

Renegotiating Diasporic Identity: A Transnational Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract: Gauri Mitra is an American immigrant from India as well as a brilliant professor of Philosophy in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* (2013). She embodies the concept of an unconventional femininity. Gauri's character defies the usual characteristics of Indian women in general of her time, a time that goes back to the 1960s-70s. Gauri reverses the role of a wife and a mother by embracing the role of an individual devoted to academic pursuits and personal achievements. As a further reversal of her gender role she engages in lesbianism at a certain stage of her life. Her character contains possibilities that can be analyzed to reveal a new woman having the prospect of becoming an example of transnational feminism. This article analyzes Gauri's character based on the idea of transnational feminism as established by Inderpal Grewal in the book *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. However, other ideas such as neo-cosmopolitanism and queer sexuality, ideas which are associated with transnational feminism are also explored in the article in order to understand the multiplicity of identity that the female protagonist of *The Lowland* possesses.

Keywords: Immigrant, transnational feminism, cosmopolitanism, multiplicity of identity

Gauri Mitra is an Indian immigrant to America portrayed as a brilliant professor of Philosophy in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* (2013). She embodies the concept of an unconventional femininity. Gauri's character goes against the usual traits of Indian women of her time, that is to say, of the 1960s-70s. Gauri reverses the role of a wife and a mother by embracing the role of an individual devoted to academic pursuits and personal achievements. In a further reversal of gender role, she embraces lesbianism at a certain stage of her life. In this article Gauri's character is studied in terms of three phases. The first section analyzes her character from a postcolonial feminist perspective. The second section focuses on her shifting roles using postmodern feminist lens. Finally, the diasporic turn of her character is studied. However, all these three perspectives stem from the ideas of transnational feminism, new-cosmopolitanism, and queer sexuality.

Inderpal Grewal introduces the idea of transnational feminism by implying that this brand of feminism creates a connection between the gendered subject and her historical past. In the book *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* Grewal observes how in the United States gendered subjects are produced in relation to race, class, caste, and other social formations. She emphasizes the point that choice plays a significant role in shaping "a central ethical framework for feminist as well as neoliberal consumer practices and the imbrications of feminism with consumer culture" (Grewal 3). Grewal also notes that the gendered bodies are differentiated from each other according to their geographical location within which race, class, religion, and nationality are considered meaningful in shaping identity. The author wonders what possibilities feminism might have within the "neoliberalism" of the US and what kind of

“cosmopolitan knowledge” would be produced in the “neoliberal conditions” since the feminists working in this condition have to assume changing and contingent subject positions in order to avoid being “incapacitated by this neoliberalism” (Grewal 3-4). Thus, observes Grewal, feminists within America create many kinds of agency and diverse subjects by embracing changing and contingent subject positions. However, ironically, notes Grewal, that the freedom of choosing one’s agency is not innocent of older imperial histories. The newer disciplinary formations in many countries of the world are also derived from their imperial past. Therefore, American neoliberalism paradoxically offers both freedom and restriction to transnational feminists.

In his enlightening essay “Breaking the Boundary: Reading Lahiri’s *The Lowland* as a Neo cosmopolitan Fiction” Binod Paudyal argues that it is plausible to study the South Asian diaspora in the United States by reappraising it in the light of that which is “responsive to an age of migration, mobility, and transnational connections” (15). In his bid to study *The Lowland* as neo-cosmopolitan fiction Paudyal resorts to Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma’s formulation of the term “neo-cosmopolitanism” in their anthology, *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US*.

Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma distinguish between traditional diasporas and the new cosmopolitanism by stating that the latter “results from the confluence of globalization (race, migration, media, money, and culture)...” (2). The critics opine that new cosmopolitan subjects are not confined to a particular nation-state or class. Such subjects “instead [occupy] a range of fluid subject positions, which can be trans-class, trans-local with competing value systems” (ibid). While the character of Gauri tends to fit easily in the category of new cosmopolitanism, the first section of this article attempts to find out her occasional reversion to the past that she otherwise tries to avert habitually. In order to do so, it is imperative to discuss briefly how postcolonial feminism can be related to concepts such as transnational feminism and neo-cosmopolitanism.

