

The Lowland – An Examination of Gauri Mitra

The storyline was disjointed. The characters were static. The missing punctuation made the dialogue difficult to follow. Some liked the book. Some disliked the book. However, nearly everyone in class seemed in agreement with the New York Times' book review on Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, and the character of Gauri:

Gauri is an angry, selfish woman... 'too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother.' Gauri will abandon her daughter.... Ms. Lahiri never manages to make this terrible act — handled by Gauri with cruelty and arbitrary highhandedness — plausible, understandable or viscerally felt. Why would Gauri regard motherhood and career as an either/or choice? Why make no effort to stay in touch with Bela or explain her decision to move to California? Why not discuss her need to leave her marriage and her child with her husband?¹

In my first reading of *The Lowland*, I agreed completely. I was disgusted with the whole account of the actions of Gauri. However, with additional readings and careful reflection, I suggest that Ms. Lahiri allows the reader to find understandable (even if they are not entirely sympathetic) reasons for the path Gauri chose: due, in part, to the path that life chose for her.

Gauri's life had many challenges and as a result, she may have struggled with at least three serious emotional challenges, which would help to account for her decision to abandon her daughter. These illnesses are attachment disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression.

Gauri was born into a poor family and when she was small, she and her brother were taken from her parents and other siblings and had to move to the city to live with grandparents and cousins. As an adult, Gauri reflected that she did not blame her mother for sending her away. In fact, she said that she had preferred the arrangement (pg. 57). In psychology, the statement "I preferred this arrangement" could indicate that Gauri was likely struggling with Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). "RAD is a mental health disorder in which a child is **unable to form healthy social relationships**.... RAD is frequently seen in children who have had inconsistent or abusive care in early childhood, including children adopted from orphanages or **foster care**."¹ Although we

have no evidence that Gauri suffered any abuse as a child, she was taken from her parents, placed in a different household, and she learned to cope with her situation by not relying on the comfort of others. This is evidenced in the fact that she felt more comfortable sleeping on the balcony over a busy street with her face pressed up against a metal railing, rather than nestled close to another human. A young child's lack of need for the security of being near other people is a proclivity of children with RAD. Gauri did appear to care for her grandparents, but even this attachment eventually caused her pain as "she's saw them day after day, and watched them turn ill and frail (57)," which may have encouraged her to keep an emotional boundary between herself and others.

There were numerous indicators that Gauri had attachment issues besides her sleeping on the balcony. "She'd observed the world...all of life, from [the] balcony....It had always been her place (53-54)" On the balcony she was separated from people, content to be a philosophical, distant-and-overhead-observer rather than a participator in the busy world around her. She relished the feeling of being on the balcony, seeing the world go by without having to take an active role in others' lives.

Gauri's ability to keep her distance from others had to change when Gauri got married. At that point, she was forced to move in with her in-laws, take orders from her mother-in-law, and begin to adopt the role of a housewife and cook for her husband. She loved the passion of Udayan, but chafed under the requirements of helping her mother-in-law with household duties, rather than sitting in a quiet place, reading books on philosophy. When Udayan was killed and she had the chance to move to the United States, perhaps she hoped, as Subhash had done, that when she moved to the United States, "the difference was so extreme that [she] could not accommodate the two places together in [her] mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside." ... "With Udayan gone, anything seemed possible. The ligaments that had held her life together were no longer there...She wanted to leave Tollygunge. To forget everything her life

had been (127).” At this point, any emotional connections Gauri had with people in India were now severed. She was free to isolate herself within her studies of philosophy once again.

Once in the United States, Subhash tried to help Gauri cope with her new situation and the trauma of Udayan’s death by allowing her to have a lot of time alone, and not requiring much from her. Seemingly out of habit or kindness, Subhash fixed his own breakfast and lunch, and left Gauri with cash and a key to the apartment so she could come and go as she wanted. This was different from the expectations of Udayan, who had required someone cook and serve all his meals. This freedom in the Rhode Island helped encourage any innate sense of independence and emotional isolation from others that Gauri had naturally, because Gauri could isolate herself among the books in the library.

Even though Subhash and Gauri were living together as husband and wife, Gauri still did not even try to form a friendship with Subhash. One day, as they walked along the beach, Gauri reflected that “she was unable to express her gratitude for what [Subhash] had undertaken. She was unable to convey the ways he was a better person than Udayan. She was unable to tell him that he was protecting her... She looked back at the set of footprints they had made in the damp sand...[they] were already vanishing, washed clean by the encroaching tide (137).” Gauri was unable to express her gratitude, even when she felt it. Perhaps the unconscious foreshadowing of Subash and Gauri’s long-term relationship was already seen through her eyes. Gauri just did not have the emotional ability to form a bond with this gentle man.

