



Anti-Feminine Traits of Gauri in Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri is a well-known Indo-American Writer. In her works, she has presented her traditional Indian female characters. But her novel *The Lowland* is an exception. The protagonist of the novel Gauri seems to be portrayed as an Anti-heroine who frees herself from all the restrictions which restrains her freedom.

Keywords: womanhood, selfish, freedom, motherhood.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most eminent diasporic writers. She is called an Indo-American writer as, through her works, she presents Indian sensibility abroad. In her novels she is a sort of representative figure for the female predicament in diaspora. She herself is a child of immigration and multi-culturalism. In her earlier publications, Lahiri represents women in cultural context whether she is in India or abroad. She presents the ramifications of patriarchy on the lives of Indian women. She has shown that women's individuality is snatched, and their emotions, their feelings have been neglected. Lahiri's female characters do not have any identity. But Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) is different from her previous works. In her earlier works, she has created such female characters who never leave their traditional Indian womanhood, but in this novel, she has portrayed a character who shuns off not only her traditional indianness but also her very womanhood. This paper attempts to study the anti-heroine characteristics of its central character, Gauri.

In earlier works of Lahiri, female protagonists create their own space, but simultaneously they follow the traditional path of their womanhood as defined by the society. On the other hand, Gauri becomes an outsider in the novel. She fails to create bonding with her in-laws and Subhash, her second husband. In fact, she never tries to set any bonding with them. She withdraws herself from her duties – duty as a daughter-in-law, as a mother and as a wife. It is rightly said that “The Lowland is a novel about the rashness of youth, as well as the hesitation and regret that can make a long life not worth living,” (<http://www.npr.org/2013/09/23/223425487/with.com>) Gauri becomes a selfish woman. Knowing the ideologies of Udayan, Gauri marries him, but later, she thinks whether he married her so he could access her help in achieving his goals in revolutions. She wants to be free, wants to be independent, and wants to run away from the imposed duties. For her own sake only, she comes to America and marries Subhash. This is the reason that she is unable to form any connection with Bela and Subhash. One can understand that it is difficult for Gauri to become a good wife of Subhash who is the younger brother of Udayan, her first husband, but what about Bela. Gauri could be a good mother at least. Bela was only twelve when Gauri leaves her and Subhash. She stays with Bela and Subhash, but never provides familial happiness. Bela is always deprived of motherly love. Gauri is always indifferent towards Bela from the time she was an infant “... every time he picked Bela up 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.” (TL: 173)

Subhash tries to do his duties as a husband, as a father. He never disturbs Gauri, never tries to impose himself upon her. “Subhash gave her the bed room and told her he would sleep on the sofa...”(151) Subhash gives her liberty, gives her money and space. “He trusted that things would change, after the baby came. That the child would bring them together, first as parents, then as husband and wife.” (165) In the beginning, he always knocks at the door. He never tries to approach her for physical relation without her wish. But later when she shows willingness, it excites him. “She did not speak to him, but after the first few times she began to take his hand and put it where she needed it to be It was the only moment he felt no part of her resisting him.” (177) All this shows that she allows him only to fulfill her needs, never speaks to him but establishes physical relation. When Subhash asks for child with him and a companion for Bela, Gauri asks to wait “And so he continued hoping, though every month, in the medicine cabinet, was a new packet of birth-control pills.” (191) She is not grateful to Subhash who redeems her from the agony she was experiencing at his parents’ home. Bela’s arrival also fails to make her feel happy. In India, mother’s image has been glorified for ages, but Gauri

becomes an exception. Subhash's mother also warned him that Gauri was "too withdrawn, too aloof to be a good mother" (114)

