



The Brutal Cost of Conversions:

Female Autonomy and Self-Formation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract

Diasporic literary criticism has long privileged themes of loss, dislocation, and fractured identity. Less attended to, however, is how migration could function as a productive space of self-transformation and reconstruction of the migrant's subjectivity. Drawing on the Foucauldian notions of "power relations" and "technologies of the self," alongside feminist debates on agency and female subjectivity, this article examines Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* to argue that the protagonist Gauri's trajectory exemplifies how migrants actively craft new subjectivities within, not beyond, existing power structures. In so doing, this article answers three interconnected questions: How do her intellectual pursuits enable a self-fashioned subjectivity? How does her defiance of traditional gender roles confront patriarchal norms? And how does the moral ambiguity of her choices complicate readings of female empowerment? Through close analysis of Gauri's philosophical education, her abandonment of maternal duties, and her eventual life in California, this article demonstrates that Gauri is not merely a resistant subject but an active agent who exercises autonomy through, rather than against, productive power. By highlighting the tensions between autonomy, ethical accountability, and self-cultivation, the present study offers a new interpretation of female subjectivity within a transnational context, challenging both diasporic criticism's emphasis on loss and feminism's tendency to celebrate resistance.

Keywords: Female Autonomy, Feminism, Jhumpa Lahiri, Michel Foucault, Subjectivity, Technologies of the Self, *The Lowland*.

1. Introduction

A mother who abandons her only daughter, pursues a doctorate in philosophy, and constructs a solitary life in California. Few contemporary novelists have created a female character as controversial as Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013). While Savita Iyer Ahrestani initially describes her as "a selfish and heartless woman" (qtd. in Acharya 36), she later revises this judgment, expressing admiration for Gauri's "willingness to trample on the life that tradition and



custom demand” (40). This ambivalence is also evident in the diverse critical interpretations of the novel. While some critics view Gauri as a selfish mother who neglects her responsibilities toward her daughter (Banerjee 2017; Barker 2013), others see her as a courageous female character who dares to prioritize her intellectual journey over domestic roles (Shameem 2021; Sourav 2025). Both perspectives, however, share a common assumption that autonomy can only be achieved by escaping patriarchal structures. What if, instead, freedom emerges through an ongoing, ambivalent, and costly practice of self-formation within that very restrictive power apparatus?

Set in Calcutta during the Naxalite movement in the 1960s and extending into the United States afterwards, *The Lowland* tells the story of two Bengali brothers, Subhash and Udayan. After Udayan is killed by the police, Subhash marries his pregnant widow, Gauri, and brings her with him to Rhode Island. However, this story is by no means a straightforward narration of immigrant adaptation or domestic reconciliation. Not only does Gauri withdraw from her role as wife and mother, but she also leaves her family to pursue an academic career in California. In this sense, Lahiri avoids presenting this decision as a simple act of liberation. Instead, she draws readers’ attention to its consequences, such as the guilt that haunts Gauri throughout her life, the isolation she imposes on herself, and the shattered relationship with the daughter she leaves behind. This is what makes Gauri such an important figure, as she opens up a space to reconsider feminist understandings of agency, ones that neither entirely condemn nor entirely celebrate her choices.

Despite the extensive scholarship on migration, gender, and identity in *The Lowland*, few critics have examined how Gauri actively shapes herself and the ethical consequences of that process. This gap raises a fundamental question about how autonomy should be understood when freedom is itself shaped within relations of power. To address this question, the present article applies the concepts of “power relations” and “technologies of the self” introduced by Michel Foucault. The first notion illuminates the patriarchal norms that constrain Gauri, while the second one examines how she actively forms herself within those constraints. For Foucault, these are not merely techniques of self-discipline; as he writes, “[f]rom the idea that the self is not given to us... we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (*The Foucault Reader* 350). In contrast to his earlier work on disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), where subjects are largely shaped by external forces, this later framework emphasizes how subjectivity is actively constituted within power relations. In this sense, Foucault’s framework creates a unique opportunity to examine Gauri’s decisions and actions as practices of self-formation.

The present article argues that Gauri’s autonomy is neither a simple moral failure nor a feminist triumph, but rather a costly practice of self-formation within patriarchal power relations.



