

**Cultural Expectations and Gendered Roles: Identity Formations in
Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland***

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Abstract

Individual identities are not only a summation of one's unique choices and experiences, but are also influenced by the culture, society and politics of the place in which individuals feel a sense of belonging or of the place where, on the contrary, they experience a disruption of the self. For a diasporic subject, the experiences in the home country and the country to which they've relocated create a binary identitary self, one that develops in the space that opens between the familiar feelings of belonging and the newfound sense of alienation. Within that space the immigrant resides in a transnational and global context that does not fully incorporate either place. Gauri, the protagonist in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, attempts to forsake her Indianness, but her new experiences and her determination to do away with the cultural signifiers of her traditional Indian upbringing provoke a synthesis, one that integrates fragments of the new, envisioned identity with remnants of a past identity that is very much alive in her unconscious. By analysing these fragments and remnants, the paper identifies patriarchy, sexuality, sexism, racism and conflicting ideas of motherhood and family as factors being negotiated by the protagonist as she contrives frames of reference for her new identity.

Keywords: culture, diaspora, gender, identity, Indian women's literature, *The Lowland*

The term “diaspora” is derived from “diaspeirein”, meaning dispersion. “Diaspeirein” has been widely associated with the devastation experienced by communities forced from their place of origin. “Diaspora” has long been associated with the Jewish community, the term denoting the enduring anguish of Jews as originally articulated in the Hebrew Bible. Accordingly, the Jewish community’s longing for the lost homeland is intimately connected with the term. In the twentieth century, the term saw a gradual alteration to its meaning, now denoting the geographical shift of people or communities across various ethnicities and historical backgrounds. Circumscribing a wider terrain, the present connotation of “diaspora” supports a better understanding of these different migration contexts; it now generally denotes a subject that, for a variety of reasons, shifts geographically to another location. Migration may be forced due to political or ethnic violence; social disorder due to the aftereffects of decolonisation had led many individuals or groups to seek asylum as refugees for protection from socio-political or religious turmoil in the home country. Diaspora could also have a positive association with voluntary shifts such as the search for work, better living conditions and enhanced economic opportunities.

For South Asians, colonisation and subsequent decolonisation are significant drivers of their migrations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Evidently, migrations caused by the colonial experience subsume a myriad of diverse factors such as political, social, economic, racial and religious violence. In the case of Indians, they chose the United Kingdom as preferred country of migration during British settlement in India in the nineteenth century. However, after World War II migration patterns changed for South Asian countries as they became independent and new immigration restrictions were established in the United Kingdom. These restricted Asian and black migration to the United Kingdom in the 1960s (Ranasinha, 2016). As a result, these groups were forced to consider other countries for migration. Many scholars and working professionals from South Asia shifted their focus to the United States. US laws favoured incoming immigrants with skill sets that promoted the country’s development. As dependent wives often accompanied South Asian male immigrants, they all endeavoured to adapt to a new country, with its peculiar language and customs.

As a reflection of their experiences, the literature of the diaspora commonly deals with the trope of a lost homeland, either a symbolic loss or a literal one. As the experiences of alienation are visited from different vantage points, the feelings of dread, anxiety, sense of loss and suffering expressed by the authors might show different levels of intensity, but there is evident common ground in the area of identity negotiation. In Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988), protagonist Thamma wishes to return to her place of origin and dwells in constant remembrance of past memories. In *The Namesake* (2003), Jhumpa Lahiri plays up Ashima’s angst about the unshakeable sense of belonging to a culturally different nation. Her son Gogol struggles to form a new identity, as his psyche is permanently imprinted with the essence of his roots. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*, Gauri and Subhash are diasporic subjects who shift voluntarily, looking for better opportunities.