Modern postcolonial studies focus on transnational aspects of globalization to find out how earlier postcolonial thoughts have transformed into transnationalism. In the introduction to her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* Ania Loomba comments that postcolonialism now faces new challenges raised by globalization, the increased threats on environment and recent symptoms of global economic crises. The author illustrates her point by noting that globalization does not heavily depend on the center”margin discourse of postcolonial studies; rather its locus is the porosity of geographical borders and transnational networks. While these themes were familiar to the postcolonial critics in the past, they have been thinking in a different form lately. However, holds Loomba, any study on globalization has to “incorporate some of the key insights of postcolonial studies, especially its historical awareness of past forms of empire and the structural connections between colonialism and neo-colonialism” (16). In fact, postcolonial discourse is now being interspersed with transnational issues such as the “inequities” that exist among global “economy, politics, and culture” (ibid). Loomba’s arguments that postcolonialism is now intermingled with transnational issues can also be found in Arif Dirlik’s essay “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism”. Dirlik opines that the differences between the First and Third Worlds are now intermingled, and so the binary oppositions between the First and Third Worlds should now be reconsidered. Dirlik observes that the postcolonial subject also now has a kind of “hybridness” or “in-betweenness” “that is not to be contained within fixed categories or binary oppositions” (336).

Both Loomba and Dirlik argue that in today's world both the term 'postcolonialism' and 'postcolonial subjectivity' have become transnational and fluid. As a postcolonial subject, Gauri's character can be analyzed in the light of postcolonial feminism linked with transnational feminist issues. In the following section Gauri's identity formation is traced within the framework of postcolonial feminist theory.

Gauri Mitra is one of the major characters of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. She travels from India to the United States with her brother-in-law turned second husband. She was first married to Udayan, the younger of two brothers and a Naxalite. After he was killed by the police the elder brother Subhash marries the pregnant Gauri and takes her to Rhode Island. When in Calcutta, in her unmarried days, Gauri had been living an independent life. Separated from her parents at an early age, she and her brother Manash had lived in their grandfather's house in Calcutta while their parents lived in a rural area. When she was sixteen, her parents had died in a car accident. Lahiri makes Gauri into a person who did not have a strong bonding with anyone until she fell in love with Udayan. When this bonding is severed after Udayan's death, Gauri fails to connect with anyone else afterwards, including with her daughter Bela. Therefore, it is noteworthy that from the beginning Lahiri depicts Gauri as an emotionally aloof and withdrawn person.

Although Gauri renounces her traditional role as a wife and a mother by leaving behind her husband and daughter to pursue the role of an independent academic, there are moments when she attempts to reconnect with her past and feels the urge to recuperate the ties she has willingly torn. She avoids getting into contact with her mentor Professor Otto Weiss thinking that he would lose his respect for her if he came to know of her decision of preferring to work rather than raise her child. She always carries during flights the embroidered turquoise shawl that her husband Subhash gave her before their marriage. She has impractically chosen to remain a citizen of her birthplace though she knows that "for the sake of simplifying the end of her life, she would need to become an American" (Lahiri 235). Gauri feels that her job and her individual lifestyle, as well as her need to become an American, are all "a betrayal of everything he [Udayan] had believed in" (Lahiri 234). She feels connected to her past in some external ways because she realizes that

...she remained, in spite of her Western clothes, her Western academic interests, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and, against the backdrop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by two brothers she had wed. (Lahiri 236)

Gauri also experiences some racial slights from people who continue to ask her where she had come from. Once a driver sent from the university to pick her up for giving a talk misunderstood her for the person paid to open another person's door. Aspects of her appearance like her complexion as well as her accent connect her to her past but unmistakably internally too; she is irremediably connected to the past from which she has cut herself off deliberately. For example, when on the roof of a hotel she meets an elderly Indian couple taking care of a little boy, suddenly she wants "to align herself with this couple" and tells them that she is waiting to be a grandmother (Lahiri 285). Her coming to Rhode Island to hand over the divorce papers to Subhash is another attempt to reweave the snapped tie between her and Bela. "Ultimately, she had come seeking Bela. She'd come to ask about Bela's life, to ask Subhash if she might contact her now" (Lahiri 306). It is interesting to note that after being renounced by Bela, Gauri chooses to go to Calcutta and attempts suicide at a local hotel, though she restrains herself at the last moment from doing so.

Since this article interprets postcolonialism as a diasporic person's nostalgia and bonding to her past, it is possible to say in this context that Gauri, an apparently assimilated diasporic woman, retains some ties to her past. Her identity cannot be fully explained without a study of this connection that she consciously or unconsciously maintains with her past. Since Gauri is a "translated" person in the sense that her acculturation in the host country is something she has opted for, her identity can be best explained as an example of a version of "postcolonial cosmopolitanisms" as defined by Inderpal Grewal. Postcolonial cosmopolitanism makes a subject transnational in the sense that she, instead of feeling obligated to a single nation, feels connected to the whole universe. However, she cannot fully ignore her ties with her own nation and culture.

