
**The 70s Bengal and Bengali Women: A Study of Gauri's Predicament in
Lahiri's *The Lowland***

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri has been a prominent name among the list of Indian diasporic authors. However, she moved to Rome and decided to write in the Italian language actively; her Bengali Indian origin has left an indelible mark on her upbringing, evident in her writings for the earlier part of her career as an author. Her delineation of Bengali characters, especially in diasporic situations, has claimed global popularity and accolades for the psychological rendition of the evolution of the Bengali diaspora. Lahiri penned the characters of her English fiction from her vivid memories of her visits to her homeland and the Bengali diaspora of her then society. The present paper intends to analyze the making and unmaking of the Bengali female character Gauri from her last English novel, *The Lowland* (2013), which is set in a crucial part in the backdrop of the Naxalite movement of Bengal. Lahiri's English works have been known for her diasporic experiences; however, the present study focuses on the predicament of a woman in a traditional Bengali society that is witnessing the most significant upheaval in the form of the Naxalite movement of the late 60s and early 70s of the twentieth century. It is interesting to understand the evolution and the struggle of Gauri, who appeared at the most tumultuous time of independent Bengal. Her position as an educated Bengali bride/widow in a traditional family is the central idea of this paper, which is dealt with at length to argue Gauri's choices and predicament.

Keywords: Bengali Woman, Naxalite Movement, tradition, desexualize

Introduction:

The story of Lahiri's second English novel, *The Lowland* (2013), is set in the second half of the twentieth century Calcutta and begins with the childhood of Subash and Udayan, two brothers quite similar in appearance but opposite in temperament. Subash, the elder one, pursues a PhD in America, while Udayan, the rebellious one, becomes active in the Naxalite movement of Bengal. Udayan marries Gauri, a philosophy student, which brings the female protagonist into the main line of the story. The analysis of Gauri's character in a traditional Bengali society is the focus of this paper, which has been delineated by the author with many unusual traits and choices, making the reader reconsider their approach and sympathy towards the lead

woman character. However, the portrayal of the mother-in-law also adds some significance to understanding Bengali women, as outlined by Lahiri.

Gauri, a philosophy student at Presidency College, was raised by her grandparents and her younger brother Manash, with whom she shares a deep bond. The flat where she grew up is in the city's center, providing her a view of the panoramic experiences through its balcony. Her location in the heart of the city makes her a reasonable observer. Gauri belongs to an upper-middle-class family with many siblings; due to her mother's illness, she and her brother Manash moved in with their maternal grandparents at a very young age. Her grandfather was a college Sanskrit professor who encouraged her to read books. She does not face any discrimination generally observed in middle-class families between a girl and boy child as both attend good English medium schools in the city.

Due to her ongoing education, she is not called back to their parent's house in the remote village, where her need for a good education could have been met. When she was alive, her grandparents were supportive and loving; she was not forced to do anything but was encouraged to do things of her own choice. She recalls the childhood incident of her slipping out of bed in the middle of the night and being found sleeping on the balcony in the morning, but her grandparents allowed her to do so; instead, they put a quilt for her on the balcony. She tells Udayan about her life on the balcony of the flat and how much she used to love spending her time amid the chaos, reading her books, and watching down the lane, so the balcony became an indispensable part of her life. Udayan also finds her intriguing and says, "So this is your bodhi tree, where you achieve enlightenment" (54). The incident also implicates Gauri's desire to go beyond the confinement of the four walls from a very young age. Finding peace in the chaos of the city also marks Gauri's unconventional attitude as Bengali women are trained to seek security within the four walls of the house, but Gauri enjoys the outside world; she stays outside and feels happy at the time when women are not even allowed to stand outside the house and come in the view of common mass. The role of supporting grandparents indicates the modern structure a new woman requires to flourish in contrast to traditional sociocultural institutions that continuously suppress women.

The women in Bengali society of the 60s or 70s were generally a product of the social expectations prepared by the family and the popular practices of the time. They were taught to be a perfect Bengali wife by learning the feminine qualities of cooking, sewing, cleaning, and, most importantly, looking beautiful and charming to impress a good alliance. Marriage in Bengali society is seen as the only salvation for a woman in her life, so the life of a Bengali woman revolves around marriage, but Gauri is very unlikely for the Bengali society of her time as she does not dedicate herself to the idea of becoming a perfect wife, during their conversation when Udayan discusses with her about the idea of marriage, she appears very firm about her plan which becomes more apparent from her response to the queries of Udayan,

Will you miss all this when you get married?...

I am not getting married.

Your relatives do not pressure you?

I am not their responsibility. They have their children to worry about.