Characters like Gogol, Gauri and Subhash become a part of the global culture by negotiating within spatial and cultural flux. This negotiation leads them to the formation of a transnational identity. Transnationalism is informed by an individual or a group’s participation in the politics of two nations: the one to which one immigrates and the one from which one emigrates. The individual or group thus becomes the recipient of, and contributor to, both economies, participating in the culture of both societies through daily activities. In *The Lowland*, Gauri shifts to the United States in hopes of a fresh start, away from the political turmoil in her homeland that she now associates with pain and loss. While the shift is voluntary, the diasporic

subject has to deal with the trauma of the past while grappling with the adjustments required by the present. The protagonist Gauri leads a globalised existence as she dislocates from her Indianness to adapt to her new surroundings. Lahiri deals with diverse responses to migration in *The Lowland*. While Gauri's husband Udayan, for example, detests moving to a foreign land, his elder brother Subhash gladly leaves to study in the United States. But he maintains an Indian value system, periodically returning to India to stay connected with his roots.

Literature Review

Women diasporic writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni, and Meera Syal, amongst others, use transnationalism to provide a fresh take on the existing themes in diasporic literature. The post-1990 work of South Asian women writers breaks free from the subject matter, genres and target audiences of previous generations of diasporic authors that consisted predominantly of males. They remove the constrictions of patriarchy and shift the focus to their homelands when negotiating identities. Naidu (2018, p. 372) points out that in women's writing, the women "are not constructed by patriarchy but are self-constructed within and in opposition to cultural formations".

The inclusion of South Asian American women writers in the gamut of US American studies faces problems due to their multicultural backgrounds. Schlote (2006) notes that this inclusion carries the risk of side-lining their cultural and historical differences. She studies that which makes them unique, removing any dependence on their male counterparts by showing how they develop individual identities, free from traditional impediments. South Asian American women, thus, are products of a particularly cosmopolitan process, as they come to identify absolutely neither with their homelands nor with their place of immigration. Dealing with the change in topography allows the immigrants to discern political differences in both nations, the reversal of traditional gender roles, and the economic disparity between the home nation and the United States. They embrace the lifestyle and traditions of both places and refigure themselves to form a transnational identity.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri subverts the idea of a lost homeland through Gauri's character. As she adjusts to American culture, she consciously attempts to suppress her identity's Indian elements. *The Lowland* differs from other texts by South Asian American diasporic writers in the political awareness and its characters, which are configured as transnational individuals (Ranasinha, 2016). Studying the agency of the immigrant woman, Stoican (2018) concentrates on the gender construct in the transcultural context of *The Lowland*. Through feminine resistance, identity formation in the immigrant woman is enabled by nomadism to go beyond the fixed structures into which women are placed in society, promoting a transcultural identity (Stoican, 2018). Gauri's physical shift, as well as her emotional inability to adapt, leads to her resistance.

Across socio-cultural locations, the questions of race, gender, and politics impact the lived experience of women. Critics have studied how South Asian women's experiences in US society shape their identity. Their transformation from acquiescent recipients of gender normative roles to liberation from convention must pass through a stage where they are victims of their traditions before they are able to redefine their expectations.

This paper argues that the lived experiences of Lahiri's characters in *The Lowland* are based on actual historical and cultural reality. Protagonist Gauri embarks on a journey to find her identity, renegotiating cultural and gender impositions. An analysis of the facets of

motherhood, family, individuality, and sexuality shows how the experiential dimension of women develops identity across cultures. The paper seeks to investigate the process of identity formation through the socio-cultural lens.

Cultural and Political Negotiations of Family and Motherhood

Media and literary representations of brown families reflect the rules they abide by and are often based on stereotypes. It represents an exotic East with colourful cultural and religious traditions and clothing, strict moral codes, and an obsession with science-based careers. Focusing on the Indian diaspora, the retellings of the lived experience of women and their transnationalism can be explored based on traditional expectations, marriage relations and type of visa (Jain, 2006). Popular television series like *Never Have I Ever* or *The Mindy Project* portray Indian women in the United States, forming a global and transnational identity that either juggles between Americanness and Indianness or attempts to salvage and reconnect with its Indian roots.