In her book Grewal defines three types of identities diasporic people may possess in the age of "transnational connectivities" (36). By transnational connectivities Grewal indicates the flows of goods, capital, labour, and knowledges that reveal "continuities and discontinuities with older colonial formations" (ibid). Grewal defines three distinct, yet overlapping categories of identity formation in the following words:

The first was the discourse of the universal or global subject; the second, that of the national or local subject as separate and distinct and different; and the third, the hyphenated, hybrid subject straddling the first two formations. (36)

Gauri's identity represents the third category mentioned in Grewal's categorization. She notes that people of this category possess an identity that is sometimes resistant to the nation-state and sometimes assimilable to it. She is conscious of the fact that her living and working in the capitalist United States go against Udayan's ideals for which he sacrificed his life. Perhaps her retaining Indian nationality is one way of redeeming herself. However, she is assimilated to the host culture in a number of ways.

Gauri's utilization of the internet to search about Bela and the Naxalbari movement is an example of "transnational connectivities" that enable people like her to hold multiple nationalisms and identities "as well as to shift from one to the other" (Grewal 37). Grewal maintains that these connectivities make it possible for diasporic subjects to assimilate race, gender, class, caste, and nationalisms "to create some divergent versions of postcolonial cosmopolitanisms" (ibid).

In *The Lowland* Gauri Mitra preserves multiple subject positions from the very beginning of her appearance in the narrative. She is born outside Calcutta, but lives there with her extended family. Therefore, she is both an insider and outsider in her grandparents' house. From a devoted student of Philosophy at Presidency she becomes the dotting wife of Udayan and a docile daughter-in-law in the Mitra house. After being widowed she marries for the second time to become the wife of her brother-in-law Subhash. Giving birth to Bela makes her a mother but she soon rejects this role by again devoting herself to study. Ultimately her study empowers her to live on her own, disowning the roles of a wife and a mother. The roles of capable professional and brilliant academic that she becomes mark yet another transformation for Gauri. Lesbianism opens up a new dimension of her identity, while coming back to Bela reveals another surprising turn in her development. All these multiple, often contradictory roles that she plays are construed within the theoretical framework of postmodern feminism in the next portion of this article.

One of the major characters in *The Lowland*, Gauri Mitra displays a number of identity traits that conform to some features of postmodern female identity formation as upheld by some theorists. Among them Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan explore the issues of postmodern feminism and globalization in their book *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity*

and *Transnational Feminist Practices*. By the phrase “scattered hegemonies” Grewal describes subjects that are produced as a result of mobile capital, transnational culture, and multiple subjectivities that replace the notion of a unitary subject. Her book makes us realize that postmodern subjects are not separable from the questions of race, transnational culture, and global economy. These aspects form the agency of postmodern subjectivity in a transnational world that is conducive to a fragmented or scattered state of being for its postmodern subjects.

The argument presented by Grewal and Kaplan can also be found in other critics. Among them Gayatri Gopinath is relevant in the context of the present discussion. In the essay “Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexuality in Motion” Gopinath suggests how an important body of feminist criticisms engages itself with the compliance of nationalist discourse with gender hierarchies. These feminist critics reveal how women are enshrined as both “the symbolic center and boundary marker of the nation” in the nationalistic discourse of different cultures (Gopinath 262). Gopinath observes that whereas many critical works have been formulated on the analysis of women’s emblematic performance as homemakers of a nation, “much less attention has been paid to the production and deployment of non-heteronormative, or “queer,” sexuality within colonial, anti-colonial nationalist, and contemporary nationalist discourses” (263). Gopinath holds that heterosexuality of the female subject is presumed as normative in discourses of nationalism and women’s sexuality. Therefore, within the familial and domestic space of the nation as imagined community, “non-heteronormative sexuality is either criminalized, or disavowed and elided:” (ibid).

The pivotal character of Gauri Mitra in *The Lowland* reverses a number of traditional gender roles from the beginning of her appearance in the narrative that culminates in her sexual overtures with Lorna, a researcher under her supervision. Gauri’s switching of gender roles after coming to Rhode Island as Subhash’s wife began with her withdrawing herself to the bedroom when Subhash was preparing their meals. It continued even after the birth of her daughter Bela, whom she often left home alone for taking walks. Gauri’s refusal to conform to the role of a wife and mother climaxes with her leaving the house to take up a teaching job at California during one of Bela and Subhas’s trip to India. In such actions Gauri reveals tracts of a postmodern feminist subject located in a transnational space. About her position as a diasporic queer South Asian, Gopinath notes that such a subject “occupies a place of impossibility, in that not only is she excluded from these various “home” spaces but, quite literally, she simply cannot be imagined” (265).

