



## **CHARACTER OF GAURI FROM JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THE LOWLAND": FEMALE INDEPENDENT REPRESENTING WESTERNISED WOMAN**

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### **Abstract**

*The core objective of this paper is to study about Gauri's character that is portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri from her novel, The Lowland. This paper not only highlights the characteristic features of Gauri like; her diasporic question of assimilation, her unemotional tendency and her stereotypical attitude. It's this paper which shows Gauri as a protagonist for her domestic persecution, egotistical and selfish by nature and independent who longs for a desire for freedom and independence*

### **Introduction:**

In Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Lowland" the character of Gauri is a beautiful study as a multifaceted but it is a beautiful depiction of a modern woman with problems that are related in the modern world where gender inequality as well as displacement and displacement because of globalization are ubiquitous phenomena's. Gauri becomes a powerful character in whom it is observed three kinds of struggles; self, gender and nation which get highlighted as she tries to escape stereo-types. She is recognized with a stable quest to find her own self which she feels suppressed herself. In reference with the character of Gauri, the Diasporic question of adaptation is also interrogated. The creation of Gauri is one of the high points of Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Lowland' where the entire process of her subjectivization analyses not only the diasporic problem of assimilation and alienation but also analyses the struggle of a woman in a patriarchal world and also of a character who is trying to discard her identity as a wallflower and come in the forefront. Here, Gauri appears to be an all rounded character who struggles to create a she is confined and subjugated herself. This is very perceptible from the name she chose for this character, Gauri which name means in Sanskrit 'fair' according to Indian mythology identity for herself in three different fronts: personal, gender and



nation. Lahiri applauds Gauri's inner strength which enables her apart from the conventional norms that she would have otherwise.

Gauri is perhaps *The Lowland's* most complex character. She is a flatly unemotional woman whose secretive nature leaves her loneliest of all. Of all the lives Udayan touched, it was Gauri's he damaged most. Love for Udayan led Gauri to break from conventional expectations; then he died young and she suffered for it. Lahiri has always written about Indians negotiating America. The contrasts are less jarring here than in previous works. *Unaccustomed Earth* in particular comes to mind, with its chill winters and discussions of preparing proper Indian food for an American spouse who won't know the difference. Gauri is only 23 years old, denied fish or meat, wearing the widow's white sari, ignored by his parents. Readers dislike her, for she is an indifferent mother as she is incapable of loving her daughter, Bela. Her gratitude toward Subhash turns to resentment, even as it is threaded with guilt. Instead, Gauri retreats into philosophy, rapidly distinguishing herself. She withdraws almost wholly into classes and her study. When Subhash takes Bela to India, the pair returns to an empty house.

Lahiri's characters prior to *The Lowland* always seemed too stereotypical whether she writes about Indians, Americans or a mix of the nationalities. She tended in prior work to fit her characters neatly into customized little boxes. However, they never stretch over the boundaries. Gauri is a female protagonist. Gauri appears starkly egotistical and a selfish as well as a heartless woman who seems to care little. Lahiri draws a woman character of Gauri so intent on making a life on her own alone that she's willing to break hearts, shatter minds, and screw up futures...fully aware of the intense pain. Her desire for independence causes those in her immediate entourage. Lahiri has given us this woman, Gauri, an unpredictable and hell-bent on breaking out of her assigned box of good indian wife or mother. Gauri's daring of her willingness to trample on the life that tradition and custom demand. Without fear, she strikes out to live on her own terms—a truly American notion. Gauri prefers to hack off her long, black hair in favor of a monkish bob. Despite being married, she openly desires an unknown man she encounters at a bus stop, to the extent of masturbating in a public bathroom. Gauri leaves her young child alone in an apartment for hours, or allows her to wander outside alone, apparently without one iota of concern. She is not a worthy of the purported ultimate



honor that society bestows upon a woman for motherhood. Though Gauri feels more realistic than any of the other women I have encountered in Lahiri's writings...and admirable for her unique resolve and independence what she ends up a loser in this story.

Gauri and Subhash made a fresh start in Rhode Island where her husband is a doctoral student and she begets Udayan's girl- child, Bela. Then, she desires for freedom to consuming as well as ravage her mind and body. She more and more wants to move apart from Subhash and Bela. Subhash and Bela have no option but to recreate their lives. It takes time, and in the process, they flow away from each other too. Bela becomes something of a no mad, travelling the country, existing job to job. Subhash lingers on the edges of her life, providing unappreciated support, the promise of home that Bela needs every now and then. Subhash hopes that Bela will someday let him back into her life even as he wonders if she in fact has one.

Gauri emerges in the text as one of the more strange female characters created by Lahiri. She can be openly contrasted with her other female protagonists like Aashima Ganguly (The Namesake) and Hem (Unaccustomed Earth). Lahiri's women are passionately independent and grow in the novels, carving their own space in the minds of the readers. She is confused in the text and remains a foreigner in both the families she enters, unable to form a long-term bond with anyone in the novel. It is, perhaps, her problem that makes her to feel a sense of isolation with her second husband and unborn child with whom she is unable to form any sort of connection. She experiences anger and resentment towards Subhash: *"...and every time Subhash took over, so that she could get some rest or take a shower or drink a cup of tea before it turned cold, every time he picked Bela up and comforted her when she cried so that Gauri did not have to, she could not deny the relief she felt at being allowed, however briefly, to step aside."* Gauri ultimately leaves both Subhash and Bela and goes to California to pursue her academic interests in philosophy, and this is where readers of the text stand divided over Gauri's personality.