There is a subsequent rearrangement of women's lives when on a quest for identity, separating the woman from their husbands on whom they depend for sustenance. This theme is recurrent in Jhumpa Lahiri's novels and short stories, showing a man's choice to shift for better economic opportunities and the woman's shift obligated by marriage. Marriage requires the diaspora woman to shift to a new cultural dimension (Jain, 2006). Jhumpa Lahiri's women characters subvert the traditionally accepted gender roles so that the woman can exercise her agency. The women in Lahiri's *The Lowland* are bound by their surroundings until they break down the oppressive regime within the domestic sphere, one issue at a time or with collective resistance.

The structure of a family and the expectations of traditional roles of motherhood that come with it are dependent on cultural signifiers. In *The Lowland*, women are confined to gendered roles as caregivers of the family. Women stay with their in-laws after marriage in Indian societies. Gauri, Lahiri's protagonist has to adhere to a similar situation. Her mother-in-law, Bijoli, disdains her presence from the beginning. Bijoli's character is a testament to the long-standing cultural trope of the mother-in-law's hatred towards her daughter-in-law, as seen exploited in Indian regional soaps. Bijoli is an overbearing patriarchal presence in Gauri's life. She chides Gauri for marrying her beloved son, Udayan, for his death and even for bearing his child. The harsh treatment Gauri faces when widowed is heightened by her youth and pregnancy. The culture to which she belongs imposes patriarchal strictures on her: "After the mourning period ended, her in-laws began to eat fish and meat again, but not Gauri. She was given white saris to wear in place of coloured ones to resemble the other widows in the family. Women three times her age" (Lahiri, 2014, p. 130). She is also made to eat alone in the kitchen. Bijoli dislikes Subhash's communication with Gauri and his sympathy toward her. While Gauri accepts Subhash's proposal as a means of escape, Bijoli expresses her hate for Gauri for doing so by blaming Gauri for the ruin of both her sons.

Gauri's revolutionary husband, Udayan, is another patriarchal figure. It is quite paradoxical as he is a part of a revolutionary movement that seeks equality for classes. Yet, his socio-political stance does not coincide with his personal conduct. In the private sphere of the house, he exhibits typical Indian male behaviour by expecting to be served his meals "and wait for Gauri or her mother-in-law to put a plate before him" (Lahiri, 2014, p. 151). Hence, Subhash's self-sufficiency is an eye-opener for Gauri. He imbibes the US American culture that habituates him to fend for himself. He could have behaved like his brother, retaining his Indian male expectations and wanting Gauri to play a domestic role. His awareness of the circumstances

under which he married her prevents this, though it does not pertain to all aspects of their marriage. Subhash frees her from domesticity but asserts his dominance by expressing his will to share the marital bed. He is portrayed as the one who is wronged, naturalising his expectations for sexual fulfilment from the woman with whom he shares a house. However, this is an imposition on Gauri's life and her individuality. She reluctantly succumbs to Subhash's expectations as it had "become more of an effort not to" (Lahiri, 2014, p. 193). Gauri is the typical diasporic prototype of the dependent wife. Her giving up her individuality is from the perspective that she has received a new chance at life because of Subhash and that her sustenance depends on him.

Subhash's expectations of Gauri's domesticity do not match reality, so he reiterates his mother's premonition that Gauri is not cut out for motherhood. While the narrative from Subhash reveals his expectations as something he can rightfully demand, despite the constant reminder of the circumstances of their marriage, Subhash recedes from the noble helping figure to another product of patriarchy. Disregarding her trauma, Gauri is expected to be an involved mother and submit to the role of family caregiver. Subhash opposes keeping a babysitter for Bela, assuming it to be Gauri's task as the mother. He is oblivious to Gauri's needs, even though he makes his own needs clear. When Gauri wants to meet with the German philosophy group weekly, she asserts its importance. When she wishes to take other classes at the university, even then, "Happy to spend time with Bela, Subhash let her go" (Lahiri, 2014, p. 196). The language usage of his having to "let her go" marks his authority over her freedom. Gauri finds herself to have shifted from one patriarchal situation to another.

