



Gauri Shukla and her Labyrinth

Gauri Shukla, a dynamic third-year literature student, often describes herself as a wandering cloud that romances with the sky, lost yet free. Diving into her debut book, “Lost in my Labyrinth ”, feels like falling into a deep sea with nothing but an anchor for your support. It is a book full of emotions and passion of the writer. Her writings stir up your heart and make you look for warmth yet it calms the ongoing chaos of the mind. I had the opportunity to interview her and know more about her as an individual as well as a budding writer.

Ekta Singh: When did you first realize you wanted to be a writer?

Gauri Shukla: First of all, I don't consider myself a writer, at least not yet. I've only just started and I have a long long way to go. People have such beautiful ways of weaving words and I envy so many people out there whose writing just submerges you in a different world. Writing has always been a sort of an escape which is the case with most of the people who tend to get into this writing business. I did not particularly want to be a writer, but when I read books, I tend to analyze the writing a lot and you know

every writer is so different and unique. You can tell the difference. That was very fascinating to me. I am the kind of person who doesn't let things out easily. I tend to keep them boxed which is why writing is immensely important because it tends to give me that release. I don't remember the exact moment when it all happened and I realized that I wanted to be a writer. All I know is that I like to write.

Ekta Singh: What made you publish this book? Is there a significance behind your book name, "*Lost in My Labyrinth*"?

GS: Honestly, this book was kind of a fluke. I was doing an internship and we had to work on an individual creative writing project. We had the freedom to choose whatever we wanted to write upon. Having worked upon multiple academic papers back to back, I needed to let out some air; write upon things that I saw while I took an evening stroll, or when I read a book and found some character overwhelmingly relatable. I took this opportunity to try something new. I decided to write in genres that I haven't tried before. So, my big brain energy led me to write a satire, a Japanese horror story, a poem and an essay. Then a week later I got a call from my mentor and she said that she really liked the pieces I had written and that she wanted to publish it. For the first time in my life, someone had liked my work and liked it enough to want to get it published. I felt elated. Now, since my work was being published, I realized that if I had to do it, I had to do it right. This led me to revisit and edit my pieces, even completely scrap two pieces. I was very confused, utterly confused because suddenly I didn't like what I had written. The more I read it, the more I didn't like it and by this time I was very exhausted because it was like all of my creative juices were dried up so I tried to come up with things but I couldn't. The pandemic had already played its part in adding to the exhaustion and the frustration. There is a certain pattern that the book follows. The first two pieces are reflections of my "exhausted" phase and the last two pieces reflect how in spite of all the weariness and the drainage, there's hope; hope that the world will be alright very soon; hope that our loved ones are going to be alright; hope that perhaps we'll succeed in making things normal again. I had written "Haunted" a while back and it's close to my heart. I wrote it when I was feeling very low emotionally. "I Am A Tumultuous Poet" might be my favorite poem. It's very simple and I wrote it when I did not want to write at all. I remember sitting on my bed with a hand on my head, looking like a grim statue. I was angry and didn't know what to write so I loudly huffed and decided to write about my writing slump only. I like that poem a lot because I wrote that poem in ten minutes and it was very raw. So yeah, The title "*Lost In My Labyrinth*", 'labyrinth' is one of my favorite words. I love the word labyrinth and I am somebody who is like trying to find a way out. I am a very confused person so it takes time for me to reach and arrive at decisions. *Lost In My Labyrinth* seemed to be an apt title for the book because like I said, trying to find a way out of this big maze that we are in right now, so many things you don't know which way is going to lead you towards your destination. So just roaming here and there getting exasperated trying to find your way out. This is my very first book and when somebody asks me to introduce myself I like to call myself a wandering cloud that romances with the sky. It's kind of like that, you don't know where you're going, just keep going and you'll find your way. Something of that sort and I like the title a lot.

Ekta Singh: What was one of the most surprising things you learned in creating your books?

GS: I am so blessed to have such an amazing bunch of people around me. I have called up people and cried, 'I don't want to do this, this is very exhausting. This is my first book' because after you write it and you publish it, you don't know the kind of response you will receive and I'm sure anyone who's ever

published their first book, it must have been nerve-racking. Moreover, the pieces in the book are very personal. What if nobody relates to them the way I did? There are all sorts of questions that plague your mind. The essay I have written in the end, it's more like a letter to the readers. All these things are very close to me and to put something out there where you know people are going to scrutinize it and people are going to form their own opinions about you, will judge your work, it makes you feel very overwhelmed. I don't like sharing my pieces with anybody because they are very personal. And just like I said, writing is a release for me and I like to keep it locked up. When I have written, I'm done, I've let it out and I will just keep that piece away. I don't want to go through the process again. So it's nerve-racking when people are reading it and reviewing it and I'm like okay this is happening! But, the most surprising thing was during and after the process, the amazing bunch of people I have. They've been so supportive. My seniors went through all the stuff before I published it and they helped me edit it. My illustrator, Aishwarya Jain, was the president of Redstockings before me and she's such an amazing person. It was so much fun to have her illustrate my work and she's such a beautiful artist. Also, one other thing that I realized was, I work well under pressure. I thought maybe because sometimes what happens is when I'm under pressure I tend to channel it in the wrong way. So I do get exhausted but I tend to work well under pressure. Also, people liked the short story the most. I was not happy with the short story and I kept on changing it until the very last day. That was literally the most surprising thing, to be honest.

