

A PORTRAIT OF A LADY: ANALYSING THE CHARACTER OF GAURI IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

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Abstract

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Gauri*, we find essayed a complex yet beautiful portrayal of a modern woman with problems that are relevant in the modern times where gender inequality as well as displacement and dislocation due to globalization are prevalent phenomena's. Symbolically named (because of the Indian mythical connection of Gauri being the synonym for the Goddess of Power) Gauri becomes a powerful character in whom we see three kinds of struggle-of self, gender and nation which get highlighted as she tries to escape stereotypes. She identifies with neither and is in a constant quest to find her own self which she feels is suppressed. Zizek's conception of Nation as a "Thing" justifies or helps one understand this escapist nature of characters such as hers who never seem to blend in, which is in fact their desire. Her the Diasporic question of assimilation is also interrogated.

Keywords: Diaspora, Subjectivization, Gender, Identity, Nation.

The creation, or rather the creolization of Gauri is, I believe, one of the high points of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* for here, 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 shed her identity as a wallflower and come in the forefront. Here, Gauri, appears to be a well rounded character who struggles to create an identity for herself in three different fronts- personal, gender and nation. Lahiri I believe applauds Gauri's inner strength which enables her to break free from the accepted norms that would have otherwise caged her and subjugated her. This is very apparent from the name she chose for this character, Gauri.

Gauri is a Sanskrit word meaning fair. Thus in naming this character fair, she is maybe, latently commenting on the fact that Gauri's actions were indeed fair or rather acceptable. Gauri is also the other manifestation of the Hindu goddesses Durga and Kali who are worshipped as the manifestations of *shaakti*, power, strength or force. Thus if this aspect is considered, it then

becomes inevitable that a character with such a name will have in her a strength or force that will free her from the shackles that were tying her down. So when it does eventually happen, when she does try and eventually succeeds in breaking free, the character of Gauri becomes more believable, more real and in effect more emblematic of being the embodiment 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 constrained, that was trying to cage her and stop her from flowering.

Gauri was born in the 1960's had gained adulthood and thrived in the 1980's backdrop of the *naxalite* movement of Bengal. Betty Friedan in her celebrated essay, 'The Feminine Mystique' had theorized the prevalent condition of women in the society being one, where there was a social pressure for women to conform to traditional roles of being homemakers or models of attractiveness and this was espoused by media representations of women as conforming to that. From the beginning itself, we see that Gauri despite being brought up to conform to societal norms, was different. She wasn't exceptionally beautiful or she wasn't the epitome of feminine beauty. She was intelligent and desired to pursue higher studies. This itself was what that had attracted Udayan to her. This was the very factor that was alienating her from the rest of the society. In fact for Gauri, this alienation happens once more when she treads foreign shores and tries to carve for herself in the Indian Diaspora abroad.

Darwin in his *On the Origin of Species* spoke of a natural selection whereby the fittest survive in the constant struggle for existence. I feel this holds true for most migrants who leave their native land behind and tread new shores. In the new land, their existence becomes one of a struggle to assimilate, to acculturate where assimilation and acculturation renders them fit enough to survive, or not. In *The Lowland*, Gauri's life becomes exemplary of this notion. Gauri's subjectivization rendered her helpless in Calcutta of the 1980's, where, as a widowed young girl she had to follow the mandates her mother-in-law set- whether be it wearing the traditional white sari, muted clothing or even turning vegetarian. Jacques Ranciere defines the process of subjectivization as "the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other" (Ranciere, 60) Her identity throughout is seen in relation to another relative of hers. Whether be it as Manash's sister, Udayan's wife, daughter in law of the Mitra family, Shubhash's wife or Bela's mother- she had to act accordingly. She had no options so to say. It was within these very boundaries that her life had to be lead. When Shubhas came into her life, like a breath of fresh air, and took her away to America that she realized that could actively make her choices, unimaginable- back home. She eventually forsakes her family to create her career, she sheds off her sari for tights and tunic and she cuts off her hair. She also gets involved with a woman. She lives alone and makes both professional and personal choices. The contrast between of the lack of options at her homeland and those present in America, is the metaphysical space, the unchartered territory displaced people have to traverse. It is during this phase that their apprehension gets highlighted for they are consciously or unconsciously trying to connect one known set of rules, customs and practices with another unknown set of rules, customs and practices; in the process not ending up belonging fully to either ,but existing in the third paradigm, social scientist Robin Cohen talks about.

In Gauri's first personal interaction was with a fellow student who was wearing "a skirt that stopped at her knees" which was in stark contrast to "the yards of silk material that Gauri wrapped and pleated and tucked every morning into a petticoat" the very same "sari's she'd worn since she stopped wearing frocks, at fifteen". (Lahiri, 134) The girl had said to Gauri "I like your outfit" before walking away which had made Gauri feel "ungainly" and she "began to want to look like the other women she noticed on campus". Shubhash wanted her to mingle in with the

others and in fact, I quote, “was relieved to see Gauri mixing with other women” at a party where she “wearing a pretty sari.”(Lahiri, 139) but after going home he got to know her opinion on that matter, on these Rhode Island women was completely different. He had asked “Should we invite a few of them to our place, sometime?” (Lahiri,140) but Gauri had come up with a non committal answer, “It’s up to you.” She went on to say that, “I don’t need their advice”, “I don’t want to spend time with them” and finally “I have nothing in common with them.”(Lahiri, 140) A few days later Shubhas had found a pair of scissors with “clumps of her hair” and all her clothes “in ribbons and scraps of various shapes” for she “had destroyed everything.” (Lahiri,141) Gauri then appeared “wearing slacks and a gray sweater” with her hair hung “bluntly along her jawbone”. When interrogating her she had replied that she had become “tired of those”. Her long hair done in ‘a braid’ was one of the first things he had noticed about her when he had seen a photograph of her. When he met her for the first time too, she was described as having “long hair pulled back above her neck” and of being “dressed in a sari”. (Lahiri, 94) Thus the very things that had become characteristic of her had made her tired. In the new environment of America those very things made her feel alienated, as if she didn’t fit in. And thus this strangeness had made her act in the manner she did. All she wanted to do was create for her own self, an identity. But it is interesting to note that she could never really be a part. Lahiri writes, “And yet she remained, in spite of her Western Clothes, her Western academic interests, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and against the backdrop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had wed.”(Lahiri, 236) She had been once mistaken “for the person paid to open another person’s door”