What would you do instead?

I could teach philosophy at a college or a school. (58)

Gauri is portrayed in quite a different frame from the usual Bengali women of her age. She was aware of her lack of expected Bengali beauty standards, making her less sought after in the marriage market. Due to her childhood away from her parents and her nonappealing looks, she considers herself insignificant around people. However, the distinctiveness in her independent thoughts and her choices in life impresses the non-conformist Udayan, who otherwise would not have found a suitable match in the popular choices of Bengali society. She marries Udayan in the most non-desired way of a Bengali society, i.e., a registered marriage without the presence of any of the family members of either side. Marriage in a traditional society is always a fundamental family matter, and the parents or the male head of the family make the most critical decisions for the lives of the groom and the bride. Unlike the fact that a valid marriage is between two souls who love and understand each other, here in a traditional society, it is ultimately a social affair that only cares for social approval and family reputation. Society makes it the prerogative of the parents to choose the alliance for their son or daughter after considering all the pros and cons of the alliance in the present and future. Udayan's parents feel cheated by their son and are not letting them perform their duty. Now their expectations are limited to Subash, to whom in letters they ask, "We hope, when the time comes, you will trust us to settle your future, to choose your wife and to be present at your wedding. We hope you do not disregard our wishes, as your brother did" (63). As parents, they easily forgive Udayan for his audacity. However, they never accept Gauri as family, which is sensed by Subash on the other side of the globe as "Letters from his parents referred only obliquely to Gauri, and only as an example of what not to do" (63).

Their childhood of Gauri was spent under the care and support of her grandparents (now dead), which made her disconnected from the other members of her family: her parents, who died when she was too young; her sisters, who were married, and even her aunts and uncles and their children shared no close bond with her. The only person close to her was her brother Manash, who had revolutionary beliefs like his friend Udayan. Due to her lack of emotional involvement with the family's other relatives, Gauri was not emotionally available to get blackmailed for giving in to the family and social expectations. Her indifference towards social expectations makes her decision to marry Udayan smooth. However, once she enters the life of her beloved husband, she experiences the weight of family expectations of a perfect Bengali woman. Her in-laws half-heartedly welcome her to their house. They call her their daughter yet expect her to take up the role of a perfect Bengali daughter-in-law. Gauri recalls her early period of married life when she still wanted to continue her studies, "Her mother-in-law had told her, the first morning, to put away the book she had brought with her, and to concentrate on the task at hand" (290). As expected from the perfect Bengali bride, she does the chores as per her mother-in-law's instructions, who stands for the expectations of traditional and social institutions, so the process of her 'subjectivization' begins after marriage.

'Subjectivization' is defined by Jacques Ranciere as "the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to another" (60). After marriage, Gauri's identity is seen in her husband and in-laws, her desire to study becomes secondary, and her role as a wife and daughter-in-law becomes more significant for others. The absolute impact of this 'subjectivization' is blatantly visible once Gauri becomes a widow of Udayan; she completely loses her identity as an individual for others and remains the wife of a deceased person. Her life after the death of Udayan shows the predicament of a Bengali widow who has to wear only a white saree without any ornaments; she is forbidden to eat non-veg. In the house, she is now reduced to someone nonexistent; she has to keep being limited to her room and made to eat alone in the kitchen. Subash senses the coldness of his mother towards her as he asks his mother at dinner time,

Where is she? he asked.

Who Gauri. His mother ladled the dal onto his rice. She takes her meal in the kitchen; she said... (92)

His parents attempt to deny the presence of Gauri in the house; his mother, herself a woman, does not show any sympathy towards her in such a difficult time of her life. Even her pregnancy only brought the hope of claiming Udayan back for his parents without any acceptance or value of Gauri. As a mother, Bijoli accepts her son's rebellious choices. However, her daughter-in-law's choice to study and stay aloof, in her view, are non-feminine traits, making Gauri incompetent to be a perfect Bengali mother. Like any orthodox mother-in-law, Bijoli blames Gauri for the death of Udayan, "That perhaps he would be still alive if he had married another sort of girl" (127). Even his father's conduct shocks Subash, "His mother's coldness toward Gauri was insulting, but his father's passivity was just as cruel" (115). Bijoli does not like it when Subash talks to or shows kindness to Gauri; she even gets angry when he points out their wrong treatment of Gauri. Bijoli, who has been through her share of life struggles, becomes numb to Gauri's most distressing situation. In the past, she had always supported the family by putting extra effort into resolving the issues.