Freedom, in *The Lowland*, emerges not as liberation from power but as an ongoing negotiation with its constraints, which is inseparable from guilt, isolation, and fractured kinship. To develop this argument, the article first elaborates on the Foucauldian framework of productive power, critique, technologies of the self, and the feminist debate on female agency. It then offers a close reading of Gauri's trajectory through four interconnected stages, including the emergence of autonomy, the politics of refusal, the reimagining of the self, and the ethical ambivalence of freedom. Ultimately, the article concludes that freedom in Lahiri's novel is a costly and uneven process of becoming that complicates dominant feminist narratives of autonomy.

1.1. Literature Review

Criticism on Lahiri's *The Lowland* has largely revolved around four overlapping concerns, including diasporic identity and migration (Daukšaitė-Kolpakovienė 2020; Hossain 2021; Acharya 2016), feminist and transnational subjectivity (Shameem 2021; Lahiri-Roy 2024; Mirza 2023), power and spatial politics (Pourya Asl 2018; Zhang, Pourya Asl, and Pakri 2024; Nadiminti 2018; Sahi 2025), and embodied or affective responses to displacement (Chifane 2016; Stoican 2017). Despite their theoretical differences, recent studies continue to interpret Gauri's transformation primarily through displacement, cultural negotiation, trauma, and gendered conflict, overlooking the processes through which she constitutes herself within relations of power.

The first strand of criticism reads Gauri's development mainly as a product of migration and identity change. Daukšaitė-Kolpakovienė (2020) argues that *The Lowland* considers identity as a central concern and sees Gauri's immigration to America as the moment when multiple possible selves begin to emerge. Hossain (2021) similarly presents Gauri's "self-transformation" as a diasporic process shaped by relocation and identity theory. In this vein, Acharya's dissertation (2016) examines Gauri and Bela as figures whose subjectivities are fractured by migration and displacement. These studies tend to attribute Gauri's transformation to geographical displacement rather than the dynamics of power or processes of self-formation.

The second group of studies examines Gauri through the lens of feminism and transnationalism. Shameem (2021), for instance, reads Gauri in the terms of transnational feminism, neo-cosmopolitanism, and queer sexuality, emphasizing the multiplicity of her identity. Furthermore, Mirza (2023) provides valuable insight into female agency within postcolonial and feminist frameworks. Finally, Lahiri Roy (2024) employs an intersectional approach to complicate moral judgments regarding Gauri's character, particularly based on the significance of youthful trauma. To sum up, although these studies engage with gender, agency, and transnational



subjectivity, they tend to conceptualize agency as resistance to patriarchal constraints, rather than as an ongoing practice of self-formation.

The third, and most relevant branch, investigates power, discourse, and resistance. Pourya Asl (2018) reads the novel based on Foucault's concept of subjugated knowledges, arguing that women's participation in the Naxalite movement has been historically and epistemically marginalized. Zhang, Pourya Asl, and Pakri (2024) analyze the novel based on spatial hierarchy and gendered spatial injustice through Lefebvre's framework. Nadiminti (2018), by contrast, examines the biopolitics of family formation, suggesting that Gauri's shift from reproductive to intellectual labor challenges heteronormative expectations. More recently, Sahi (2025) notes Ania Loomba's Foucauldian reading of discourse in *The Lowland*, particularly in relation to Gauri's estrangement. While these studies move closer to a power-centered interpretation, they remain focused on discourse, space, and biopolitics rather than on Gauri's self-constitution through Foucault's later notion of technologies of the self.

While power (diaspora, patriarchy, or space) is pervasive in many of the critical works discussed above, there is another line of inquiry into Lahiri's novel through embodiment, trauma, and affect. Chifane (2016) explores the theme of immigrant women and body culture in *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, focusing on clothing, bodily display, sexuality, movement, and memory as responses to cultural trauma and dislocation. Similarly, Stoican (2017) examines "the traumatic effect of a family event upon members of different generations – wife (Gauri), brother (Subhash) and daughter (Bela) – whose lives continue to unfold outside India" (33). Additionally, in her analysis of Subhash's cultural reinvention, Stoican addresses the embodied and affective dimensions of displacement. These studies are important, as they not only move beyond abstract discussions of identity, but also attend to the lived, embodied dimensions of migration. Furthermore, while they illustrate how the characters cope with their traumatic experiences and displacement, they do not examine whether these coping mechanisms function as practices of self-formation within structures of power. As a result, the relationship between embodiment, agency, and the active constitution of subjectivity in Gauri's trajectory remains unexplored.

