

## **The Feminist Gynocriticism Voiced by Jhumpa Lahiri in "The Lowland"**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to assess and analyze "The Lowland's" feminist archetype. The research will focus on Gauri, the book's main character, and her choices concerning the conventional roles that women, especially Indian women, are expected to play. Reversing the feminine archetype, she leaves her family and home to look for work. Additionally, this essay will try to analyze motherhood myths hypocritically.

**Key Words:**Gynocriticism, Feminine psyche and Nurturing

The 2013 novel by Jhumpa Lahiri investigates various streams and concepts of female independence. This essay's primary objective is to analyze and examine the pages of this text to present arguments proving that the novel is a feminist text through the protagonist Gauri and to identify the grey areas that her character inhabits.

As described by Elaine Showalter, Gynocriticism is the study of how female authors portray women in literature from a feminine perspective. Gender is examined through the lens of its social and cultural implications from the gynocritical perspective. Gender, according to this school of thinking, is a social and cultural construct, whereas sex is a biological construct. Female writers have long been concerned about male-dominated discourse and the silencing of the female voice. Early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Simon de Beauvoir thought that one must fully shed feminine attributes to flourish in a man's world. Later, feminism took a less militant attitude, with Betty Friedman and Germaine Greer emphasizing the need for women to continue to fulfil their responsibilities to their families and careers. Women are encouraged to embrace their feminine sides while questioning socially assigned roles in modern feminism. As gender roles are reversed, the argument has become more intriguing.

Numerous Indian women authors have questioned the patriarchal roles imposed on women. Numerous authors, including Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Kamala Markandya, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, and Gita Hariharan, have addressed the dilemma of Indian women. At the threshold of modernity, she simultaneously yearns for independence and fears breaking free. Numerous female protagonists speak out against archaic practices and institutions. These authors provide a window into the feminine psyche and her struggle to assert herself with extraordinary depth and clarity. The majority of female authors write as a form of self-expression. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of these writers. She is an Indian American author whose short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* won the Pulitzer Prize and catapulted her onto the literary scene (2000). The acclaimed filmmaker Mira Nair adapted her second and first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), into a motion picture. Her second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was also well received. *The Low Land*, her second novel, was published in 2013 and was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

Gauri, the novel's female protagonist, falls in love with and marries Udayan Mitra. Udayan and his older brother Subhash are inseparable as children and are commonly called "mirror images." When Udayan meets Gauri, Subhash is pursuing higher education in America. Udayan is a member of the outlawed Naxalite movement, and the police execute him in full view of his parents and wife. This

catastrophic event leaves permanent scars on all of them, especially on the two women: the mother whose favourite son was taken from her and his young pregnant wife. Subhash, the older brother, returns to mourn his younger sibling's death. He decides to provide Gauri with the means to flee after observing the prejudice against her and the police and investigation agencies' continued questioning about her deceased husband's criminal associates.

Contrary to his parent's wishes, he marries and brings her to America. "To assume his brother's role, to raise his child, and to develop the same affection for Gauri as Udayan. To follow him in a manner that felt perverse and predestined. That felt both proper and improper " (115).

Gauri gives birth to a daughter named Bela, but she soon feels trapped by her marriage and parental responsibilities. She is still plagued by memories of her first husband, her daughter's real father, and "Gauri was still hoping for some news from Udayan. They might have been for him to acknowledge Bela and the family. To acknowledge that their lives had continued whether they knew him or not " (154).

Gauri has spent the past five years almost exclusively caring for her daughter Bela, so by the time she turns five, she will be eager to get out and have some time. Subhash, however, says no because he has moral objections to Gauri leaving his daughter in the care of strangers while she attends college. As a result, Gauri starts to feel resentment toward Subhash. She sees this as a violation of their marriage vows. "She realized that even though he had encouraged her to go to the library and attend lectures occasionally, he did not consider this her work. He told her she could keep her plans to study in the United States after marriage, but he insisted that Bela come first. The point she was making was that she is not your kid. To bring him back to reality " (162).

This resentment grows as Subhash is eventually compelled to make peace with Gauri and permit her to attend classes without restriction. Gauri comes to appreciate her time away from her daughter and husband. The daily repetition of the same monotonous tasks leaves her feeling "depleted." She resents Subhash's absence when he is at work due to an unrelenting surge of emotion. "She resented him for leaving for two or three days to participate in oceanography conferences or conduct sea research. Due to no fault of his own, she was occasionally unable to withstand his appearance." (163)

In her book *Towards a New Psychology of Women*, Jean Baker Miller acknowledges the stereotype of women as the primary caregivers and nurturers in society. She writes that women's "selves were almost totally determined by what the dominant culture believed it needed from women" (17). As a result, the so-called feminine virtues are cherished in women, and if women want to break free of this expectation, they are labelled as unsuccessful mothers and wives, just like Gauri. Therefore, Gauri still thinks she is an outsider in her own house. She shuts herself in her room, occupied with schoolwork, and withdraws into her world of attending university classes and studying in the library. She is keenly aware of her shortcomings as a wife and a mother, but she chooses to proceed down this road despite this awareness. Women have also "traditionally built a sense of self-worth on activities that they can manage to define as taking care of and giving to others," according to a study published in *Psychological Science*. (Miller,53). Therefore, Gauri experiences feelings of inadequacy because she cannot 'feel' like a mother should. In addition, even though she is thankful to Subhash for rescuing her from Tollygunge, she harbours resentment toward him because he is not Udayan. A perceptive reader will not miss that it is almost as if she has already seen so much in life that she can no longer believe in the institutions of marriage or motherhood.

