

Gauri – An Epitome of Grit and Determination From the novel – the Low Land by Jhumpa Lahiri

Usha Srikanth

Abstract

Gauri is the protagonist of the novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. She is the embodiment of the modern day woman who is a part of the society which exercises patriarchal control over her. She breaks the shackles, the shackles of womanhood, motherhood and a wife. She chooses to strive for the betterment of the downtrodden in her own way and tries to see the bigger picture and solutions which she presumes as solutions of problems which she deems are greater than hers. She is a woman who strives to make the society better - A society which is devoid of injustice, of hate and of prejudice. After her flight to America she embraces change in the new land and makes it her home. She embraces the freedom quite naturally. In the process she sacrifices motherhood, the essence of the woman that the Indian society wanted her to become and grows into the woman she wants to be. She displays muted strength till she reaches her goal.

Keywords: *Feminism, Diaspora, Naxalism, Womanhood, Motherhood*

Date of Submission: 29-04-2020

Date of Acceptance: 13-05-2020

I. THE OBJECTIVE

This paper attempts to study the character of Gauri as a woman of grit and determination who does not succumb to the societal pressures and fit in as a wife and a mother. She displays strength beyond the capacity of any normal woman in her sacrifice. She sacrifices the comforts of a ‘Happily married life’; she also sacrifices the love of her only child. In this way she fuels her spirit with the brute strength of grit and determination to break the shackles of womanhood and motherhood.

II. RESEARCH GAP

The character ‘Gauri’ from the novel is viewed as one of the strongest characters that have been essayed by the author ‘Jhumpa Lahiri’. Gauri has been critically viewed as the protagonist of the novel ‘The Lowland’. Her character has been critically analyzed as that of a woman who has broken the barriers of the stereotyping of women of the 1960s especially in India. She has also been identified and hailed as the modern day Draupadi because of the unrelenting love for her first husband Udayan. She is the dream of the feminists, but she has not been analyzed as the epitome of grit and determination who, with her calm, breaks the shackles not only of womanhood but also the stereotypical ideas of motherhood. This paper attempts to fill this gap

III. INTRODUCTION

The meaning of the word ‘Gauri’ is white or fair complexioned one; she is also the goddess of power. She is a Goddess and the wife of Lord Shiva. Jhumpa Lahiri has carefully chosen this name to define the character of the female protagonist of the novel ‘The Lowland’. Gauri is everything that a well – rounded character can be. She can be viewed as a feminist who struggles to pave the way for her identity in a patriarchal world. The fact that Gauri was born in India and specifically in The west Bengal which is home to one of the most powerful Shakti – peetas is symbolic of the courage and bravery from within her to defy the set rules of patriarchy and emerge as a clear – headed individual who chose the ideals and path which she believed in, rather than succumbing to the norms of Indian society.

Gauri – super woman

Gauri is portrayed as a member of the weaker sex born in the 1960s which was an era of male hierarchy. Indian women though were being educated and employed, still had to fulfill all the duties that an illiterate woman would do, along - with the burden of coping with college and in some cases the burden of being employed for money. This was a generation which fought to become super – women, as, a cultured ‘Indian Woman’ did not forget her culture in the name of ‘education’. Gauri too falls into this category who succumbed to the traditions of following the norms of widowhood when Udayan dies. She accepts all the traditions like wearing white, not being seen in front of other people, not eating meat and other traditions which are depicted very well by the author. Gauri falls prey to more than one type of discrimination and oppression simultaneously

(Concept of Intersectionality by Toril Moi. Where she cites the classic example of the burdens of being a black, lesbian woman in a wheelchair) Gauri is an educated woman in an era where education for women was viewed as just degrees added to their name than as knowledge that brought about independence and transformation.

Gauri grows wings in the free land

Her flight from India to America is also significant in the novel. America being a free land is again symbolic of the spirit of liberty and fraternity which she aspired to see in the Indian society. This spirit within her grew wings and became stronger in this free land. She is not portrayed as a character who is struggling with alienation in a new land. She does not try to fit – in with the other Indian families that her husband Subhash introduces her to. In a single meeting she is quite clear that she is not one among them. Her journey from the airport to his room is also suggestive that she is eager to learn about this new land and dissolve completely in what it has to offer to her. (A portrait of a lady: Analyzing the character of Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel 'The Lowland' Joie Bose) she does not fit in as a character who faces diasporic problems of alienation in a new land. Like the character Aamir in 'The Kite Runner' by Khaled Hosseini she too is haunted by the harsh realities that plague her mother land compared to the land of plenty that she likes to make her own. The fire of patriotism is always raging in her heart, the plight of the poor farmers, the atrocity of the feudal lords, the insensitivity of the Indian Government towards this and finally the death of many youngsters like her first husband Udayan all for a cause which did not even exist beyond the front pages of a few leading newspapers in Bengal. In fact Gauri finds this foreign land fertile enough to let go of the customs and traditions which encumbered her in India. This is seen when she decides to cut her hair and unwraps the seven yards to choose something that is western, she is instantly comfortable in the new short hair and western outfit. She thrives in this soil to flower free from the patriarchal values that she felt victimized her. (She found classrooms and the offices of professors lining the halls. Bulletin boards announcing upcoming lectures and conferences... There was no guard preventing her, questioning her. No armed soldiers sitting on sandbags, as they had for months outside the main building at Presidency Pg no: 132) Lahiri has a well-defined and well-formulated vision of the portrayal of Gauri.