To sum up, existing scholarship has illuminated migration, feminism, transnationalism, trauma, body culture, discourse, spatiality, and biopolitics in *The Lowland*. However, what this literature overlooks is Gauri's trajectory as a Foucauldian process of self-formation shaped by power relations and technologies of the self. Even where critics acknowledge resistance, they tend to read it as either diasporic adaptation or female agency, without fully addressing the ethical ambivalence of autonomy, the way freedom in Lahiri's novel is inseparable from loss, guilt, isolation, and ruptured kinship. Ultimately, drawing on Foucault's later concept of



technologies of the self, as well as feminist notions of agency and subjectivity, this article argues that Gauri's autonomy is neither a victory nor a moral failure, but a costly practice of self-formation in which freedom emerges through, rather than beyond, relations of power.

2. Theoretical Framework: Power, Resistance, and Technologies of the Self

In his later works, by developing the concepts of power and technologies of the self, Foucault provides a useful framework for understanding how subjectivity is constructed. Within this framework, he elaborates on how subjects challenge dominant norms while simultaneously constituting themselves. Furthermore, Foucault reconceptualizes power as productive, non-linear, and inseparable from resistance, rather than considering it merely repressive phenomenon. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault rejects what he calls the "repressive hypothesis" (11), according to which power functions primarily through prohibition and domination. Instead, he argues that power is neither "a general system of domination exerted by one group over another" (92) nor a commodity to be "acquired, seized, or shared" (94). Rather than occupying merely "a role of prohibition or accompaniment," power relations have "a directly productive role, wherever they come into play" (94). This productiveness is made possible by the fact that power circulates through "innumerable points" within social relations and "comes from below" (94), operating through dispersed networks instead of a single sovereign center.

Therefore, productive power works through processes of subjectivation. As Foucault himself defines his project, the task is "to determine what the subject must be, to what condition he is subject, what status he must have, what position he must occupy in reality or in the imaginary, in order to become a legitimate subject of this or that type of knowledge. In short, it is a matter of determining its mode of 'subjectivation'" (Foucault, "Foucault" 944). Subjectivity is not formed outside power but emerges through the norms, discourses, and social practices that power generates. This perception is entirely consistent with *The Lowland*, where patriarchal norms regarding widowhood, marriage, and motherhood not only constrain Gauri's choices, but also serve as driving forces in shaping her understanding of herself and her place within society.

It should be noted that the interconnectivity between power and resistance plays a crucial role in productive power. As Foucault writes, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95). Resistance, therefore, emerges from within the very relations of power it contests and there is no pure space outside power. In *The Lowland*, Gauri's resistance to the identity imposed upon



her as a widow illustrates this notion when she does not reject second marriage completely and uses it strategically to escape the social death of widowhood. Furthermore, in *The Politics of Truth*, Foucault defines the concept of critique in close relation with resistance as the refusal “not to be governed like that” (46), a movement through which “the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth” (47). As a result, critique is “the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability” (47). In this regard, critique means how subjects undermine the legitimacy of normative systems and open possibilities for alternative forms of selfhood. In the novel, Gauri’s disregard of her family’s opinion of her secret marriage to Udayan is a perfect example of critique, as she refuses to accept familial authority as an undeniable truth.

Foucault later develops this argument in terms of technologies of the self, which he refers to as practices that “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves” (*Technologies of the Self* 18). These are not simply forms of resistance in the narrow sense of opposing power. Rather, they are practices of self-formation through which individuals attempt to transform themselves “with the aim of attaining, for example, happiness, purity, wisdom or immortality” (18). Furthermore, Foucault points out the importance of the relation between technologies of domination and technologies of the self, highlighting “the point where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself” (*Ethics* 86). Among the various techniques he discusses, the *hypomnemata*, personal notebooks that constitute “a material memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation” (*Technologies of the Self* 48) illustrate how individuals work upon themselves through practices of reflection and recollection. Consequently, the concept of technologies of the self provides a useful framework for examining how subjects attempt to fashion alternative ways of being while remaining embedded within the very structures of power they seek to negotiate.

Despite the analytical value of these concepts, Foucault’s conception of power and subjectivity has generated a serious debate among feminist scholars. In this regard, Judith Butler offers a significant critique of these notions. She argues that the Foucauldian subject runs the risk of appearing “fully constituted by power” with “no recourse to an agency beyond it” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 14). At the same time, however, Butler insists that power must also be understood as “what is taken up and reiterated in the subject’s ‘own’ acting” (14). Her intervention is valuable because it rethinks agency not as an escape from power but as a process through which power is reworked in the formation of alternative subjectivities. This study adopts



Butler's insight by approaching selfhood as a dynamic process, in which subjects negotiate, appropriate, and transform the norms through which they are constituted.