When Subhash unexpectedly returns home early one day, he discovers that Bela's mother has abandoned her in the house, which is the final event that causes a rift in their marriage. Subhash decides to go a week without communicating with her as a punishment. "When he finally spoke up, he admitted that his mother had been correct all along. You do not deserve to be a parent. You did not make good use of the opportunity " (175). Despite this, Gauri and Subhash choose to cohabit to provide a stable environment for their child. She continues to pursue her education and recently

moved to Boston to enrol in a doctoral programme there. After his father's passing, Subhash takes his daughter Bela to pay his respects in Calcutta. Upon returning to the United States, they discovered that Gauri had long broken free. She has decided to become a professor at a university and has accepted the position. Only a letter written in Bengali is all that she leaves behind; she entrusts Bela to Subhash. It would appear that the father and daughter have been able to put the past behind them and move on with their lives, but there are still significant rifts between them. Bela's academic performance results suffer, and she is frequently observed going about the area by herself. The guidance counsellor at Subhash's school insists that he take Bela to a psychologist, even though he initially resists the idea. The abrupt departure of Gauri left an indelible mark on Bela, who was only twelve years old at the time.

Unlike Ashi in *The Namesake*, Gauri refuses to conform to the traditional Indian Bengali immigrant wife's role. She resists the claustrophobic standards imposed upon her. Although it is difficult to empathize with a mother who abandons her child and her husband, primarily when the husband provides her with a means of escape from a life as a widow and an unwanted daughter-in-law, it is possible to understand why she would make such a decision. Gauri can be viewed as a reformer who defies preconceived notions of what she should and must do. Cutting her hair and donning a sari are the first indications of her rebellion. "In one corner of the floor, her saris, petticoats, and blouses lay in ribbons and scraps of various sizes and shapes, as if an animal had torn the fabric with its teeth and claws. He discovered the drawers to be empty upon opening them. She had utterly ruined everything." (141). Gauri's apparent rebellion and selfishness can be attributed to covert conflict and pain. This results in an outward display of her seething emotions of pain and separation from her childhood, which amounts to abandonment in some ways. Then separation from her husband, his brutal killing, and negation by her in-laws that her second husband failed to assuage and graduated to a boiling point.

Gauri's constant companions are her books, and some of the first few conversations she has with Udayan are about books and philosophy. Breaking traditional norms, she elopes with Udayan and marries him. None of her family members is informed about the wedding. "She did not care what her aunts and uncles, her sisters, would think of what she was doing" (287).

Gauri spent most of her childhood with her maternal grandparents, away from her parents. Her sisters were much older than her, almost belonging to another generation, and she felt close only to her brother Manash, who was also sent to be raised by her grandparents. Furthermore, although she never resented her parents for sending her away and appreciated them for the autonomy they had inadvertently given to her, Gauri never received her mother's love and nurturance the way a child does. Therefore, abandoning her daughter for very different reasons is less surprising. It seems she did not know a mother's tender love and did not know how to reciprocate it either.

Throughout the novel, we see Gauri haunted by the memories of her first love and husband. When the police are rounding up Udayan, he manages to look at her face before he is shot. "He knew that he was no hero to her. He had lied to her and used her. Furthermore, now he was going to abandon her. Or was it she abandoning him? For she looked at him as she had never looked before. It was a look of disillusion—a revision of everything they had once shared" (page).

Thus, Gauri's final abandonment of her family comes as no surprise. She has seen abandonment both at her parents' hands and then at her husband's hands. Betrayed by the man she genuinely loved and betrayed into being a party to a policeman's murder, she loses faith in ties and the bonds of love. The study shows she does not find peace or self-fulfilment by negating her feminine self. She is a successful professional but ends up as a lonely individual.

## Conclusion

Gauri, in a nutshell, finds her true self in the United States. She evolves as she leaves her hometown and settles in the country, where she meets new people, expands her horizons, and retains some of her previously held beliefs. Gauri thinks the change was intentional and that there will be no need for compromise regarding her newfound identity. Though she aspires to be more American and less Indian, she sees herself primarily as an intellectual. Even though Gauri would like to be a part of Subhash and Bela's lives, especially as a mother and grandma, it is too late by the time several years have passed.

Moreover, Gauri realises that she is not as American as she thought she was, and even though she has been in Calcutta for days at the end of her novel, she does not embrace her Indian identity because this return is yet another disappointment that refers to the destructive part of the self rather than to the understanding of itself. She does not fully identify as either American or Indian. At the novel's conclusion, Gauri seems to reclaim some of the identities she had previously abandoned. It emphasises the concept of identity, which is fluid and ever-evolving (some identities lose their foundation, while others gain a new one). Gauri's quest for a new identity in *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri can be undertaken at any point. Gauri demonstrates that she does not struggle with finding her place in American or Indian cultures. She knows she will have to take charge of certain aspects of her life to be happy, but she is confident in her choices and does not feel remorse.

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