



Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*: An assertion of feminist self in the diasporic 'third space'

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Abstract

The paper "Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*: An Assertion of Feminist Self in the Diasporic Third Space" attempts to chart the ways in which the feminist avowal of Gauri to find a space for herself in this world found manifestation in the land of the US where she could cut herself off from her familial trappings to give vent to her academic career as a Neo-Marxist philosopher. The novel celebrates the 'third space' – the 'in-betweenness' – which allows women to explore themselves and cut off from the patriarchal ties to realize their own selves. *The Lowland* is thus not just about diasporic nostalgia, but about the celebration of that feminist spirit that manifests itself in celebration of the 'new female' that Gauri is represented as.

Keywords: diaspora, feminist assertion, gauri, homi bhaba, jhumpa lahiri, stuart hall, the lowland, third space

Introduction

At a time when the global movement of people across nations has been a phenomenon on rise due to globalization, the coming up of the Multinational corporations, the 'dollar dream', the means to financial and academic excellence and various other factors, the notion of 'diaspora' has been a subject of much cultural and sociological interest to academicians, bureaucrats, politicians across the world as such movement of people has given rise to a sensibility which permeates various ideological underpinnings of human existence. The initial reaction to diasporic existence was one of dislocation and nostalgia, but gradually the same has been replaced with a kind of celebration of being in a newer space which could give rise to occasions where the diasporic self could manifest itself in a more coherent and concerted way to deal with his or her human predicament. The paper seeks to critically explore the character of Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* to understand the ways in which women explore the diasporic 'third space' in the present global cultural scenario. To understand the journey of Gauri from being a widow to the Mitra family in Tollygunge, Calcutta to her being a Neo-Marxist philosopher and academician in the US, the notion of diasporic situation as the "third space" (as enumerated by Homi Bhaba and Stuart Hall) is taken as the theoretical parameter to reconnoiter the charismatic rise of feminist awareness and assertion in the novel *The Lowland*.

Whereas for Ashima Ganguly in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, her initial days in the US when she accompanies her husband to be a housewife was like bearing the pain of "lifelong pregnancy", but when we meet Gauri in *The Lowland*, we see a different woman who too accompanies her second husband to the US to get away from the atrocities that widows have to go through in Indian society and culture, but instead of being a submissive woman who feels gratitude towards her second husband, Subash, for supposedly deciding to marry his brother's widow, she pursues her own path of development to achieve a position for herself in the world of academics. Through Gauri, Jhumpa Lahiri seems to be exploring the consciousness of the 'new female' who breaks the wall of domesticity and

submissiveness to explore the greater world. If she would have decided to stay back in India as a widow, after the death of Udayan, she would have to live a life of much humiliation as widows usually have to undertake in the Indian scenario. But instead of being so, she decides to explore her own self which was only possible in the supposed alien land of the US where nobody knows her, where she could start her life anew and reach the zenith of the academic world that she had always aimed to pursue.

In other words, it can be said that it is the diasporic space which gives Gauri the opportunity to break free from the patriarchal shackles and explore herself. In this context, it is, thus, necessary to understand the diasporic space and sensibilities from the cultural point of view of the "third space" which Homi Bhaba and Stuart Hall so significantly celebrates. The term diaspora refers to the botanical fact of 'seed dispersal' which has been thus explored from the point of view of the physical, psychological, emotional and cultural dislocation that an immigrant suffers from as s/he tries to adapt himself/herself to the country of his or her adoption. A sense of nostalgia permeates the existence of the diasporic people as they always are pulled by a sense of emotional connect to their motherland and the push to attain some kind of financial (and often academic) excellence in the country where they are trying to settle. The diasporic people, thus, live in an "in-betweenness" which manifests itself in the hybridity of their existence where they are neither here nor there – neither one, and yet double. Yet in their "in-betweenness" there is a celebration of the so-called 'third space' as stated by Bhaba.