On the other hand, this emphasis on agency does not resolve all feminist concerns about Foucault's work. In this context, there are two significant critiques, concerning the normative grounds of Foucault's analysis and gendered embodiment. Nancy Fraser raises the first critique, arguing that Foucault is "normatively confused" (31) because his analysis of power "provides no foundations for criticizing modern society" while simultaneously insisting "that we must criticize it" (17). While this criticism is valid, the present study does not seek to provide a normative foundation for critique. Instead, it examines the practical and ethical costs of self-formation. Consequently, the article operates on a different register from the one Fraser questions. The second critique comes from Sandra Bartky, who asserts that Foucault remains "blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine" (132), a critique that is mainly directed at his early analyses of disciplinary power. Although this is an important limitation, the present study draws on Foucault's later work on technologies of the self, which shifts the focus from how power disciplines the body to how subjects actively forge themselves. As a result, the analysis remains largely outside the scope of Bartky's critique. Thus, by shifting the analytical focus from the normative justification of resistance to the practical costs of self-formation, and by drawing on Foucault's later work rather than his earlier account of discipline, the study acknowledges the validity of these feminist critiques while operating in a register where they do not directly undermine its core claims.

While Fraser and Bartky have pointed out some notable shortcomings in Foucault's earlier works, Lois McNay offers more constructive reading of his later ideas. In *Foucault and Feminism* (1992), McNay claims that Foucault's later notions of technologies of the self allow us to see how individuals are able to shape their subjectivity even while remaining within relations of power. She contends that "subjects are capable of reflexively monitoring the social relations which shape them" (4), a view that contrasts with the Foucauldian reduction of the subject to a merely passive body. McNay's reading is particularly valuable for the present study, as it reveals how women like Gauri can exercise agency and self-transformation, despite their embedment within the social relations that constitute them.

Building on the above discussion, the concept of technologies of the self, when read alongside feminist debates on agency and subjectivity, offers a productive framework for analyzing the ambivalence of female autonomy in *The Lowland*, revealing self-formation not as liberation from power but as a process through which both autonomy and loss can be generated, revealing the ethical ambivalence at the heart of freedom.



3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1. The Emergence of Autonomy

Even before migration opens new possibilities for identity transformation, Gauri exhibits subtle but consistent signs of self-direction that set her apart from the traditional women around her. This early disposition is rooted in her childhood. Recalling her youth, Gauri tells Udayan: “When she was a little girl ... she would sometimes stumble out of bed during the night, and her grandparents would find her in the morning, fast asleep on the balcony, her face against the blackened filigree, her body on the stone floor. ... She had loved waking up out-of-doors, without the protection of walls and a ceiling” (54). Although this episode should not be read as an act of resistance, it nevertheless indicates an early pull towards forms of experience that do not fit neatly into the routines and expectations of domestic life, and reflects a mindset that is inclined toward alternative ways of being.

As she grows older, she chooses not to return to her parents in a remote village, staying with her maternal grandparents in Calcutta, even though the option is available. Lahiri illustrates this instance of autonomy as follows: “There had always been the option to return to her parents’ village. But though she visited, taking the train to see them for holidays, rural life held no appeal for her. ... Really, she appreciated them for letting her go her own way. That was their gift to you, Udayan said. Autonomy” (57). For Gauri, this autonomy is neither a declaration of war against her family nor a rejection of her parents. On the contrary, she considers her separation as a gift that should be appreciated. As Amy Allen argues, autonomy is understood as “the twin capacities to reflect critically upon the power-knowledge relations that have constituted one’s subjectivity and to engage in practices of self-transformation” (44). In this regard, Gauri’s decision to remain apart from her family signals the early emergence of this capacity. This is in line with Foucault’s later emphasis that individuals are not merely constrained by power, but are able to act upon themselves through practices that gradually shape their ways of being (*Technologies of the Self* 18). She begins to distance herself from normative expectations, creating limited spaces of self-direction within existing social constraints. However, what distinguishes Gauri’s autonomy from a purely Foucauldian account is its gendered dimension. Her decision to separate from her immediate family not only demonstrates the capacity for self-formation, but also suggests an early rejection of the norms that define traditional femininity.