Along with her household duties, she takes the work of stitching and sewing to earn extra money to support her husband in providing their sons with excellent education and facilities. Her kindness for people in distress is evident from the fact that during the greatest famine of Bengal, she helps strangers even when she was pregnant with Subash, "she had gone to volunteer kitchen to serve bowls of gruel" or "saved the strained rice watershed" (187) for them. However, once she takes up the role of a traditional mother-in-law, she finds another woman's new authority with no agency as her way of venting out the long-suppressed frustration of her marginalized existence of Bengali women in the traditional societal setup. The daughter-in-law in a traditional family suffers from the multilayered dominance of the family, and Bijoli's relationship with Gauri begins with a challenge to her authority and her control over her son, which makes her insensitive towards the new bride, forever visualizing her as a rival, a threat, and mostly as an intruder. She becomes cruel toward Gauri after the sudden and violent death of her son.

Gauri's predicament in their Tollygunge house compels Subash to make the stern decision to save the future of Gauri and the unborn child before leaving for

America. He knows there is no escape for the Bengali widow in their traditional society. A widow is denied the right to have a secure and happy life in a traditional Bengali society. Society does not allow a widow to remarry or go by her independent thoughts and decisions. Even in the early years of the twenty-first century, widows from West Bengal suffered an awful predicament as the National Commission of Women (NCW) submitted a report to the Supreme Court about the conditions of widows' predicament in Vrindavan in which it asserts, "status of widows in Bengal is among the worst in the country and modern times. Poverty is another reason for the arrival of widowed women from West Bengal" (as qt in Times of India article *SC's 11 Year struggle to Give Dignity to the 'White Shadows of Vrindavan* by Dhananjay Mahapatra). The overt exploitation of widows in Bengali society and the behavior of his parents towards Gauri push Subhash to make the most challenging decision of his life as he foresees the future of Gauri and the child who would be left to live a life of misery under the cold and stern control of his mother and the indifferent approach of his father and mainly under the cruel norms of the society. Subash thought the only possible solution was to marry her, as marriage marks the change in a woman's destiny in Bengali society and takes her away from the oppressive demands of the traditional society. On the other hand, Gauri agrees to marry Subash to escape the life of a Bengali widow and the memories of Udayan.

Her decision to marry Subash brings wrath and contempt towards her, not just of her in-laws and her family but also of the organization with which Udayan was associated. Ironically, the organization took extreme actions to win equality and prosperity for the lower class. However, the sufferings of a widow are still invisible to them as if it is a prominent life befitted for the widows. The party gets disappointed with her as "they had cut their ties with her. They had deemed her second marriage unchaste" (127). Women in the Bengali Hindu society are judged on the society's set standards, categorizing them as chaste or unchaste; men are always above such judgments; when they commit any such act, they are accepted to be polygamous in nature, and even the mythologies and legendary stories support this view of the society. Though Gauri, with her essential nature of remaining indifferent towards social pressure and expectation, finds her act rebellious and pleasing to Udayan, and by this, she finds a way to win back her autonomy, which was lost due to her unquestioned agreeing to the life of oppression. She is thrilled by her decision,

It had been another flaunting of convention, something Udayan might have admired. When she'd eloped with Udayan, she had felt powerful and audacious. Agreeing to be Subash's wife and flee to America with him, a decision at once calculated and impulsive, felt even more extreme. (127)

At this point, it appears Gauri is running away from the traditional family, society, and their atrocities. However, it is a decision that breaks her ties to the place where she once felt connected only because of Udayan. Her acceptance of the traditional way of living as a bride and even as a widow in his family was for Udayan's sake. She accepts a life she believes she is not made for due to her love for Udayan, which she has not felt for anyone in her entire life; she goes beyond her basic temperament and attempts to become the meek and docile daughter-in-law of

everyone's expectation. This highlights that a woman's destiny, beliefs, and existence change after getting married in a traditional setup. Like Gauri, a woman in a traditional society must make a stark change in every aspect of her life to become a daughter-in-law in a traditional society. This emphasizes the vulnerable existence of women in traditional society who need to adapt according to traditional society's obsolete but dominant expectations. Gauri's college education and independent thoughts become utterly useless to her as she meekly complies with the family expectations and social norms; her sufferings do not affect anyone except Subash since all the oppression and atrocities are accepted norms of living for a Bengali woman in a traditional society. However, her decision later proves to be draining in the long run as she tries to break her connection with Udayan and his memories by being the wife of his elder brother, who ironically looks like Udayan in his appearance. This leads to alienation in her personality since she is so shattered by the painful experience of the period of Udayan's death that later, she becomes unable to connect back with anyone in her life, not even with her daughter Bela.

