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Between Transgression and Liberation: Re-reading Gauri as an Epitome of Resistance in *The Lowland*

M. Ashiqur Rahaman Sourav*

Abstract: The current paper examines the character of Gauri, the protagonist in Jhumpa Lahiri's 2013 novel *The Lowland*, through the lens of liberal feminism, addressing a gap in existing literature that has largely focused on intersectional, spatial, and postcolonial readings. Liberal feminism advocates equal rights and opportunities for women within existing social structures, and this study explores how Gauri's pursuit of education, marital autonomy, and career independence embodies these principles in a diasporic context. Drawing on the works of Wollstonecraft (2009) and Friedan (1963), this analysis positions Gauri's choices against the backdrop of patriarchal norms, widowhood stigma, and migration. Often perceived as selfish, Gauri instead emerges as a complex figure whose resistance is enacted through self-determination and the rejection of prescribed gender roles. By contextualizing her agency within both Indian reformist traditions and contemporary transnational debates, the paper demonstrates the continued relevance of liberal feminism for interpreting women's strategies of survival and empowerment in South Asian literature.

Keywords: Feminism, diaspora, women's agency, patriarchy, self-love, resistance

Introduction

Women have evolved from silencing and being subjected to power, choice, and leadership over the centuries. Women are now claiming their rights and fighting for better opportunities after being banned from a majority of the life spectrum. In recent times, feminism, being a political and social movement, advocates women's equality in political, economic, and cultural domains. Arianto and Ambalegin (2018) state that indoctrination is one form of limiting women's space through the covert control of movement. It indicates that even though there are restrictions, they operate in a subtle way. An American Indian author, Jhumpa Lahiri, has received several literary awards for the feminist themes employed in her novels. One of her most praised novels, The *Lowland*, follows female leads who dare to make untraditional decisions about their lives. The novel is about Gauri, and she first gets married to Udayan. He is a free-spirited guy deeply involved in the Naxalite movement. When Udayan is killed, she winds up marrying his older brother, Subhash who is the self-satisfied one considerably absorbed with taking part in the educational opportunities of the West. Compelled by the unborn child Gouri carries, Subhash marries her out of duty and pity. Gauri maintains physical and living quarters with them but never warms to a deep emotional bond with Subhash or Bela. She dwells with nostalgia and guilt; her life is a combination of study and rejecting full motherhood (a role she considers "stifling & constraining," 15). At the end, she puts on Western dresses and she started to follow her own desires. She leaves her husband and daughter in order to pursue higher studies.

Mahato (2021, p. 72) comments that "leaving her husband and child, this mother is breaking the family." But Gauri is undeterred; she refuses to join the masses. Bela, who feels lost after her mother leaves, eventually grows into a strong, independent young woman and a wandering climate activist. Gauri's decisions, such as choosing a child out of marriage, distancing herself from her parents, and

*Corresponding email: sourav@eng.green.edu.bd
Lecturer, Department of English, Green University of Bangladesh (GUB), Narayanganj, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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prioritizing scholarship, reflect her rejection of patriarchal expectations. As Daukšaitė-Kolpakovienė (2020) notes, "Gauri chooses a future identity of an academic for herself, and it becomes her most prominent identity" (p. 125). In contrast to the cultural norm where "Indian women faced constant neglect in society" and were valued only within domestic boundaries, Gauri affirms her individuality. This essay restores Gauri in the frame of liberal feminism, focusing on equal opportunity and individual autonomy. Through these notions, the paper discusses how Gauri's identities and her life choices come out as a modernist prototype of it in a diasporic setup. It borrows the glimpses from theorists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued for women's "power… over themselves" (Wollstonecraft 2009; p. 47) and Betty Friedan's critique of domestic limits (Friedan, 1963). It also looks at how her resistance is mediated by postcolonial and cultural contexts, where gender norms are simultaneously policed through caste, nationalism, and migration. By reading Gauri's trajectory in the light of liberal feminism, this paper seeks to question shallow interpretations or assigning a character certificate as selfish/needy, etc. The show gives us a subtle character whose resistance is that of self-determination and intellectual curiosity and to preconceived gender roles, allowing for a raw, sienna understanding of how liberal feminist strategies fold into South Asian and transgender narratives.