This early practice of self-formation becomes more explicit when Lahiri notes that Gauri “prefers books to jewels and saris” (46). This contrast is significant because jewels and saris function as visible signs of feminine respectability, as they are ornaments worn for others. Books,



in contrast, cultivate an inner relation to the self that requires solitude, reflection, and the deliberate exercise of thought. By choosing books over conventional expectations placed on women, Gauri not only engages in a Foucauldian practice of self-cultivation, but also demonstrates what Allen calls a capacity for critically reflecting on the norms that shape the self. Additionally, this insight is consistent with Foucault's concept of the *hypomnemata*, which, as discussed earlier, function as a technology of the self through the accumulation and revisiting of reading. Although Lahiri does not explicitly depict Gauri keeping notebooks, her attachment to books suggests a similar investment in practices of reading, reflection, and intellectual cultivation. Gauri's books act as a kind of accumulated treasure that cannot be consumed and discarded but rather kept, revisited, and allowed to shape her thinking over time. In this sense, reading participates in what Foucault calls "the role of reading and writing in constituting the self", a process at the heart of technologies of the self (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton vii). Thus, Lahiri associates Gauri's emerging subjectivity not with ornamentation but with intellectual practice, foreshadowing the role that philosophical study will later play in her project of self-constitution.

These seeds of autonomy are important because they show Gauri's subsequent choices are not radical breaks from her past. On the contrary, her capacity for autonomy is already visible in Calcutta, yet she is still controlled by family expectations, gendered norms, and social limitations. Autonomy in the novel appears as a gradual process through which Gauri begins to imagine herself differently from the roles assigned to her. Thus, the more explicit practices of critique and self-fashioning that characterize Gauri's later life appear not as sudden acts of liberation but as the continuation of a process already underway. Autonomy, in this sense, appears less as a moment of emancipation than as a gradual and uneven practice of becoming.

3.2. The Politics of Refusal

While the previous section traced the emergence of autonomy as a latent tendency, autonomy in itself does not necessarily entail resistance. For Foucault, critique begins when individuals start to question the specific forms of authority through which they are governed. In this regard, critique is not a rejection of power, but rather "the art of not being governed quite so much" (*The Politics of Truth* 45). In *The Lowland*, Gauri's autonomy gradually turns into a series of refusals against family authority, normative expectations of womanhood, and the social roles prescribed for women. Rather than seeking a position outside power, she negotiates with existing structures, refusing certain forms of subjectivity while also experimenting with others.



The first manifestation of critique can be traced to Gauri's past relationship with her family. Gauri admits that she "didn't care what her aunts and uncles, her sisters, would think of what she was doing" (287). This line reveals the driving force behind her behavior, which is visible in her clandestine relationship with Udayan as well as her willingness to act without her family's approval. Instead of explaining herself or asking for permission, she begins to withdraw the family's authority over her decisions. In Foucauldian perspective, this shift can be read as a moment of critique, where established norms begin to lose their unquestioned justification. Feminist revisions of Foucault further complicate this process by questioning the idea of a fully autonomous subject existing prior to power. As Butler argues, "power acts on the subject, but ... in a transitive sense, conferring a power that is not exclusively the subject's own" (*The Psychic Life of Power* 15). It should be noted that Gauri's refusal of familial judgment does not arise from an autonomous position outside social relations. Instead, it takes shape within the power dynamics that have formed her. As a result, Gauri's agency is an ongoing negotiation with the authority of others that cannot be separated from the gendered constraints within which she lives.

This politics of refusal becomes more apparent after Udayan's untimely death. As a young widow, Gauri is subjected to traditions that symbolically redefine her identity. Lahiri describes what is done to her: "the vermillion was washed clean from her hair, the iron bangle removed from her wrist. The absence of these ornaments marked her as a widow" (108-9). This is a moment of subjection, in which Gauri is the object of ritual, not its agent. However, she refuses to internalize this imposed identity. Instead, she accepts Subhash's proposal, contemplating: "in America no one knew about the movement, no one would bother her. She could go on with her studies. It would be an opportunity to begin again" (119). Here, Gauri is no longer an object; instead, she strategically evaluates marriage as a way to escape widowhood's social death and to reopen the possibility of new beginning. She does not denounce patriarchy, finding a tactical way through it. This is the meaning of critique as "the art of not being governed like that and at that cost" (Foucault, *The Politics of Truth* 46).