Udayan's view on Gauri is similar to Ranasinha's (2016, p. 227) analysis of Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* in that the protagonist "is a sexual subject via meanings he inscribes on her body. His sense of nationhood, migrant identity, and masculinity converges around her gendered body". While Udayan and Gauri marry for love, he shapes her into one who resonates with his views and limits her education in her choice of discipline. He uses her to gain information vital to his movement, committing a crime without her knowledge of being involved. Her whole being is engulfed by his beliefs and desire to gain his approval and appreciation, and naturally, his death traumatises her existence. Every decision she makes is to escape from memories of Udayan. She goes to the United States, devotes herself to her education and leaves their daughter. Yet Udayan's untimely death haunts her with the knowledge that he has left her alone while she had planned to spend her life with him. "Politics enters in subtle ways, problematising the boundaries between macro-events and micro-experience and the categories of the personal and the political" (Ranasinha, 2016, p. 192).

When considering the lack of maternal instincts in Gauri, readers look at her from Subhash's point of view and vilify her absence of "maternal instincts". However, she must be read as a character stuck in a historical moment to understand her deviation from traditionally accepted norms of motherhood: Gauri's deviation is her way of resisting cultural expectations. Her daughter Bela is a reminder of the past that Gauri seeks to escape, of Udayan's death and how she was denied the possibility of a happy life. When pregnant, Gauri "felt as if she contained a ghost, as Udayan was" (Lahiri, 2014, p. 149). Even a simple act of caregiving like running her fingers through Bela's hair to unknot it reminds her of her affection towards Udayan. Stoican (2018) remarks that: "Gauri's abandonment of her mother role may express her attempt to resolve her trauma by ceaseless withdrawal. The character appears as an embodiment of individualistic values, as she chooses to focus on her own struggle and overlook the pain of her family members" (p. 168).

Gauri herself was raised by relatives. As a young child, she was aware of her mother's love and did not resent her parents "for not raising her" (Lahiri, 2014, p. 68). Gauri gives Bela an upbringing like hers, and Bela learns to embrace her mother's detachment. However, the difference is that Gauri was separated from her parents because of a car accident while she willingly left her daughter with Subhash. Perhaps because of her experience, she feels that going is the right thing, especially when she has ensured that Bela will be with a caring guardian. She does not inquire about Bela or Subhash, as it is too painful for her to be associated with her past. Ranasinha (2016, p. 219) suggests that Gauri's inability to have a relationship with her daughter is due to the lingering effect of the "political violence she has witnessed". She chooses academics over motherhood, making Bijoli's premonition come true.

The Lowland redefines motherhood and familial roles by subverting Indian traditional expectations. It transcends borders to provide a global view of these issues, helping to form the transnational identity of the South Asian diaspora subjects. While the "taboo of an unloving mother" (Ranasinha, 2016, p. 220) is explored, Subhash's role in Bela's upbringing is a fresh take on traditional norms of motherhood. It is crucial to note that care in parenting does not have a gender, unlike what society dictates. This is why one glorifies what Subhash does as selfless and vilifies Gauri, even though society has always normalised the opposite. The woman can reject motherhood as her choice, as seen in Gauri. She is denied the life she chose with Udayan. She decides not to be stuck in a pretend marriage with Subhash. Her leaving behind Bela is not only to focus on herself. She recognises the closeness that Subhash and Bela share and that Subhash would be a better parent to Bela than she ever could. Through Subhash's narrative, Lahiri shows how the woman is socially expected to put family first. Through Gauri's actions, she breaks the cultural expectations of applying the same culturally mandated roles to women irrespective of their situation.

Individuality and Sexual Liberation

Lahiri cleverly seems to situate Subhash's character within the sphere of what could be called the Indian cultural psyche. At the same time, the author indirectly critiques his perspective, without making it too evident, when Gauri's actions are understood from her perspective. Her participation and subsequent rejection of traditional roles lead her toward liberation. She discards societal expectations and replaces them with elements of her individuality. Transnational characters like Gauri are witnesses and victims of oppression at multiple levels. They learn from their experiences to break free from the shackles of racism and sexism and exist as independent beings, free from historical, social, and cultural impediments on their lives. This leads to them to a critical reshaping of their identities in order to become empowered.