Review of Literature

The literary and critical reception of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* has produced a significant body of scholarship which addresses the themes of exile, memory, trauma, and gendered subjectivity. The critical analysis of Gauri's expectations has generated significant controversy due to her feminist interpretation of the novel. The following literature review comprises the major studies that address these issues, as well as examining Gauri within broader feminist theoretical perspectives. These are notably liberal, postcolonial, and intersectional. Gauri has often been analyzed as a problematic figure. For example, in their examination of gender and displacement in Lahiri's fiction, Banerjee and Srivastava assert that Gauri embodies "a moral explosion" in the self that "reproduces the dominant representation of Indian womanhood." By refusing to play the role of a mother and by arguing against the marital bond, Gauri unstitches the metaphorical bond of the South Asian expatriate family. They hold this removal as exigent and emancipation simultaneously. It compels us to rethink who and what generates feminist defiance. However, postcolonial feminists, who emphasize the cultural politics of gender in South Asia, frequently criticize liberal readings. Mohanty's classic essay "Under Western Eyes" popularized the term 'Western gaze'. Recent scholarship continues to complicate Gauri's portrayal. According to Wei (2023, p. 4), *The Lowland* "depicts…how Gauri goes from enduring the restrictions brought by gendered space to immigrating to foreign countries" and it offer a feminist geographic view of her transformation. A transnational feminist reading notes that Gauri's experience in America represents a "diasporic assertion of autonomy" that reorient her identity beyond patriarchal confines (Shameem, 2021, p. 15). Additionally, a postmodern feminist critique observes that Gauri's choices marrying Subhash, then abandoning both him and her daughter reflect a "break…from a benchmark of meaning…to achieve her goals" (Fadhel & Adek, 2020, p. 98), and it totally challenges the traditional womanhood.

Banerjee and Srivastava (2024, p. 62) assert that Gauri embodies "a moral explosion in the self that reproduces the dominant representation of Indian womanhood", warning that she "unstitches the symbolic cohesion of the South Asian expatriate family". Mohanty (1984, p. 333) critiques such liberal interpretations by pointing to the massive "Western gaze" in feminist discourse, while Gopal (2005, p. 174) emphasizes how postcolonial female subjects must resist "not only the patriarchy but also the cultural nationalism. It allocates them moral purity and sacrificial roles". Thus, Gauri's action is considered defiant because it breaks away from motherhood and family, which are key ideas in Indian nationalist and diasporic discussions. The discussion of performativity is well grounded in Judith Butler's work on gender performativity. Gender is a performance constituted by cultural values rather than an expression of fixed identity (Butler, 1990, p. 519). By avoiding traditional femininity and refusing to restrain herself to the role of nurturer in a patriarchal society, Gauri conveys a powerful

resistance to performativity and the demands that are placed upon women in both Indian and diasporic cultures is a significant issue. Therefore, instead, what does it say about her individualism as an interference in the excessively scripted performances of gender?

Crenshaw (1991) argues that it is necessary to consider the way in which intersecting oppressions are manifest in the observed and described co-occurrences of marginalization. Gauri is a widow. Gauri was not just any woman; she was a political migrant and an exile-seeking scholar too. After researching on Gauri, it portrays her as an uncritical nationalist icon or male proxy, despite the existence of a rich compilation of feminist theory which still finds itself in a theoretical limbo. This is because it does not have the key marker that Gauri's intellectual work would need to change gender norms while she is alone and without a voice. This is because most of the complaints she gets either make fun of her lack of interest or praise her defiance while oversimplifying her role as a theorist.