However, the most consequential form of refusal is related to motherhood. When Subhash proposes having another child to "correct the imbalance" and "close up the distance" (160), Gauri silently resists the idea, convinced that "becoming a mother again was the one thing in her life she was determined to prevent from happening" (161). This refusal becomes even more explicit when she asks Subhash "if they could hire somebody, to give her time to take a survey of German philosophy that met twice a week," only to be told by Subhash that "her priority should be Bela" (162). The conflict between them reveals a fundamental disagreement about the meaning of womanhood. Subhash believes that maternal responsibility should take



precedence over intellectual ambition. However, Gauri does not accept the assumption that motherhood should define her entire identity. In this sense, her resistance is directed not against a particular individual but against a broader regime of expectations that links femininity to self-sacrifice. This is exactly what Foucault means by critique, the refusal “to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles” (*The Politics of Truth* 45). Gauri refuses this specific form of governance that would subordinate her intellectual life to domestic duty, foreshadowing her eventual decision to leave both husband and daughter behind.

By this stage of the novel, Gauri’s refusals begin to move beyond critique toward the possibility of an alternative mode of existence. Reflecting on her life, she begins to imagine that “without Bela or Subhash, her life might be a different thing” (174). The importance of this mindset lies not in the mere rejection of family, but in its depiction of different self into the future. For Foucault, critique is valuable not only because it dismantles existing forms of authority, but because it opens a space in which new forms of subjectivity may emerge. Thus, Gauri’s politics of refusal is a transitional stage in her development, as she questions the identities imposed upon her and begins to imagine who she might become instead. The next section explores how this process becomes a more conscious project of self-formation through education, intellectual practice, and the creation of new ways of being.

3.3. Reimagining the Self

While the critique discussed in the previous section involves a rejection of certain forms of authority and imposed identities, it does not fully explain Gauri’s transformation. According to Foucault, freedom is not exhausted by resistance. Rather, it involves practices through which individuals actively constitute themselves. In his discussion of technologies of the self, Foucault defines such practices as those that enable individuals “to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves” (*Technologies of the Self* 18). Migration to America provides Gauri with an unprecedented opportunity in which this process can unfold. No longer engaged in rejecting the identities imposed upon her, she increasingly turns toward practices through which alternative forms of subjectivity can be cultivated. In this sense, freedom emerges not merely as the refusal of external constraints, but as an ongoing project of self-formation.

The first and most systematic sign of this transformation appears in Gauri’s growing commitment to intellectual life. Shortly after arriving in America, and before Bela’s birth, she



secretly attends philosophy courses: “Surreptitiously, twice a week, she began attending the class. She wrote down the titles of the texts on the reading list and went to the library, borrowing Subhash’s card to check out a few books. She’d intended to remain anonymous, to go unnoticed” (132). This quote suggests that by acquiring knowledge, Gauri tends to reshape her relationship to herself through study. In other words, her anonymity emphasizes that these actions are not undertaken to gain social recognition or professional advancement. On the contrary, these are private disciplines with the aim of self-transformation. In fact, Gauri’s engagement with philosophy can be understood through a Foucauldian notion of technologies of the self, while simultaneously exposing the gendered limitations of this framework. Instead of performing domestic duties, Gauri turns to intellectual practice and tends to reframe the terms through which feminine subjectivity is traditionally defined. As McNay contends, Foucault’s emphasis on the effects of power upon the body “results in a reduction of social agents to passive bodies and cannot explain how individuals may act in an autonomous fashion” (*Foucault and Feminism*, 4). Accordingly, Gauri’s intellectual turn suggests the kind of agency that McNay finds lacking in Foucault’s earlier work: a reflexive practice through which she can critically monitor and change the social relations that constrain her. In this sense, Gauri’s intellectual life demonstrates how feminist agency operates within power relations by challenging the very conditions through which subjectivity is formed.

On the other hand, this intellectual self-formation is accompanied by a reimagining of her physical appearance. While attending classes, Gauri begins to imagine herself differently, wanting to “look like the other women she noticed on the campus, like a woman Udayan had never seen” (134). This pivotal moment suggests that Gauri’s physical transformation is not merely in relation to assimilation but about the emergence of an alternative mode of femininity that departs from the domestic roles that had previously defined her. In this context, Udayan functions as a figure of masculine recognition linked to the social and political world she has left behind. Therefore, becoming a woman he would not recognize means creating distance from the subject positions through which she has previously been known. This imagined alternative soon gives way to a more radical act. Returning home one day, Subhash discovers that “all of her saris, and her petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scraps of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws” (140-41). If this scene is read in isolation, it might seem to be a simple rejection of Indian femininity. However, its significance lies less in cultural negation and more in transformation. Gauri actively intervenes in the material signs through which her identity is constituted. Her body becomes a site of inscription, a surface upon which she writes her new identity, anticipating the more systematic practices of self-fashioning that will later define her intellectual life.