The same way Gauri could not fit in with others who seemed strange in Rhode Island, in the same way when she returned to Calcutta years later, she could not blend in with the crowd and people looked at her through parted curtains from their window. “People were glancing at her now that she was out of the car. Taking in her sunglasses, her American clothing and shoes. Unaware that once she, too, had lived here.” (Lahiri, 319) Her alienation persists till the end in every action of hers, in every decision of hers. Though she could accept a same sex relationship, she felt hurt when her partner dismissed their relationship as a casual fling that could be easily discharged due to external reasons. “The liason ended, without rancour but definitively. Yet Gauri was humiliated, for not taking it as lightly.”(Lahiri, 240) What did Gauri want? A serious relationship ruled by the tenets of monogamy that was embedded in her as she grew up being governed by conservative Indian society? If so, then how could she have married against her families wishes by eloping? How could she have remarried her late husband’s elder brother? Then leave him and her daughter alone in an alien environment, 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 *to be or not to be* state and is confused in the same manner as most people living in thriving Diaspora’s are. A struggle between their conventional roots and that of the new land they have settled in ensue. In this manner she grows to become the very product that is produced by diasporas, a product that becomes much analysed.

Through dichotomies such as Gauri’s we see the creolization of a new breed of characters who are outcasts, who find it difficult to fit in, who are because of their nature, actions and responses- awkward. They are people who are on the fringes of society for they can hardly fit into any group. They are those whose voices never seem to find a body, who are I, now define by

borrowing a term from postcolonial studies- the subalterns. The identity that they want to create when they feel lost becomes the very identity that alienates them. They become people who fit in nowhere, ending up thus, alone as Gauri does in the end of the novel, too clumsy for any definite system, too awkward to blend in. 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 says that he feels that they “straddle two cultures; at other times, we fall between two stools” (Rushdie,15)

Zizek treats Nation as a Thing, where “national identification is by definition sustained by a relationship toward the Nation qua Thing” (Zizek,201) which is constructed in the way a community behaves, upholds and constructs its way of life, beliefs and thus, enjoyment. National identification on one hand unites people but on the other segregates them from the Other. Ethnic tensions arise in the collision between one’s own national consciousness and that of the Other which is seen as a menace of because it exists in a parallel dissimilar paradigm. The tussle faced by people of any Diaspora is precisely this. It is this tussle that they want to escape but because of the nature of Diaspora they are eternally stuck. The need for national identification is ambiguous in Gauri for why she rejects it, is itself indistinct. Would national identification symbolize her history with Udayan, a content part of her life that she tries to forget? Or is she merely awed by the foreigners? Close readings would enable us to assume the former case since she returns to her homeland, many years later to find answers, to find solace and this helps her in understanding herself and finally helps her in coming to terms with all her actions. Her physicality which was typically Indian, would never leave her. Her roots remain in India. She is a double barreled character for whom the symbol of Nation becomes more, for this is the nation to protect which her lover, her first husband Udayan died. Life after that was always a compromise. Bearing his child when he wasn’t there or marrying Subhas to escape the rut 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 adjust and accept the totality of it. This highlights how the foreign lands most of the times provide only material solutions that are dry while home lands contain the spiritual calm, people desire. That is why the desire to come back persist.

Gauri is not the only one. In all the stories that Lahiri narrates, this becomes a recurrent theme. In the story titled “Mrs. Sen”, in the collection of her short stories Interpreter of Maladies, Mrs Sen’s obsession with fish leads to her downfall. For the careful Mrs Sen, preparing elaborately, fish curry, becomes emblematic of her home, her roots- that she so misses. Her obsession makes her out of place. Her attachment to her roots is the very thing that alienates her. It seems absurd to the white boy. A similar picture gets painted in Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake* and Chitra of “A Year’s End” in the collection *Unaccustomed Earth* and they find life around them very difficult. Life outside the homeland does not paint a pretty picture and they almost never seem to fit in. Once the scent of foreign shore hits them, a sense of duality creeps in and that very duality makes their existence difficult, thus they behave in manners that are beyond the norm and thus seem to the world uncomfortable. They become like lost pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Gauri is a bit of those and much more for there are more angles to her character. There are so many questions that need answering in her life. Was it right to go against her family and marry Udayan? Was it right to act as a spy and give information that would help in killing a policeman? Was it right to wed for convenience and not love? Was it right to not want to mother Bela? Was it right to alienate herself from Shubhash, the very man who showed her a route to freedom? Was it right to suddenly want back the very people she had left? Was it right to have a

yearning for suicide? Was any of her wants justified? Gauri's character becomes more rounded with these questions. More complicated and more intriguing. She accepts her circumstances in the end and reaches a sort of understanding.

Through Gauri, I believe Lahiri is attempting to provide a solution to the long-going Diasporic tussle 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. With their attempt to make the two meet, somehow, things fall apart. In their attempt to assimilate to a new culture they find themselves in an exile of sorts and they find what Parthasarathy encapsulates in his poem 'Exile', "you learn roots are deep."(Parthasarathy, 75)

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