Homi Bhabha, thus, puts up a challenge against the earlier views on diaspora being nostalgic. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhaba argues that "the very concepts of homogenous national cultures" must go through "a profound process of redefinition" (1994, 5), as he feels that there is "no necessary or eternal 'belongingness'" (175) to which the diasporic community is essentially tied. The essentialist claims of supposed 'purity' of cultures and thus their manifestation in the psychic and cultural realm of diasporic existence has been put under lens by Bhaba to state how in the globalized world of today's existence when the national

boundaries and its limitations are growing thinner day by day, to merely explore the diasporic sensibilities from the nostalgic point of view is to narrow the focus of scholarly engagement with a vast sociological and cultural process that diaspora is.

In the realm of our consciousness, the national feeling is but in a state of fluidity. It is in a continuous process of change and always transitional and therefore to merely restrict that vast reservoir of emotions and feelings merely from the point of nostalgia would be to shut one's eyes to the complexity of the process. Homi Bhaba refers to the complexity and thus talks about how the hybridity of the diasporic sensibility needs to be understood in terms of the "third space" within which the diasporic people find their identity, their real and imaginary journey, their ethos of adapting to the new world and moreover to create a space which is distinct from that of the land they have left and also the culture of the land that they have adopted. In that state of "in-betweenness" the diasporic individuals create a space for themselves where they not just celebrate their hybrid existence, but at the same time makes ample use of the opportunities to reach higher in life, by cutting themselves off from the supposed emotional entanglements in which they are usually caught up when in the motherland.

Stuart Hall further explores the idea of third space as he does away with the supposed transcendental nature of human identity to explore the ways in which diasporic community defines "a heterogeneous concept that is constantly recreating and refashioning itself, while ethnic identification is devalued as a monolithic and static phenomenon incapable of variation and transformation" (qtd. Behdad 2005, 399-400). The monolithic way of viewing and understanding the world is but a thing of the past as life processes are more complicated and needs to be understood in its variegated complexities.

In case of Gauri, the Naxalbari movement in Calcutta affected her life when her husband, Udayan, is being brutally killed by the Police. Her passion for life was drained out as she is being shut within the Mitra household in Tollygunge, Calcutta. The unfurling of her true potential was not possible within the domain that she was forced into by the police oppression to subdue the Naxalbari movement. So, finding a chance to get out of that mess, she chooses to marry Subash as it takes her to the land of opportunities – the US. Often it is being accused that Jhumpa Lahiri portrayed Gauri to be a dispassionate self who grabs the opportunity to go to the US and then pursues her own career disregarding her family and even her daughter, Bela.

She leaves her daughter and her husband; and decides to take the path of her academic career as a Neo-Marxist philosopher and academician, while the traditional patriarchal norms dictates that she should have been a 'care-giver' to her daughter (Bela) and husband. Such accusations against Gauri seems to be gender-biased as patriarchal realm cannot digest that a female can choose to give preference to her career over her family.

A feminist assertion in what makes the character of Gauri stand out as she through her choices in life proves that only when a female decides to give vent to the realization of her potential that she can prove her worth to the society and to herself. To gauge and bind a woman within the narrow walls of domesticity is to not let half of the humankind not use the resources and talents that they are inherently born with. Feminism is not just a theoretical positioning of gender

equity, but should be put into practice for letting the women break the bounds of patriarchy and create that space for herself and her sisters which can make them find true significance to their journey of life. Merely subduing a female as a wife or a mother is to limit the potent possibilities that a female has within her. It is to this patriarchal bias that Jhumpa Lahiri is hitting at through the character of Gauri.

Probably, Jhumpa Lahiri was conscious of the fact that if she had to make Gauri reach some place of significance in life, then she will have to take her out of India and put her in a space which allows her to pursue her dreams without any social and cultural inhibitions and gender stereotyping. So, Lahiri, the diasporic writer chooses bring Gauri to the US. The unusual aspect of this representation is the fact that whereas earlier, women in the diasporic set up were seen to be ones who usually follow their husbands, sons and fathers to the adopted nation. The females had no choice in these matters. The "dollar dream" made men choose the land of opportunities as the country of their residence and the women merely accompanied the men to serve their interests and live a life of anonymity within the domestic walls of the house in the adopted land and suffer silently as long as they get accustomed to the new way of life and busy themselves with child-rearing and household chores.