The most sustained form of this self-fashioning develops through Gauri's formal philosophical education. After Bela's birth, she officially enters the university and devotes herself to academic study. Lahiri describes this moment as follows: "She registered for the class and went to the bookstore, filling a basket with books. *On the Genealogy of Morals. The Phenomenology of Mind. The World as Will and Idea*. She bought a packet of pens and a dictionary. A wire-bound notebook bearing the university's seal" (162). The significance of these lines draws attention not only to the acquisition of knowledge, but also to the systematic practices that accompany it. Reading, note-taking, writing, and reflection become regular activities through which Gauri organizes her life. Gauri's books and notebooks are not sources of useless information, but rather tools she employs to nurture and transform herself. Gauri's engagement with philosophy provides precisely the kind of reflexive self-examination that McNay identifies as central to processes of self-formation. Instead of simply earning academic degrees, she develops a critical awareness of the norms and expectations that have structured her life. Thus, her intellectual practices illustrate not an escape from power but a situated process of self-making, demonstrating that individuals are capable of active self-transformation even while remaining confined within power system.

Nonetheless, the more deeply Gauri engages in this process of self-formation, the more apparent her struggles become. The intellectual world, which provides her with a fresh way of life, stands in stark contrast with the roles she is supposed to fulfill within the patriarchal framework. This tension becomes visible in her reflections, which suggest a deeper sense that the self she is becoming no longer fits within those prescribed identities. In this sense, the very technologies of the self that enable her transformation also generate an ethical burden. Although they open up new possibilities for becoming, at the same time they produce distance, guilt, and fractured maternal attachments. Self-formation in *The Lowland*, therefore leads to liberation as a contradictory and uneven process in which loss is inevitable.

3.4. Freedom, Loss, and Ethical Ambivalence

If the previous section examined the practices through which Gauri reimagines and transforms herself, the present section considers the ethical tensions generated by that transformation. For Foucault, freedom is not a final state achieved after overcoming power; rather, it is entangled with ethical self-relation. As he argues, "Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection" (Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom" 284). While Gauri's quest for autonomy provides her with an opportunity to cultivate an intellectual life beyond the constraints of



patriarchal norms, it also generates new ethical dilemmas. In this regard, the more successfully Gauri fashions herself according to her own aspirations, the more visible the personal costs of that transformation become.

Having established herself as a respected scholar in California, publishing books and teaching philosophy, Gauri appears to have achieved the autonomy she had long sought. However, Lahiri refuses to celebrate this achievement, since it comes with utter loneliness. Reflecting on her life in California, Lahiri notes that “Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings” (236). Based on this quote, Although Gauri embraces this form of isolation as an ideal way of being, it reveals a profound lack of human intimacy, where the only companionship she finds is silence. Autonomy appears here as an ambivalent achievement, giving Gauri the freedom she desires, but at the cost of losing meaningful social connection. Gauri has come closest to mastery over herself, yet Lahiri suggests that such mastery comes with sacrifice.

The most explicit acknowledgment of this ambivalence comes from Gauri herself. After her brief relationship with Lorna ends, she reflects on the series of transformations that have defined her life: “From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman. With the exception of losing Udayan, she had actively chosen to take these steps. She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions” (240). This quotation demonstrates that Gauri does not consider herself as a victim of circumstance. While she acknowledges her own agency, she is fully aware that ethical transformation is not a gentle process of becoming. Rather, it involves violence, loss, and the deliberate severance of attachments. Gauri has indeed created alternative versions of herself, but it is shadowed by the recognition of what those conversions have cost her: a daughter, a husband, a coherent family life. The freedom she gains cannot be separated from the attachments she leaves behind.

The ultimate consequence of Gauri’s identity shift is revealed decades later, when she attempts to reunite with Bela. After years of silence, Gauri travels to Rhode Island to deliver divorce papers in person, hoping perhaps for some form of reconciliation. Bela’s response is devastating: “You’re not my mother. You’re nothing” (313). The cruel tone of the statement shows a complete rupture of the maternal bond. Lahiri describes Gauri’s reaction without any moral judgment: “She was burning with the failure of it. The effort of the journey, the presumptuous chance she’d taken, the foolish anticipation of coming back” (312). Deep down, Gauri admits that she had no right to expect a different reaction. Her decision to leave Bela and build an intellectual life has resulted in a daughter who no longer recognizes her as a mother.