Lahiri talks about the female sexual independence. Gauri has a fluid sexuality with women living independently as a Professor in California. She is not self-conscious and lives a life of a wanderer. Lahiri's women are quite symbolic of sexual freedom and expression and one can find



them scattered in her novels and stories. Hema, from *Unaccustomed Earth* also asserts her sexual independence just like Bela and Gauri do. Therefore, it's possible to say that the novel is a feminist text in the terms of its depiction of female independence. Gauri as a character is at the same time amazing and a little problematic. But she carves her own destiny and doesn't leave things to fate. She understands the passion Udayan had for the revolution, and accepts the fact that it was bigger than their relationship. She makes the decision of leaving Subhash and Bela because she realizes that they can be happier without her presence. Lahiri again unravels the difficulties of her female characters and how they continue to live in these old areas. As Gopakumar Nair commented, "If she had opted to lead a role of a loving wife and a perfect mother after landing in US, it would be something quite unnatural and hard to accept. Just look at her past which moulded her character! A lonely girl with an insecure childhood, brought up by grandparents, deprived of parent's love and care. Her only anchor was her brother...Even the affair with Udayan was not at all a romantic relationship for her ...she just wanted a change...That is what she longed for throughout her life".

For the first appearance in the form of an image in the hands of Subhash, who gazes at the black and white photograph, feels: *"From time to time he drew out the picture and looked at it. He wondered when he would meet Gauri, and what he would think of her, now that they were connected. And part of him felt defeated by Udayan all over again, for having found a girl like that."* (The Lowland, 45) To naming this character fair, Gauri is latently commenting on the fact that Gauri's actions were indeed fair or rather acceptable. Gauri is also the other manifestation of power, strength or force which is her inner strength freed her from the restraints. These shackles of Gauri made her vexed in the life. The character of Gauri becomes more believable, more real and in effect more commendable of being the personification of power. She can be then viewed as someone who was trying to prepare a foothold for herself in a world that was making her existence inhibited and that was trying to cage her and stop her from flowering. Betty Friedan in her celebrated essay, "The Feminine Mystique" had theorized the common condition of women in the society where there was a social pressure for women to conform to conventional roles of being homemakers or models of prettiness and this was espoused by media representations of women altogether. Then, get involved with a woman, however casual, for homosexuality is not an accepted cultural norm as weren't any of



those she consciously chose to break. Gauri is in a state to be confused as in the same manner as most people living in flourishing Diasporas. A struggle among their conservative roots and that of the new land they have settled in result. In this manner, she grows to become the creation that is produced by Diasporas and is a product that becomes much analysed through dichotomies such as Gauri's.

To see the realization of a new breed of characters who are outcasts, awkward and difficult to fit in, despite their nature, actions and responses. They are the people can hardly fit into any group. The identity that they want to create when they feel lost becomes only identity that alienates them. These are all the people who fit alone as Gauri does in the end of the novel. They are too clumsy for any definite system as well as too awkward to blend in. But, Lahiri writes of Gauri, **"Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end."** (Lahiri, 240) Rushdie sums up Gauri's problem by speaking for people growing up in the Indian Diaspora, he feels that they **"straddle two cultures; at other times, we fall between two stools."** It is this tussle that they want to escape but because of the nature of Diaspora. They are eternally stuck and need for national identification which is ambiguous and distinct in Gauri for why she rejects it. Her physicality, which was typically Indian, would never leave her. Her roots remain in India. She is a double barrelled character for whom the symbol of Nation becomes more. Life after her husband Udayam's death was always a compromise to her. She found herself in or even drowning herself in work was a compromise she made to escape the reality of Udayan's death. But the event of Udayan's death had occurred in India so, going outside the country was not truly help her but also adjust and accept the totality of it.

### Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri explores, through her 'The Lowland', a variety of streams and ideas of female independence within itself. This is the novel which indeed a symbol of feminism through the main character of Gauri and identify the main areas that her character presents. She becomes symbolic of her home and her fascination makes her out of place. Her attachment to her roots is the very thing that alienates her. Gauri is a bit of those and much more for there are more angles to her character. She abides by her circumstances in the end and reaches a sort of understanding. Through Gauri,



Lahiri, perhaps, is attempting to give a solution to the long-going Diasporic struggle that to be or not to be state. They are trying to accept whatever comes by without longing for the past they have left behind or yearning to be become one with the new land they have tread upon. In their attempt to integrate to a new culture they find themselves in an exile of sorts. Lahiri's great strength as a fiction writer lies in her elegant, effortless to read and writing. She holds for each of her characters...even Gauri. She casts no judgment on Gauri's decisions, offers no condemnation for what might be seen, even lived on its own terms, as ultimately no life at all.

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