Gauri is indifferent towards Bela too. She always wants to be away from her. That's why, it is Subhash who always accompanies Bela. "She (Gauri) waited for Subhash to take over, to allow her to leave ..." (196) She always keeps on finding excuses to go outside, leaving Bela all alone at home. "So it began in the afternoons. Not every afternoon but often enough, too often, disoriented by the sense of freedom, devouring the sensation as a beggar devours food." (20) Women in India have adapted well to the modern ways of life style while still keeping in mind the traditional ways of society. They are efficient enough to perform both domestic and professional roles. Indian women are strong pillars to hold their family. These qualities make them excel to play the roles of mother, daughter, wife etc. But where does Gauri stand here. If we observe her character carefully, we find her a lady who wants freedom, isolation, and privacy at any cost. "A woman born ahead of her time, unsuited both by temperament and intellect to the conventions demanded by her culture...but this forging of a new self comes at a terrible cost of her family" (<http://www.theguardian.com>>07.) She spends her childhood away from her parents. But she feels that it is good for her to be away to live her life in her own way. "She didn't think she resented her parents for not raising her... Really she appreciated them for letting her go her own way." (TL: 68)

One must respect other's privacy and space. Gauri, like everyone else, wants space and privacy, and Subhash himself provides her this space and privacy. He tries his best to bring up Bela himself. He never tries to trouble Gauri for anything. He waits for her "Almost five years ago they had begun their journey as husband and wife, but he was still waiting to arrive somewhere with her." (190) It was Subhash who took stand for Gauri and fought with his parents, "You can't separate them. For Udayan's sake accept her." (114) He wanted to bring her to America only to help Gauri from the cruelties of his parents and police inquires, "To take his brother's place, to raise his child, to come to love Gauri as Udayan had." (115) But Gauri never tries to live a life with Subhash and her daughter Bela. She is "an angry, selfish woman, who will repay with Subhash's generosity and kindness and his efforts to invent a new life for them in Rhode Island with chilly disregard." (<http://mobile-nytimes.com/2013/09/20/books/jhumpa-lahiris-new-novel-the-lowland.html&hl=IN>) It is Subhash who hopes for a family, living together with Gauri and Bela. Bela, too, loves Subhash. When she was a kid only she says to Subhash: "But I love you more than anybody loves anybody." (TL: 187). Even a child

understands the feelings of true love and care of her father. Bela says to her father "I'll never go away from you, Baba." (TL: 212) Gauri remains an outsider in her family, unable to form a lasting bond with her in-laws, Subhash and Bela. She is isolated having a sense of distance from Bela and Subhash. She thinks that Udayan married her to fulfill his movement's activities, and he never performed his duties towards her. That is why, she experiences anger and resentment towards Subhash because he performs his duties, as a husband and as a parent, very well.

Gauri takes a hard step and ultimately leaves Subhash and Bela. She is an indifferent mother and wife, a flat woman with no motherly emotions. That is the reason she leaves all alone.

Readers will want to dislike her, for she is an indifferent mother, incapable of loving daughter Bela. Her gratitude towards Subhash turns to resentment, even as it is threaded with guilt.

<http://www.popmatters.com/175580thelowland-by-jhumpa-lanwhird-2495720805.html>.)

It seems as she was looking for a chance to escape. She never does her duty as a parent, as a wife and now she escapes. She moves away to California for her own career, thinking about herself only, not about her own daughter and husband. It can be understood if someone abandons someone else's child, but to abandon her own child is quite difficult to understand and accept. Both Bela and Subhash are not provided with any familial happiness from her. Gauri accepts a teaching position in a college. She wants to go away from her family. when Gauri meets Bela after so many years Bela asks her to "... Go back to whatever it was that was more important... I can't stand the sight of you... Nothing will excuse what you did." (382) Bela bursts out on Gauri, "you're as dead to me as he is. The only difference is that you left me by choice." (385)

Gauri is a selfish lady, ungrateful, who does not deserve an iota of her husband's (Subhash) blindness. A person who has gone through so much hardship is not supposed to do any wrong to others, but Gauri does, and does it to her own daughter and husband. She denies all the responsibilities of a wife, and a mother. She sheds all the qualities of an Indian woman, by cutting short her long hair and shedding her traditional sarees. She is seen masturbating in a toilet being attracted to a stranger. She has a temporary physical relationship with a female student as well. Lahiri seems to defy all the notions of a woman, an Indian woman in particular in portraying Gauri.

Thus, Gauri emerges in the text as an anti-heroine. Contempt comes naturally for her as she frees herself from all the responsibilities which come in the way of her freedom. She never thinks what would happen with the members of her family. She renounces motherhood which is considered to be the greatest honour and blessing for any woman. So she is a female only biologically, without possessing any feminine quality.

References

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