But the 'new woman' of Jhumpa Lahiri, Gauri, chooses not to merely accept the gender norms and live a life of anonymity; but chooses to silently rebel against the norms and create a path for her own. She gets out of the emotional entanglement within which women are being trapped to pave her own path. It is in this portrayal of Gauri that Jhumpa Lahiri presents to the world a character who needs the 'third space' to realize her potential – within that 'third space' she celebrates her own self and makes the most of her competence as an individual and as an academician. There are very few examples of such women in literary narratives as well as in life who take a bold step to make a mark in this world by choosing to not seek mere pleasure in domestic and familial matters which patriarchy endeavours to make females learn from their childhood. In an effort to break free from the realms of bondage to the world of freedom, one needs to suffer a lot and Gauri similarly does so as she chooses to leave her daughter with Subash and pursue her academic career. Instead of being trapped in a farcical marriage, that she could take the step of walking out of it at the moment of her choice is what makes Gauri such an intriguing character.

Jhumpa Lahiri thus uses the character of Gauri in a diasporic "third space" to unleash the potential of a female who could go beyond the emotional tangles of patriarchal set up to create a niche for herself – an example she is to the females, who need to disengage themselves from the appalling and vicious male-chauvinist trappings to free themselves to a world of their own, till such women become acceptable and the society sees women's ambition and career as equally important as that of the males.

It can be asked why is it that Gauri had to reach the so-called "third space" to unleash her potential – what makes her not stand up for her rights while in India and within India. In other words, is it that only in the diasporic set up of the first world nation, a female can think of realizing her goals and make her feminist assertion? To think on this issue would be to make a conjecture which would lead to another story. That Lahiri chooses a diasporic space for

Gauri is because the 'third space in-betweenness' provides Lahiri the chance to place her character in a firm footing where she could find an easier manifestation of her own self without having the social and cultural pressure of the immediate and the larger family.

In the novel, we see that Gauri chooses to become an American by getting an American haircut and even abandons her Indian attire (sarees). This act of changing the physical appearance as well as one's clothing is necessary for Gauri to mentally and psychologically align herself to the new space – both physical and psychological that she had manifest herself in while in the diasporic set up. In her self-imposed isolation, she broods over her self and find some solace in fashioning her 'self', according to her own desire, which usually the patriarchy does not allow a woman to do. Lahiri writes - "Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings" (Lahiri, 2013: 165). It is this isolation from everything around her that creates the essence in her to stand apart and that isolation was possible as it was a diasporic third space in which the individualism of the US provides the necessary anonymity to Gauri to be with herself.

In her isolation, she creates a space for herself – a emotional and psychological room of her own – which is necessary for her 'self-assertion' - "She was establishing her existence apart from him. This was the real shock. He thought he would be the one to protect her, to reassure her. But he felt cast aside, indicated along with Gauri. He was afraid to exert his authority, his confidence as a father shaken now that he was alone" (Lahiri, 2013: 214). In doing so, she sheds the burden of the past as the 'third space' allows her that convenience – "She had California to swallow her; she had wanted to disappear there" (Lahiri, 2013: 233).

To conclude, it can be stated that Lahiri's Gauri is a character carved out of the author's desire to celebrate femininity and a feminist assertion in the realm of the 'third space' to provide the readers with a definite example of a literary example who is inspiring enough to lead to the creation of a gender-equitable world where neither does a person like Gauri have to suffer in isolation, not does she has to cut herself off from the realm of all her familial ties to assert her individuality and her career as an academician. In the portrayal of Gauri, Jhumpa Lahiri celebrates that aspect of the feminine which had long been kept in bounds and needs to be unleashed to make women realize their potential as well as to make the world most gender- just.

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