shares her secret to anyone now tries to understand the private matters of others. Such change of attitude on the part of Gauri appears possible when she keeps away from her own family and experiences her individuality. Hence, she feels "The obligation to be open to others, to forge these alliances" (233), and this obligation lets her staff welcome her, and students, too, greatly admire her. It is a paradox of her liminal subject position in that she, who deserts her husband and daughter at Rhode Island, and stops communication with them, is becoming "an alternate guardian to a few" (233) in California. Her unsettled subjectivity in America is seen in driving her own daughter to trauma by her in Rhode Island., and trying to understand the "personal crisis" (233) of her students at California. In Rhode Island, she did not concern about what Subhash and Bela eat and sometimes did not feel the urge to eat together, but in California she is in charge of students coming from India, and "Once a year she invited them to dinner, catering biriyani and kebabs." (233) In California, she realizes the impossibility of survival without bringing about change or transformation to herself to deal with her displacement and dislocation abroad.

In California, in her liminal subject position there is sea change in Gauri's stand vis a vis Naxalism. Udayan's wife Gauri who becomes widow because of Naxalism does not support the movement wholeheartedly although she is not conspicuous in her criticism of it. She is a kind of

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a new woman who tries to lead her own life. That particular aspect of her further gets reinforced when she comes to California. Her disillusionment of his ideology is evident when she comes to know that she was used by Udayan to kill the policeman when the latter took his child to the school.

Gauri's change is more striking in heterosexual matters in California. Earlier in Boston as well she was found to be changed after having a crush with an unknown person who happened to be a professor at MIT. Initially at California, she deliberately embraces "the pure and proper celibacy of widowhood" (236) that she has not experienced in Rhode Island because of Subhash and Bela. For this, she avoids situations that require her getting introduced to others. She even follows the "Western custom of wearing a wedding band" (236) at daytime to accentuate her marital status.

This determination notwithstanding, Gauri fails to maintain her silence and isolation from others. She has to break her isolation, and get well along with the time that she lives in California. Very soon she has multiple affairs "more satisfying and enduring than the relationships she'd experienced in either of her marriages." (237). It would have been a taboo or adultery in India, but in California she celebrates her freedom and feels empowered. She forges many relations - "arbitrary, casual" (237) relations at dinners, at homes of colleagues, and at also conferences that she attends. She has her relation with a person that has made bookself in her apartment, and the husband of a musicologist. Through these relations she asserts her individual choices by experiencing the freedom of a liberal country which would have been otherwise tagged as sexual perversion back in India, or by Subhash in Rhode Island.

Her greatest assertion of sexual freedom, and sense of empowerment is seen in her complex relation with Lorna, a graduate student of UCLA. Lorna has the experience of working in advertising at different places of the world like New York, London, Tokyo and other places. She quits her job to pursue Phd, and hence she approaches Gauri as external reader of her thesis. In the course of that work, an intimacy develops between them, and they go for experiencing same sex pleasures for several times.

She had no recollection of crossing a line that drove her to desire a woman's body. With Lorna she found herself already on the other side of it. (238)

Gauri knows how far she has overstepped with Lorna. In California, her adventure into lesbianism is made possible by her liminal subject position. The freedom she enjoys in liminality empowers her to unfix and resist the stereotypes on female sex as lesbian or gay behavior metaphorically bears a connotation of "a moment of crossing a boundary, or blurring a set of

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categories. All such ‘liminal’ moments mirror the moment of self-identification as lesbian or gay, which is necessarily an act of conscious resistance to established norms and boundaries.” (Barry 143). It is the liminality that drives her to foray into such experience which is at once liberating and empowering on the one hand, and humiliating on the other. It is because of her such assertion Soma Sen in her ‘Some Lows, Many Highs: Jhumpa Lahiri’s “The Lowland”’ says:

Perhaps the most feminist of Lahiri’s novels, *The Lowland* portrays two types of feminism – an individualistic kind of feminism in the character of Gauri, the Naxalite sympathizer, who abandones everything to pursue a career in philosophy, and a kind of eco-feminism in her daughter, Bela. Ironically, it is Bela who ends up practicing the lifestyle of a proletariat, taking up organic farming instead of higher studies, living an anti-capitalist lifestyle, and becoming a single, unwed mother. (141)

The heterosexual and lesbian relation that Gauri is found to be involved in her liminal subject position gives her a new identity i.e., a post modern identity as she unfixes the stereotypes by her different roles and assertion of her individual choices. Gauri’s lesbian behavior is a kind of what Sedgwick finds in fluidity of identity or in sexual identity as “coming ‘out of the closet’ (openly revealing one’s gay or lesbian sexual orientation) is not a single absolute act.” (Barry 140) Gauri’s adventure into lesbianism is, therefore, driven not only by an inner urge, but also by her change of roles which underlines her own empowerment. Gauri is actually emboldened by her assumption of different roles and positions to resist the stereotypes, and emerge as postmodern in her persona. The evolution of Gauri culminates when she signs the divorce paper to facilitate Subhash marriage with Elisa.

Conclusion

The Lowland is a bold attempt in representing woman in Gauri who defines her identity as an evolved and modern woman in the face of all difficulties. Her significance as modern woman is more enhanced by the fact that she is situated “in-between” or liminal space in a foreign country. It simply showcases the extraordinary art of story-telling on the part of Lahiri and her belief in the idea of new woman.

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