Ekta Singh: This is your first published book. Have you heard much from your readers? What kinds of things do they say?

GS: I've received so many reviews and long messages on WhatsApp. People have told me that they were able to relate to a piece, to some lines, to some part. Somebody was able to relate more to the short story and they found it very raw. I tried to write on the LGBTQIA theme as well because this is something that is very close to my heart. People were very supportive and they were thrilled. They said that they were able to connect to what I wrote. My friends texted me saying that they're very proud of me and that they are overjoyed that I am their friend and that they wish to read more of my works. I was stunned. Students and people I did not know, texted me and told me that they bought my book and they are reading it. Overall, it was a very gratifying experience, nerve-racking but a very nice experience. Everybody was very supportive. Some of my juniors got books for me to sign. That was a different experience altogether. I'm so thankful to all the lovely people around me.

Ekta Singh: How do you develop your write-ups? What is the procedure?

GS: Whenever I write something, the first thing I need is to have an idea about what I am supposed to write. After I have a certain idea of what my piece is going to be about, for example a short story or the poem, I start working on it. Most of the pieces are very personal, for example this book is very personal to me. Everything that came out was very raw because I did not want to make it very technical. Usually, when I write, there is no process as such because like I said writing is sort of a release. But then I do try to write in a technical way as well because ultimately it's going to be read by people. You cannot write anything and serve it up. Like here, read it and try to fathom it on your own. You have to keep in mind who your target audience is. Whenever I write a piece, it's important for me that whatever I write shouldn't seem superficial. When I was working on the short story, "Charged Guilty" the setting was different. If you read it, you won't see a setting because I haven't mentioned a place or time. Before that, when I first began writing it. The setting was foreign. And when I read it, I realized that this is very

superficial because I have not experienced those feelings. And if I'm writing about something that I've not experienced, how do I make it seem real? How do I make the reader feel that the writer went through it or she's writing from experience because for a writer, they must use their imagination and write from the creative depths of their mind. That's something that you're supposed to be able to do as a storyteller. Even if you don't experience a certain thing, you are to make your readers feel them. That is how you create magic. You use your imagination to create that atmosphere to create that feeling but then sometimes what happens in that process is that the world you create tends to become a little superficial. How do you make it feel real to the readers? What I did was, I removed the settings because the foreign setting seemed alien to me, it did not give me a feeling as if it's something real. It was like I was suffering from this hangover by watching these dramas on Netflix and listening to English songs. Then I changed the format. Instead of writing a short story I wrote it in the form of a diary journal. That created all the difference. Now, I did not need to have a flow because it was a diary entry. It doesn't need that flow that was required for a short story. There didn't need to be a climax, there didn't have to be a dilemma, there didn't have to be different stages of the story. It was a diary entry and it was supposed to be read like that. Broken and fragmented parts are put together creating a coherent whole. People like the short story the most. I was not happy with it and I kept on changing it until the very last day. That was also the most surprising thing. I did not expect that at all and then I realized that maybe it's not about the setting, it's about how you connect with the reader. But, along with that skill also comes into play because not everybody can be a writer. I don't consider myself a writer. This was a fluke and writing is challenging. It's very hard. I cried while writing this book because I was so tired. I had to force myself towards the end of the deadline. It was a very tiring process but it was worth it in the end. Writing is hard. If somebody wants to become a writer and take it up as a profession, It's going to be difficult, it's a struggle. I want to be a writer so I sometimes think if I'm doing enough, if I'm reading enough or if I am writing enough. Because there are so many people in the world publishing books all the time. Every day you see people are getting their books published with these big publishing houses. It's like throwing the glass bottle with a letter inside in an ocean. You don't know if your bottle or your letter is going to reach the shore. What if it gets lost? What are you going to do then? In this situation, some people tell me that there will always be some people who will read your book. I am like, will that give me enough sustenance? How will I live if only 5 people are reading my book? Writing is tough. It takes a lot of things away from you but it also gives you a lot of things. It's hard to describe.

Ekta Singh: In your book *Lost in my Labyrinth*, I loved the piece “Charged Guilty” especially the line “no matter where I go, I’m going to carry the war inside me everywhere?”. This short story makes me go through different emotions. My question is was it inspired by a real-life incident in your life?