Lahiri neither condemns Gauri's pursuit of freedom nor dismisses Bela's anger. She simply presents the autonomous self that Gauri has constructed as incompatible with the maternal identity that Bela once needed.

The feelings of guilt and broken family relationships in Gauri's life suggest that autonomy, even in Foucauldian terms, cannot fully produce a sovereign subject. As a result, her trajectory reveals a limitation in Foucauldian accounts of self-formation. While these accounts illuminate how subjects constitute themselves through practices of freedom, they pay less attention to the enduring ethical and relational bonds that cannot simply be undone. As Judith Butler puts it, "the 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms" (*Giving an Account of Oneself*, 8). The guilt Gauri carries is not explicitly stated, but it is revealed in her willingness to accept Bela's rejection without defense, in her quiet acceptance that she has no claim to her daughter's love. Even after decades of self-fashioning, Gauri discovers that autonomy cannot destroy the bonds through which the self itself has been constituted. Consequently, Bela's refusal reveals not simply the failure of reconciliation, but the limits of self-determination itself.

Lahiri does not end Gauri's story through punishment or redemption. Instead, the novel ends with a fragile recognition that self-formation remains an unfinished process. After her unsuccessful attempt to reconnect with Bela, Gauri realizes that it is impossible to completely escape or reconcile with her past. Ultimately, the final gesture of the novel is not forgiveness but the reopening of possibility. Bela writes to her mother: "When Meghna is older, when she and I are both ready, we can try to meet again" (325). She offers her so-called mother a slim chance of a future encounter—not reconciliation, but not complete rejection either. In doing so, Lahiri deliberately refuses to resolve the tension that has shaped Gauri's life from the beginning. Throughout the novel, autonomy emerges not as a stable achievement but as a costly and ongoing practice of self-formation that generates both freedom and loss, agency and guilt. Ultimately, Gauri's story demonstrates that autonomy serves as a double-edged sword that cannot be easily celebrated or condemned. Rather, it is shaped as an ambivalent process of becoming, one revealed through responsibility, loss, and the ongoing possibility of transformation, with moral implications that go beyond the final page.

4. Conclusion

The current study has argued that Gauri's trajectory in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* can be understood as a complex process of self-formation within relations of power, not as a narrative



of liberation or transgression. In this sense, drawing on Foucault's later work on power relations, critique, and technologies of the self – and engaging with feminist critiques that highlight the ethical and embodied costs of such practices – this article goes beyond existing critiques that either condemn Gauri as a heartless mother or praise her as a feminist heroine, demonstrating that autonomy emerges through ongoing practices of transformation, not through escape from social constraints. Accordingly, in the analysis section, it is first shown that Gauri's capacity for autonomy can be traced back to before her migration, as she exhibits a persistent desire to shape her life according to her own aspirations, despite the constraints of family expectations and gendered norms in Indian society. This latent autonomy becomes more explicit after Udayan's death, when Gauri engages in a series of acts of critique that challenge the identities imposed upon her as widow, wife, and mother.

On the other hand, the present article examined how migration creates an unprecedented opportunity for a more systematic process of self-transformation. With engagement in intellectual practices and the deliberately altering her appearance, Gauri undertakes what Foucault describes as technologies of the self. These practices enable her to cultivate alternative modes, a shift that is starkly at odds with the expectations associated with conventional Indian femininity. However, her transformation should not be regarded as a rejection of her previous identities, but rather as an active process of constructing new ones. Ultimately, the analysis revealed the intertwined relationship between autonomy and ethical ambivalence. The freedom Gauri attains cannot be separated from isolation, broken kinship, and a lingering sense of guilt. Lahiri not only repeatedly refuses to consider these consequences as either punishment or vindication, but the novel presents freedom as a practice that simultaneously expands possibilities for selfhood and generates new forms of responsibility. Gauri succeeds in transforming herself, yet she cannot entirely be free from the effects of her choices on her own life and the lives of others.

A Foucauldian reading, therefore, challenges binary interpretations of Gauri's character. In addition, it shows that autonomy and power are two sides of the same coin, revealing how freedom emerges within power relations through ongoing practices of critique and self-formation. This perspective also plays a pivotal role in the discussion of agency within feminist and diasporic contexts, suggesting that subjectivity is neither entirely determined by social structures nor entirely free from them. In this light, *The Lowland* presents freedom not as a moment of emancipation, but as a continuous and costly process of becoming, the consequences of which remain open, unfinished, and ethically complex.



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