Gopinath’s words resound those of the postmodern feminist critics Judith Butler and Adrienne Rich, when these critics discuss the question of lesbianism in two of their seminal works. Butler in *Gender Trouble* notes that transsexual subjects appear to be invisible in certain cultures since political and cultural laws in those societies establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. Butler notes that “[i]ndeed, precisely because certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain” (24). In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” Rich also talks about the nonexistence of queer females by observing that lesbians have always been denied of a political existence in history. They have been considered “as female versions of male homosexuality” (Rich 28). Thus female reality is erased by the inclusion of lesbianism in male homosexuality. All the critics agree on the proposition that lesbianism has always been excluded and hidden from the political, cultural, and legal framework of different societies. Judged from their perspective, the case of Gauri Mitra of *The Lowland*

can be thought of as inhabiting a secluded place in the social hierarchy where she can keep her sexual identity hidden. It is mentioned in the text that she is aware of the fact that “[i]t would have been a scandal if anyone detected what was going on” (Lahiri 241).

Gauri compares the reversion of her role from lover to colleague of Lorna with the other changes of roles she has willingly brought over herself. She summarizes these upheavals of her life in these words:

It was not unlike the way her role had changed at so many other points in the past. From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman...She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end. (Lahiri 240)

This self-realization on Gauri’s part enables her to recognize the various roles she has performed in life. These somewhat contradictory roles indicate her fragmented existence that is characteristic of postmodern identity formation. Along with this fragmented self, the queer identity of Gauri makes her isolated at one point. Butler and Rich, as well as Gopinath, had noted that a queer woman is nonexistent in the society, likewise, Gauri conforms to the social norm by choosing to hide her identity. Ironically, as a result of the reversal of her normative gender role, she is secluded and lonely in the end. As a true postmodern subject Gauri possesses multiple, and even an unstable identity that is marked by mutable gender and societal roles. By going back to Grewal and Kaplan, we can situate Gauri’s subject position in the transnational context as opposed to that of “the European unitary subject” (7). Grewal and Kaplan view postmodernism as a political discourse that forms a significant part of transnational culture. In Grewal’s words mobile capitals and multiple subjectivities produce “scattered hegemonies” and postmodernism is the cultural expression of this term. Viewed thus, the postmodern diasporic subject Gauri is part of this scattered hegemony whose identity is marked by multiplicity and instability.

The last section of the article studies Gauri Mitra’s identity formation as a diasporic woman in the United States who re-visions Lahiri’s usual depiction of first-generation South Asian female characters who accommodate tradition and modernity. Unlike Ashima Ganguli in Lahiri’s much discussed first novel *The Namesake*, Gauri deconstructs the idea of a diasporic Indian family in order to live an individual life in a separate state as a devoted careerist and academic woman. Her forsaking of Subhash and Bela is something that turns the idea of a close-knit family upside down. This shocking decision deconstructs the traditional idea of a first-generation diasporic South Asian woman’s identity and signals a new era of cosmopolitanism. The complex identity formation of Gauri makes her a new diasporic Indian woman in the United States.

The story of Gauri’s arrival in the United States after her postgraduate student husband has settled down there is different from most of other homesick housewives from India. After attending a party with other Indians at Narasimhan’s place, a senior of Subhash in the same university, Gauri declares that she has nothing in common with the other expatriate Indian women and so does not want to keep in touch with them anymore. Shortly after the party she cuts off her hair and destroys her Indian outfits and replaces them with Western ones such as slacks and sweater. In fact, Gauri’s outward transformation signals a deeper divide in her that keeps her apart of the typical diasporic women from her own country. Her extraordinary childhood of freedom and a life spent apart from her family teaches her to be aloof and makes her introverted from the very beginning. The only possibility of her change of disposition died with Udayan as she cocooned herself even more firmly after his death. Therefore, diasporic life does not imply

nostalgia and homesickness for Gauri; neither does it bring the blessing of a new life for her. The void inside her is too deep to be touched or fulfilled. It has been there even before she met Udayan. Gauri is a person who is always already alone, and unable to connect with the others around her. This is something Subhash's mother predicts correctly about her by noting that: "[s]he's too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother" (Lahiri114).