When a diaspora subject shifts from their country of origin to the migration country, their identity undergoes a flux. The person is habituated to the culture and tradition of their home country, and in learning new customs of the migration country, they try to strike a balance between the two. Gauri is a similar subject in diaspora literature. She finds it challenging to retain her Indianness in the American setting but does not mix the two. Rejecting aspects of her Indianness, Gauri cuts off the long hair she used to braid and instead sports a short-haired look. She is aware of the gaze of Americans on her South Asian self, so she discards wearing saris and substitutes them with American clothing like slacks. The transnationalism of the diaspora subject in negotiating identity leads to this cosmopolitanism.

Towards the end of *The Lowland*, Gauri returns to her roots to reconcile with the past. She remains attired in the clothing of the new land with which she now identifies. Her visit to Calcutta is for the last glimpse of everything that encompassed her life; in doing so, she attempts to be free of all that haunts her life and find closure. After visiting all the places of importance to her, she contemplates suicide. In those moments, she realises the futility of the act as death cannot unite her with Udayan. Her identity is not based on locations but on the various instances she has spent with or without Udayan. When she attempts to renew her identity, she forsakes those things that remind her of Udayan and works on developing a mindset that is free of him. Her rejection of Udayan to subside the pain that his death caused her leads to her rejection of her Indianness. Thus, when she is “unable to find him, she felt a new solidarity with him. The bond of not existing” (Lahiri, 2014, p. 393). The realisation that she cannot reunite with him finally frees her from being stuck in a period from her past.

Another instance where Gauri regains her identity is studying the subject she had given up when she met Udayan. She had wanted to study master’s in philosophy when she met him. Udayan was critical of the subject, and Gauri gave it up by aligning her studies around subjects he was passionate about. She does not realise how she had given up her individuality in the process by colouring her existence through his beliefs and needs. She found herself “thinking about the things that mattered to him” (Lahiri, 2014, p. 71). She never questioned Udayan’s motives. He told her that the officer needed to be taken out of the way, but it did not occur to Gauri that this meant murder. Her faith in and love for him blinds her to the possibility. This is why she feels betrayed when she finds this to be the reason for Udayan’s arrest. She is filled with a guilt at having been an accessory to murder that she carries for the rest of her life. Attending Philosophy classes at the university is a significant step toward regaining her individuality. She sheds a part of Udayan’s expectations away by completing her education. Gauri asserts her need to attend classes, and, as Stoican (2018) notes, it indirectly reminds Subhash of his promise before their marriage that coming to the United States would mean restarting her life. Stoican (2018) further writes, “Gauri’s dedication to an academic career may illustrate her need to block the pain and guilt of her Indian youth. Equipped with the awareness that she cannot be a proper mother, Gauri redirects her efforts to the world of research” (p. 168).

The patriarchal grip on women’s lives gives Gauri no say in her reproductive choices. Udayan decides “they’d bring children into the world” (Lahiri, 2014, p. 131) after the revolution is successful. His inability to keep track of time when he is hiding gets her pregnant. Gauri’s say in the matter is insignificant as she attunes herself to his needs. Even Subhash expects to share the marital bed with Gauri and have a child because they are married, forgetting the circumstances that led to their marriage. Gauri is with him only to suppress his rising expectations. When Gauri directs her husband on what she wants sexually, it reclaims control over her life. Though dissatisfied, she is a step closer to prioritising her needs, communicated through the non-verbal mode of gestures. The taboo regarding female sexuality is overcome through the expression of her sexual desires. Gauri’s fantasy about the man she saw expels her pent-up sexual energies through masturbation. It sexually frees her from the unsatisfied and unfulfilled sexual lives that she leads. Gauri’s sexual liberation also enables her to explore her sexuality in a same-sex relationship. Lahiri does not elucidate the implications of this relationship on Gauri’s psyche. However, one can find in this instance Lahiri’s subtle stepping towards forsaking heterosexual normativity in culture and literature.