GS: Not exactly. I don't know what exactly inspired it. I changed the story so many times that I don't even remember where it started and where it ended. I changed it so many times. We all have read a lot of stories and works where the LGBTQIA theme has been tackled but I have seen very few female writers trying to tackle it. For example, if you have read “Call Me By Your Name” by Andre Aciman or if you watch movies or related series, mostly it's directed or written from a male perspective. I wanted the protagonists to be females and I wanted it to be from a female perspective. Especially in India, you see it even less. I have read a lot of books on this theme and literally, all of them have been written by male writers. And I'm talking about big books that made their name in the market. I'm sure some female writers have written on these themes, definitely, why not. But I'm talking about the books that got enough commercialization and made a big mark in the writing industry. When it comes to books like Shyam

Selvadurai's "Funny Boy" or "Giovanni's Room" by James Baldwin, you see it from a male perspective. I just wanted to write it where the protagonists were females. I think there was this feminine urge to create female protagonists who are bisexual.

Ekta Singh: Your letter to readers *One True Sentence* is a piece with which I felt most connected. The incidents, experience and all those cramming I did in school. The letter starts and ends with the truth of our actions, "*Everything that goes around, comes around*". My question to you is, why did you choose to write a letter? Can we say that the letter is a message for the readers, that they must not let go of things that make them feel alive just for the sake of gold chains?

GS: I wanted to write a letter because like you said, basically not just to send a message but to talk about things that I wouldn't talk about otherwise. I wanted to talk about school and talk about how that and then coming to college changed me. I wanted to show the process of transition that happened. Also, I always feel that whenever things have gone astray and I'm like it's messed up. Somehow in some twisted way, it comes back and it suddenly makes sense. In the letter titled "One True Sentence", I can talk about why I am the way I am right now. Things that did not make much sense when I was in school, suddenly became crystal clear in college. Religion, caste, gender, education, politics - all these things which I knew about but did not fully understand now became such important issues in my life. I wanted to talk about all these things because they are important and we've all been through it in some way or the other. People might have related to it.

Ekta Singh: The first piece of the book is a poem, "*Haunted*". The poem left me with a tight heart with fingers tingling for warmth. The title made me wonder if the poem had gothic elements in it but slowly I realized it was about haunting memories which indeed is scarier than anything else. Was there a certain motive behind naming the poem "Haunted"?

GS: "Haunted" is a very raw poem and I wrote it when I was feeling low. I think I am self-destructive in a way. I beat myself up a lot. Even if the other person is at fault I somehow find a way to blame it upon myself. We read books and fairytales and we have that image in our minds- of us being the princesses and living in our beautiful palaces and castles. The poem is written on those terms where I have my castle, who is the person I love and I am the princess living in that castle. But I'm also a ticking time bomb. If I stay in that castle or in other terms, if I stay with the person/people I love, when I explode it's not just me who is going to be shattered into pieces, it's also the people that I love who are going to get destroyed along with me. It's written more on those terms. It's titled "Haunted" because like you rightly said it talks about haunting memories. Those memories which keep on coming back time and again no matter how much you try to push them, they just break forth through those little crevices in your body, they just find a way to it somehow and they drown you. It just came out instantly. I did not have to work or edit it. It is very raw, it does not have a rhyming scheme or anything. It's written in free verse. My heart felt a little naked after I decided to publish it. But, I feel good now.

Ekta Singh: Your book is full of mesmerizing lines, words that take you to different places. What or who is your muse for your imagination?

GS: I like to write about things that I see and experience around me. I think of my surroundings, the world around me. I look at something and I'm like maybe I can write something about them. You see leaves fluttering and it's poetic, it's lyrical in a way. You may listen to a song that inspires you to write something. Books, people around you. Everybody's a walking story. I tend to take inspiration from all of it.

Ekta Singh: Have you ever faced writer's block? If yes. What brings you out of it?

GS: I faced writer's block while I was writing this book and I was trying to look for something which could get me out of it. One day, I was scrolling through social media and I found this one quote by Ernest Hemingway and it said, "Sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get going, I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, 'Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence right the truest sentence you know. '" That was it. It got me out of the writer's block because now I had to think of the truest sentence I knew. For me it is, 'What comes around goes around' and I began to think about it then. I am going to remember these lines all my life because whenever you write, you have to write the truest sentence you know. You cannot fake it. You can have different faces when you write, you can try to trick your readers. But even when you're trying to trick them, you have to be true to yourself.

Ekta Singh: Is there something you would like to say to your readers?

GS: I love them so much. I am so so grateful for the response that I've received and everybody who bought the book and read it; had the patience to read all of it and try to understand it. It requires a lot of patience to have to go through it and read it. They have sent a lot of love to me and I am very grateful for that. When the book came out and people were congratulating me, I cried. I cried because I was not expecting so many people to congratulate me. People I didn't know were texting me and telling me that they bought the book. The feeling was out of this world. It was ridiculous, it was really nice and I want to write more. I want to become a writer whose works people would want to read and who they can easily connect to. I want to become that person. Also, I'm a little bit selfish and a bit ambitious. I want my name edged in gold letters; become immortal even after death like our classical writers. But when they wrote, they didn't know they'd be selling a hundred million copies worldwide. They were writing because they wanted to and because they had to.

Ekta Singh

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