Although Gauri likely struggled with attachment disorder, Gauri initially had typical motherly instincts for her child. “At first a part of her resisted sharing Bela with [Subhash].... Gauri was aware of how the slightest oversight on her part could cause Bela to be destroyed...Standing still on a sultry late summer’s day, without a trace of breeze, she was nevertheless afraid that a sudden wind

would pry Bela from her grasp (144-145).” However, as time passed, her emotional challenges began to interfere with her being able to continue in a normal relationship. “[Gauri] had convinced herself that Subhash was her rival and that she was in competition with him for Bela. But of course it had not been a competition, it had been her own squandering. Her own withdrawal, covert, ineluctable.” (232).

By the time Bela was four years old, Gauri was obviously longer attached to her daughter in a typical mother-daughter way. Subhash had “something that troubled him...though [Gauri] cared for Bela capably, though she kept her clean...rarely did Suhash see her smiling when she looked into Bela’s face.... It was as if Bela were a relative’s child and not her own (159).” This is the beginning of the time when Gauri begins to take risks with Bela’s life and to leave her alone for short periods of time. Gauri becomes more resentful of the time she has to devote to the care of Bela. “[Gauri’s] worst nemesis resided within her. She was ...frightened that the final task Udayan had left her with, the long task of raising Bela, was not bringing meaning to her life.... Instead there was a growing numbness that inhibited her, that impaired her (165).” This inability to connection emotionally is consistent with a person with attachment disorder, and helps us better understand Gauri’s bizarre behavior toward her daughter. This detachment made it possible for Gauri to tear apart her daughter’s life by abandoning her with the stroke of a pen in such an abrupt way.

Eventually, even Gauri’s limited feelings of gratitude toward Subhash had dwindled. Years after their separation, when Gauri received the divorce request, her response to seeing his letter in the mails was that “he had boiled down to the proof of his penmanship, the dried saliva on the back of a stamp (285).”

By this time, she was content to spend much of her time alone. “Isolation offered its own form of companionship...it was something upon which she’d come to depend, with which she’d

entered by now into a relationship more satisfying and enduring than the relationships she'd experiences in *either* of her marriage relationships (*emphasis added*) (237).” It is difficult to understand the relationship choices that Gauri made, but it seems clear that at least one aspect of her decision-making came from her lack of ability to form normal attachments.

Another mental disorder that interfered with Gauri's ability to function normally as a mother and a wife was post-traumatic stress disorder. “Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating anxiety disorder that occurs after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event that involves either a real or perceived threat of injury or death. Symptoms of PTSD include emotional apathy, inability to express feelings, and avoidance of people or situations that are reminders of the event.²⁹” The most blatant traumatic event in Gauri's life was the stress of hiding from the police her injured, hunted husband, and then watching him being executed. It is obvious that Gauri was suffering from PTSD at that time. “No one bothered her. She was aware of holding her body very still, and she felt at times as if she were falling, the bed seeming to give way. She was unable to cry. There were only the tears disconnected to feeling that gathered and sometimes fell from the corners of her eyes in the morning, after sleep (108).”

Additionally, other events before and after the killing of Udayan would fall into the category of traumatic events, enough to cause an emotional breakdown. Her parents were killed in a car accident when she was sixteen. When she married Udayan, she had to move in with her in-laws, strangers who were angry that the marriage had taken place without their knowledge and consent, and she dealt with constant hostility, day-after-day. Then, Udayan coerced her to attend illegal and dangerous insurgent meetings. When she stopped attending meetings, Udayan continued to attend, continuing to allow her to suffer in fear for his life, and for the lives of those associated with him.

Then, Udayan convinced her to unwittingly help him in a terrorist act that she later realized had killed a man. Finally, she marries a stranger and moves to a strange country.

All of these facts, when taken in individual portions could easily cause a person to withdraw from normal interaction with others, but in combination, they pushed Gauri to avoid reminders of the events that caused her such trauma, perhaps even to the point of wanting to avoid seeing any resemblance of Udayan in his daughter, Bela. This avoidance of remembering the trauma associated with Udayan, and the typical emotional apathy that comes with PTSD was definitely a factor in Gauri's willingness to abandon her daughter without having the courage, or perhaps the ability to know how to express her reasons for leaving.