As Gauri moves to the US after marrying Subhash, she tries hard to forget her past. For her, the best way to forget Udayan was to lose herself as the Gauri of Calcutta and redesign herself in the new environment of the West. She begins by getting rid of her traditional attire and long hair, then by keeping herself absorbed in her studies, and when this seems not enough to leave her past behind, she takes a shocking step. She leaves her husband and even her only child, Bela, and moves to California. Motherhood is considered a blessing for a woman in a traditional Bengali society; it is seen as their power to recreate, to bring life on earth like the supreme power as Bijoli, mother of Subash and Udayan, understands the value of giving birth since she could not conceive for five years and had once considered herself unfortunate and wasted, she had longed for a child like nothing else. Whereas Gauri gets pregnant at a time when she is devastated and not prepared to welcome the child without Udayan, who is already dead, her emotional state does not let her connect with her child from the beginning; she feels unworthy of her child not being confident enough to take care of the tiny life in her arms. Her distancing from her daughter may appear cruel on the surface, but the ugly truth that she only knows keeps haunting her. She feels unworthy of being a mother like Udayan, who declares in the last days of his life that he will never have his children.

This came as a realization days before his death about the cruelty committed by them to the young son of the policeman in whose murder both Udayan and Gauri were indirectly involved. Before leaving for America, Gauri gets to know about the murder of the policeman, and the same guilt persists in her for a lifetime, as well as the similar realization that being a parent was not her right. Gradually, she becomes pretty aware of the abyss between Bela and her and her inability to connect back to her. She becomes ashamed of the choices she has made in her life and gets scared to face anything of her past, which can remind her of the shameful act, so her decision to desert her daughter becomes her way to escape her past and the guilt attached to it. She burdens herself with one more guilt after deserting her daughter, as she recalls her avoiding the Professor who helped her achieve her career, "She had not kept in

touch with him...she knew that Weiss, who had mentored her, who had believed in her, who had always asked after Bela, would have lost his respect for her" (234). However, her motherly affection towards her college students in California cancels out her insensitive image. As Lahiri focuses on her interaction with the college students, "She listened to them confess that they could not hand in a paper because of a personal crisis that was overwhelming their lives. If needed, she handed them a tissue from the box she kept in her drawer, telling them not to worry, to file for an incomplete, telling them she understood" (233). She even becomes guardian to some of her students and gets wedding invitations. Although she permanently restricts herself from getting emotionally involved with anyone, she misses her students once they leave college. Her broken personality hinders her growth as a mother, but she is not as cruel or selfish as she appears when making choices.

Her absence from the family dramatically impacts Bela, resulting in a complete disconnection of her from her traditional roots. Before Gauri had left, at least Bela had the notion of her culture through the food the family shared, the language her parents spoke, or the single visit to her grandparents' place, but after Gauri's departure, she terribly suffers the loss of family and with that the loss of all the knowledge of her cultural roots that one inherits from the family. The language is one important characteristic feature of the Bengali community, which Bela had some understanding of until she was twelve. However, afterward, this language became an alien language for her. Just an acquaintance of it remains in her as she recalls hearing some Bangladeshi workers talking who converse in Bengali with each other, "They speak in a language Bela's parents had used with one another. A language she had understood better than she had spoken in her childhood. A language she stopped hearing after her mother left" (256). Her broken family fails to keep the Bengali culture alive as Eliot observes in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, "But by far the most important channel of transmission of culture remains the family: and when family life fails to play its part, we must expect our culture to deteriorate" (43). This also implicates a woman's role in being the harbinger of tradition and culture in a family or a society since they have been the ones who maintain and inculcate them in the next generation. So, Bela's Bengali roots are also lost after her mother leaves, creating a significant gap in her family picture.

Conclusion:

Gauri, as a Bengali woman, has multiple sides. She grows up under the care of her grandparents, who let her explore her likes and dislikes, unlike other girls of the same traditional society. She was not raised with feminine expectations and did not exhibit the typical feminine qualities of impressing society with her charms. She was raised away from her parents and is part of a family of aunts, uncles, and cousins, which leads to a lack of over-emotional attachment to the family members. This quality helps her to keep herself rational and focused on her studies and understanding. However, once she falls in love with Udayan and marries him, she tries to change into a traditional woman completely. She accepts all the duties expected of a Bengali wife and daughter-in-law, pushing her studies backward. However, Udayan's painful death once again desexualizes her, and she becomes

detached from the people around her and takes decisions one after the other, which are considered unfeminine in a traditional Bengali society. Bijoli's attitude towards Gauri reveals the role of a senior Bengali woman in the subjugation of the younger ones, which proves the intricate functioning of the social machinery that makes not only men but also women hardwired in the participation of the subjugation of women in general.

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