The current study provides a deeper understanding and presents Gauri as a figure standing between breaking rules and finding freedom. Moreover, in a cultural commentary, Anuska (2024) vividly describes how Lahiri maps Gauri's journey through spatial resistance: "Her first and foremost resistance was changing the way she looked. She replaced her sarees with T-shirts and chopped off her hair" (Anuska, 2024, para. 3). Queer-critical readings also enrich the interpretive field. Vinitha and Rani (2023) similarly complicate Gauri's role, noting that by venerating the feminine archetype and also she leaves her family and home to look for work," the novel challenges traditional motherhood myths.

Theoretical Framework

Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism grew from enlightenment thoughts. It asserts that women should have the same privileges to learn science and math and they can make their choices. They can have a strong career, vote and other things. It works for change from inside the structures rather than conflict outside. Wollstonecraft (2009, p. 47) proclaims that she desires for women to have "power…over themselves", thereby linking the cultivation of the intellect with moral agency. Friedan (1963) uncovered the struggles of the females with domestic boundary, yearning for self-expression in their educations and work roles. Gauri's migration to the U.S., along with her rejection of a predestined family life which particularly her resistance to conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood. It exemplifies liberal feminist strategies of asserting self-reliance. This is carefully chosen self-sovereignty in succession and divorced as life moments from without remarriage or exit from the parental family take place within a shift of regime of choice.

Postcolonial Feminist Challenges

Postcolonial feminism questions the idea of a universal liberal feminism. This term is warning against implementing Western discourses when attention is not paid to cultural expectations and historical truths. Mohanty (1984, p. 340) warns that "sisterhood cannot be assumed" (p. 340) and requires some essentials in local conditions, such as caste or community, nationalism, and colonial pasts. In the mid-20th century patriarchal forces were operating in India that shaped what it meant to be a woman and what women did. The transgression by Gauri is perhaps a disavowal of not just patriarchal family roles, but a confrontation with the postcolonial structures. Her widowhood, connection to a politically active husband, and educational migration unfold within a framework where nationalist ideals uphold gender norms, enforcing moral purity and sacrificial expectations of women who are highlighting the tension between personal autonomy and patriarchal structures. Liberal feminist ideals alone cannot fully account for these intersecting pressures.

Performative and Existential Feminism

Simone de Beauvoir, stresses that "one is not born but, rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 2011, p. 283) which explicated existential feminism and underscores a recognition of the facticity in gender

identity. Butler (1990) develops this notion in terms of gender performativity. It shows that gender is not an essential core but the effect of regular social practice. Gauri breaks this script in *The Lowland*. She challenges the culturally prescript acts that constitute 'good mother' or 'ideal wife' identifications by renouncing the image of sari-draped dutiful wife and moving away from maternal responsibilities and commissioning relationships which appear unconventional. In the novel, Gauri's tendencies align with an existentialist model of self-creation. Intellectual effort and rigorous philosophical inquest serve as a means for her to surpass her arbitrary and socially assigned roles.

Feminist Interpretations of Gauri's Resistance

Postcolonial and Existential Readings

Gauri's life after Udayan's death unfolds at the intersection of personal loss and structural limitations. Postcolonial feminism helps to explain these conditions by showing how gender norms in India are tied to caste, nationalism, and colonial legacies (Mohanty, 1984). Her relocation to the U.S. is made possible through Subhash's academic migration and the class resources that support it (Mishra, 2007). Gauri's decision to immerse herself in philosophical study represents an act of self-creation from an existential feminist view as described by Beauvoir (2011). She transforms it into a project of personal freedom rather than treating education as an escape. Gauri moves toward what Beauvoir calls 'transcendence' with the refusing to center her identity around widowhood or motherhood. Her life becomes a process of redefining value in intellectual and personal terms instead of the domestic roles expected of her.