One more major emotional struggle that can explain Gauri's behavior is depression. "Avoiding social contact is a common pattern you might notice when falling into depression. Some people skip activities they normally enjoy and isolate themselves from the world.... [Another] major component of depression is rumination, which involves dwelling and brooding about themes like loss and failure."⁴

There is indication that Gauri spent a lot of time ruminating about life even when she was young – certainly as young as in her college years. She was interested in philosophy and why people acted the way they did. "[Philosophy is] an insight into the hidden presuppositions underlying the way we look at ourselves and the rest of the world."⁵ Gauri loved to sit on the balcony, watch people, think, and read philosophy. She said that she could think better in a noisy environment. She felt "the constant din more soothing than silence would have been (54)." Even at a young age, her words reflected an outward struggle to drown out the inner struggle she had going on inside her head.

However, we know that her time on the balcony was not necessarily a time of relaxation. When she was asked if the balcony was her own personal "Bodhi tree," she did not say that she felt

enlightened, but she “only shrugged her shoulders (55).” Apparently, she did not gain solace from her time alone on the balcony, but she was busy brooding about the meaning of life.

Another time in her life that would have encouraged feelings of depression was when she gave up most of her studies to spend time with her hostile mother-in-law. Bijoli was openly critical to Gauri. Did Gauri overhear Bijoli discuss with Subhash, (or with others), “She’s too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother” (114)? Later, when Gauri *was* a mother, perhaps she felt as many mothers do, as if she was only *acting* out the role of being a mother to a tiny being that she didn’t recognize, a human that someone hands to you and says “this is yours... be a mother.” In those moments of uncertainty, did her self-doubts and guilt tell her that Bijoli was correct? Did she feel depressed and discouraged, that she *was* in fact, aloof, and it was part of her nature to act “unnaturally” in her role as a mother (34)?

We may have an insight into Gauri’s mental state when she moved to the United States. “She looked at the flat gray road, with two ongoing stripes painted down the middle. This was the place where she could put things behind her. Where her child would be born, ignorant and safe (125).” However, would her mental illness in fact make her life feel just like the road: flat, grey, with two stripes already telling her that she had no choice in her life, two lines already painted for her and her child, showing her that her life was already mapped out for her in monotonous predictability? Like many people with depression, she may have immediately felt the need to withdraw, perhaps to survive the emotions of being in a new culture with no friends, no job, and no immediate responsibilities. We know that she withdrew from the other women and mothers in the neighborhood. She chafed at the tediousness of the repetitions tasks required of stay-at-home mothers. She did not reach out to try to establish relationships with other adults to keep intellectually stimulated. She would have found help in outside support, because being the primary

stay-at-home caregiver requires a long-distance view of the future, and a willingness to put one's own goals secondary to the building-up of other human beings. This is especially true if the caregiver returns back to the workforce or school after the children are grown, because taking a step back into the scholastic or working world can bring many challenges. These were choices that Gauri was not willing to make, and because of her several emotional challenges, she was not even able to find a way to balance the world of school and work, while still supporting the needs of her child.

Gauri is accused of being cruel and arbitrarily highhanded. It is true that Gauri's method of leaving of Bela left scars on her daughter's psyche, we know that Gauri did have some understanding of the inappropriateness of her actions. "The shame that had flooded her veins was permanent. She would never be free from that (306)." "[Gauri] used to dial [Bela's phone number] sometimes when the receiver was still on its hook, when thinking of Bela. When she was appalled by her transgression, over-taken by regret." Gauri knew that her actions in running away from Bela and Subash without explaining her feelings were inappropriate, and this added to her burden of guilt and depression. Perhaps this is why she could not seem to commit herself in any permanent relationship except perhaps the one with Lorna, which turned out to be merely a tryst on Lorna's part. Lorna's casualness about their relationship, and Gauri's subsequent sense of isolation and unworthiness would add to depression, and her inability to act in a normal fashion in her relationships, even when she thought she might want one with her own daughter, and with her granddaughter.

Last, but not least, the most damaging event in Gauri's life seemed to be knowing she had aided in the killing of the police officer. In a sudden turn of events following Bela's rejection of Gauri,

Gauri's frantic response drove her to return to Tollygunge, to go by the house of the little boy whose father was killed, and then, to stand on the balcony and prepare to take her own life. Her

depression, PTSD, and attachment disorder had done its damage. She felt that death was better than life. It is unclear why she chose to do otherwise. Perhaps, she had been surviving just by pure animalistic instinct. Perhaps, somewhere deep in her psyche, she decided to live one more day, like the creatures of the lowland. **“Certain creatures laid eggs that were able to endure the dry season. Others survived by burying themselves in mud, simulating death, waiting for the return of rain (2).”**

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