Community plays an important role when analysing the development of women’s identity across various socio-cultural backgrounds. The diaspora subject finds adjusting to the new

location easier when they are part of a community of people from their home country. About being a part of such a community, Jain (2006) writes that “Coping with excitement of new experiences and both joys and traumas of new situations involves most women into constantly working on their capabilities of creating and then sustaining new relationship” (p. 2312). Gauri, however, rejects the Indian community in her neighbourhood by telling Subhash that she has “nothing in common with them” (Lahiri, 2014, p. 168). It sets her apart as a character who develops her identity in unknown surroundings by forsaking any bonds with her original culture. She does not correspond with her family in India, except for the occasional mail to her brother Manash. The only people from her homeland she takes some responsibility for are the Indian students the University who ask her to help fit in. She finds it easier to host them as she does not need to form emotional bonds. They belong to a new generation and do not share her trepidations about coming to the United States. These are important markers for her dissociation from Indianness. Gauri creates a cosmopolitan South Asian American identity for herself. The only Indian elements in her identity are her name and skin colour.

Individuality in a person develops hand in hand with emotional, sexual, and economic liberation. Gauri leads her life by making decisions to suppress the social traumas of her personal life. Still, she eventually learns the importance of her existence beyond socio-cultural and historical impediments. A broader look at Gauri’s journey helps us find traces the developmental processes of diasporic women across the world. To locate the self in a new space or reshape it in the same context requires strength and determination. To read Gauri without understanding the guilt and trauma she’s carried with her throughout her life would lead to blaming her for prioritising her career over her daughter. Gauri seeks to find herself despite what she goes through, and in this endeavour, she emerges as a self-sufficient individual. She is no longer the dependent wife of the Indian man who has shifted to America but is a financially independent cosmopolitan Indian American woman.

Conclusion

As much as identity development is dependent on conscious choices taken by an individual, it is also influenced by culture through traditions and racial and sexual oppression. A closer look at the lived experiences of Gauri from Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* shows how her identity is a summation of the same. The paper has delved into various aspects of Gauri’s life to show how her social, historical, and racial backgrounds are sources of personal development and transformation.

Women are considered the primary caregivers of the family. Without regard to the situation in which marriage occurs or the potential destructive nature of it, it is expected that women will adapt to domesticity and accept being bound by patriarchal coercions. Gauri conforms to the expectations of being a daughter-in-law, wife and mother as society dictates. Her mother-in-law treats her in a long-standing, continuous tradition of mistreating her daughters-in-law. Bijoli might have undergone similar experiences in her youth but falls back to cultural stereotypes as she converts from the role of a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law. Moreover, as the novel progresses, Udayan’s death profoundly impacts his mother. Bijoli detaches herself from the world, visiting the spot where she pays tribute to her son and losing herself to the trauma of the past, just as Gauri has. Even then, she does not have sympathy for Gauri’s predicament.

Ranasinha (2016, p. 20) notes that “Authors like Lahiri highlight ethnocentric white feminism’s blindness to white, patriarchal structures by delineating the gendered constraints that affect

white as well as subcontinental women” Women’s oppression due to their culture informs how patriarchy is embedded in the family structure. Whether it is the figure of the mother-in-law or the unassuming husband who thinks he is the saviour, the wife/mother of the family will be subjected to their rules and expectations.

Gauri silently tolerates the burden of patriarchy until she can break free. With acts of resistance, assertion, or inspiration from the community, she finds a way to construct her identity. This quest for identity is not only personal: it is also racial and political. Gauri has to deal with the trauma of a critical political event in her homeland. It shapes who she becomes, as most of her decisions revolve around it. She is unable to adjust to domestic confinement and rejects motherhood, devoting herself to her academic career. The visit to Calcutta and her ultimate reconciliation with the past set her free. The negotiation with the past and the lessons of the present, influenced by culture and history, shape the self.

The aspects of family, motherhood, sexuality and individuality in Gauri’s life are investigated to determine the contribution of each to her identity. A separate evaluation shows how historical and cultural circumstances inform these elements. The characters’ negotiation within each of these contexts establishes the gendered identity of Lahiri’s women. While creating their identity, the women attain individuality, one where sexual liberation plays a significant part. In future, Gauri’s same-sex relationship and the formation of queer identities can be further explored within historical and cultural contexts.

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