Both Gauri's inner and outer selves find comfort in an existence that does not require intimacy of any kind. She can bear to remain on the edge of community life, letting its bustle graze her only enough to feel herself professionally needed. She believes that with her life in California she had entered a new world. This life allows her to form temporary relationships with students and colleagues, relationships that never strike their root deep and never claim a part of her soul. She engages in sporadic love relations, sometimes more than one at the same time, but always remains impersonal about them, taking them as passing matters. In such an existence Gauri feels that if she wished she could be virtually connected to anyone or anything without getting closer. She also feels that her virtual presence on the internet is something inevitable: "[s]he cannot avoid it; she is a member of the virtual world, an aspect of her visible on the new sea that has come to dominate the earth's surface" (Lahiri 276). Gauri's sense of her new self indicates the emergence of a new kind of diasporic subject who is, in Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma's words, a "new cosmopolitan" who "occupies a range of fluid subject positions, which can be trans-class, trans-local with competing value systems" (2).

In the essay "Breaking the Boundary: Reading Lahiri's *The Lowland* as a Neo-cosmopolitan Fiction" Binod Paudyal observes that "Gauri represents a new cosmopolitan subject of the twenty-first century, the new millennium characterized by global capitalism and global forms of travel, technology, and communication" (28). She problematizes the traditional categories of home and belonging because her willingly chosen subject position is fluid. She "stays home in California, but she is a moving diaspora, positioning herself between multiple places, particularly through the virtual world" (ibid). Paudyal's study of Gauri's character is based on the concept of cosmopolitan subject formation characterized by a host of critics, some of whom have been made use of in the context of the present article to reinforce the identity of Gauri as a redefined new woman of contemporary South Asian diaspora in the United States.

A relevant point to be considered regarding Gauri's identity is to see how her subject position empowers her in diasporic space. It is obvious that her academic achievements and subsequent professional success are directly connected to her migration to, and stay in America. However, given her temperament, it can be conjectured that she would not be able to continue performing the role of a docile housewife anywhere in the world. Again, her innate sense of isolation would not allow her to be spiritually connected to anyone around her. In this sense, Gauri seems to be a migrant bound to live a dissociated life, not only in a geographical sense, but also in the psychological sense. The United States provides her with the opportunity to respond to the urge for dispersal that is already within her. She is merely externalizing her internal mobility as a diasporic subject. However, it is also important to note that the United States has created a space for her where she can cater to the country's requirement. Seen from this viewpoint, Gauri's diasporic existence seems to be an effect of both personal effort and external stimulations. Therefore, the tag "neo-cosmopolitan" is appropriate for her because Rajan and Sharma invest this term with transnational movements caused by both personal and external motivations. The personal and external motivations that stimulate Gauri's transnational movement depend on the use of technology to a great extent. Thus it is also possible to

include Arjun Appadurai's idea of "ethnoscape and technoscape" within Rajan and Sharma's concept of neo-cosmopolitanism to theorize the lived experience of Gauri Mitra.

Appadurai uses the term "ethnoscape" to define the consciousness of mobile persons who have had a notable effect on the global politics. He holds that these people "can never afford to let their imagination rest too long, even if they wish to" (Appadurai 32). He believes that behind diasporic people's movement factors like the shifting needs of international capital and shifting policies on refugee populations play a big role. As for technoscape, the critic observes that now both mechanical and informational technology moves at a high speed "across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries" (Appadurai 32). Gauri's life in California is informed by ideas that Appadurai has drawn since her lived experience as a diasporic subject is inspired by the kind of ethno- and technoscapes he has talked about. The first scape allows her existence as a moving subject, as an Indian academic in the USA, whereas the second one enables her to straddle boundaries in the reality of a virtual world.

So far in this article the identity formation of Gauri Mitra has been analyzed from three different perspectives. Finally, it can be conjectured that Gauri straddles identities in the sense that both geographically and psychologically she occupies multiple places, cultures, and subject positions. Thus she embodies the concept of transnational feminism that enables her in the United States to create many kinds of agency and diverse subjects by embracing changing and contingent subject positions. As a diasporic woman she can be viewed as a new cosmopolitan subject who is not confined to a particular nation-state or class. Therefore, it can be justifiably said that Gauri represents the concept of an unconventional femininity through the reversal of the role of a wife and a mother, and by embracing the role of an individual devoted to academic pursuits and personal achievements.

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