Maternal Refusal and Care Ethics

One of the most debated aspects of Gauri's character is her refusal to take on traditional maternal duties. Beauvoir's notion of maternal indecision and Chakravarti's (2003) critique of caste-patriarchal expectations help to explain why such refusal is often judged more severely than male political lapses. Indian culture glorifies men like Udayan who take radical chances; but, in most narratives, any women who reject motherhood are often seen as morally deficient. This kind of discussion is further complicated by care ethics. Tronto (1993) warns against evaluating care only through visible acts, as this overlooks the social and psychological perspectives that shape caregiving abilities. Gauri's trauma from witnessing political violence and losing her husband may have reduced her ability to engage in emotional care. Nevertheless, her withdrawal places the burden of caregiving to Subhash, a move that problematizes responsibility and consent in shared family life.

Queer Affiliations and Sexual Autonomy

Gauri's subsequent relationships, those of her non-traditional expressions deepen her protest from cognitive freedom to physical autonomy. These choices break the social scripts that marry womanhood to heterosexuality and reproductive futurism. It theorized as gender performativity by Butler (1990). These ties are also affected by liberty and limitation in the diaspora. Her student and immigrant responsibilities despite being far from her village are precarious monitoring. Her profession requires seclusion; thus, she has multiple unattached relationships. However, But, this could mean wrongly connecting freedom with a lack of emotions, something that care ethics researchers often criticize.

Intergenerational Rearticulation

Gauri became a different person to her daughter Bela. This intellectual withdrawal is an agrarian activism and the care of a single parent. This is where ecofeminist perspectives are helpful in thinking of Bela's work as marrying gendered care with environmental stewardship (Shiva, 1988). Gauri challenged traditional norms. Bela's choices expanded further patriarchal roles onto the community and ecological well-being. While she upholds the refusal of traditional family institutions, she combines it with engagement in care. So, the feminist strategies can change and develop through generations in order to confront new social realities and survival contexts without violating our commitment towards autonomy and resistance.

Key Findings

The composite feminist reading reveals some insights as liberal, postcolonial, existential, performative, intersectional, ecofeminist and care ethics aspects of her resistance. Her marriage to Subhash could be viewed as an expression of liberal-feminist alternative. However, it is also shaped by widowhood stigma, state control, and surrogacy in a postcolonial world. Additionally, her focus on deep thinking is a way of gaining freedom, which matches with liberal and existential feminism. However, there is a conflict because stepping away from caregiving roles requires certain privileges. Gauri's rejection of traditional motherhood seems to undermine patriarchal norms. She highlights the problems raised in care ethics by leaving care giving to others. Moreover, she opens space for non-traditional or queer relationships, which was a continuation of enlarging proportions of self-rule. Focusing on independence could reinforce a sense of isolation. Finally, Bela's ecofeminist activism reshapes her mother's struggle into a model of ecologically rooted freedom and care. Together, these insights show that Gauri's choices are not simple acts of freedom but a mix of social pressures, trauma, and changing contexts. Her life illustrates how feminist resistance in South Asian diaspora literature can appear ordinary, yet it is really a balance between compromise and refusal, influenced by history and generations.

Conclusion

Gauri in *The Lowland* should not be seen as simply 'selfish' or 'neglectful'; rather, she is a complex character who expresses multiple forms of resistance. By viewing her through various feminist lenses such as liberal, postcolonial, existential, performative, intersectional, ecofeminism, and care ethics it becomes clear that her actions are influenced by trauma and social conditions, as well as the changing opportunities for movement. This perspective shows that feminist resistance in diasporic South Asian literature can include both strategic compliance and intentional rejection. Her life gives us a refutation of the small moral box that we often reserve for judging women for their choices included thoughts about autonomy. These are deeply situated and can be far from comforting. However, future research could explore how similar strategies of resistance appear in other literary works in that particular portray where women navigate intersecting pressures of gender, culture, and displacement.

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