Gauri – Free from the shackles of motherhood

Women were portrayed as nurturers, care – givers and educated mothers. Gauri breaks all these barriers and goes on to become the unconventional woman who believes in higher ideals and chooses them over these virtues which were expected of her from the Indian society. She appoints undergraduates to take care of Bela when she gets into a doctoral programme. We do not get to view her as a weak character. She loves her child in the only best way that she could. She watched Bela from within the house to avoid small talk with other mothers, one day Bela returns home immediately after being sent to the bus stand. Bela insists on Gauri to see the earthworms that had emerged to die, she seeks refuge in her mother and pleads for help, Gauri looks at the other children who have managed, a normal sympathizing mother would've indulged the kid and seen her across safely, but Gauri had decided to make Bela strong and independent exactly like how her first husband Udayan had prepared her. She drags Bela by the hand and gets her to the bus, Bela is seen screaming and crying. We can see streaks of a strong feminist woman who gears her child for what is to follow in the future. She gives her daughter a taste or a teaser of the unfair and unjust world that we live in. The fact that she allows her husband Subhash to become more close to the tiny Bela than herself displays Gauri's tenderness, her understanding of deeper feelings that Subhash had for his brother Udayan, she knew instantly, when Bela was born that Subhash regarded the tiny being much more than just a niece or a daughter or a new member of the Mitra family. For him she was the missing Udayan and she filled the hole that Udayan had left in Subhash.

After the death of her husband Udayan, though she follows the norms of widowhood, she still envisions a life for herself as she instantly agrees to marry Subhash. She displays sparks of resilience and reiterates Darwin's theory 'Survival of the fittest'. (She had married Subhash as a means of staying connected to Udayan. Pg no. 127, my first husband was killed, she said. I watched it happen. I married his brother to get away Pg. no. 166) By choosing to remarry she finds new vistas to pursue her dreams of further education and also a new and free land for the unborn child. She sees in Subhash the opportunity for her ideals to gain new grounds.

Gauri – The idealist

Throughout the novel the readers get a complete picture of the calm and serene Goddess 'Gauri'. She is seen going about her mundane daily chores year after year, even tending to Bela who she knew in her deepest emotions loved Subhash more and that they belonged together like a family, they found love and harmony in each other. She was one among those women who fell into the category of 'The problem that had no name' (As she made the bed, shopped for groceries.... lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – "Is this all?" - 'The Feminine Mystique' by Betty Friedan) She is also very devoted towards her objective which was given life and meaning by her college boyfriend and first husband 'Udayan'. As is

symbolic of her name she envisions a land that is fair, free of corruption and she wants to fight for equality. She is influenced by the 'Naxalite movement' in Bengal.

The struggle that we see in Gauri is a very courageous one; it signifies the muted strength of Goddess Kali from the outside but a strong struggle, a roaring fire, for that one ideal she believed in from within. More like one piece of a wreck which is thrown out of the eye of a tornado.

Gauri – In the depths of love

We can also see the unrelenting love that Gauri has for Udayan throughout the novel and keeps him alive for the readers, like Draupadi's only love was Karana. (*Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Divakaruni Das) She becomes Udayan himself as she is ready to give new wings to the ideology that she and he had shared. The doctorate study takes wings in theory but not the practical output that she had envisioned. (*Her ideology was isolated from practice, neutered by its long tenure in the academy. Long ago she'd wanted her work to be in deference to Udayan, but by now it was a betrayal of everything he had believed in. All the ways he had influenced and inspired her, shrewdly cultivated for her own intellectual gain*) however this study becomes her only source of happiness and objective to be alive.

Towards the end she is also seen as the sacrificial and unselfish mother who does not claim her right over her daughter and is accepting of the fact that Bela does not wish to see her ever again nor does she want her child Meghana to acknowledge her existence. Gauri accepts all of this with graceful dignity.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion I'd like to say that Gauri has been essayed as a strong character that is dedicated towards the one ideal that she and her first husband Udayan believed in. She is the epitome of grit and determination. *She was always opposed to any feminism that championed women's special virtues or values firmly rejecting any idealization of specifically 'feminine' traits.* (Margaret Walters – *Feminism. A very short introduction* – Oxford University Press) Underneath her calm demeanor can be seen the unrelenting love for Udayan, love for the betterment of India. What had started on the campus just down the street from the flat where she lived, the talks about deterioration of living standards, Indians chaining other Indians. Poor people being trampled to death for a mere sack of cheap rice, all these become the sole reason of her existence. She harbors within her a utopian dream which worked well with the idea of Mao and Marx in other countries but which remains unachievable in her motherland. She embraces a new life by marrying Subhash, dutifully completes the expected tasks of a wife and mother. She does all these for years with the determination that one day her dream of a better Bengal will be fulfilled. She has the grit to sacrifice the love of her family and especially her child as she knew that the raging fire in her needed to become a torch that will light lives. Finally towards the end we see her pursuing PhD through which she believes that the world will be introduced to the atrocities that prevailed in Naxalbari. She sacrifices all the pleasures, embraces all the brick bats that are hurled towards with this sole determination. Hence she can be hailed as the epitome of grit and determination.

REFERENCES:

- [1]. Carastathis, Anna. "The concept of intersectionality in feminist theory." *Philosophy Compass* 9.5 (2014): 304-314.
- [2]. A portrait of a lady: Analyzing the character of Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel 'The Lowland' Joie Bose
- [3]. Hosseini, Khaled. *The kite runner*. Penguin, 2003.
- [4]. Friedan, Betty. *The feminine mystique*. WW Norton & Company, 2010.
- [5]. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel*. Anchor, 2009.
- [6]. Walters, Margaret. *Feminism: A very short introduction*. Vol. 141. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Usha Srikanth. "Gauri – An Epitome of Grit and Determination From the novel – the Low Land by Jhumpa Lahiri." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 09(5), 2020, pp 21-23.