



# The Independent Road of Gauri: A Feminist Geographic Analysis of *The Lowland*

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## Abstract

The novel *The Lowland* (2013) written by Jhumpa Lahiri seemingly begins with the story of twin brothers, Subhash and Udayan, but eventually turns into the independent journey of a woman named Gauri. This paper attempts to trace Gauri in two spaces—the traditional society of India and the modern society of the U.S.—and shows her transformation guided by feminist geographic theories.

## Subject Areas

Literature

## Keywords

Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*, Feminist Geography, Gendered Space, Spatial Confinement

## 1. Introduction

Indian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-) is a well-known writer in contemporary American literature. Born on July 11, 1967, in London, Lahiri immigrated to the United States with her parents at the age of three, and grew up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. In 1989, she received her B.A. in English Literature from Barnard College and her Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University in 1997. She is now a professor of creative writing at the Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton University. Lahiri enjoys a high reputation and becomes one of the top writers in the American literary world. She won Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), and the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award in 2008 for *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Her achievement in the field of short stories makes her one of the most original and

important writers in American literature.

*The Lowland* (2013) was Lahiri's fourth novel, a finalist for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction, and eventually won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2015. Set against the backdrop of a Naxalite insurgency in neo-decolonized India, *The Lowland* seemingly begins with the story of twin brothers Subhash and Udayan, but eventually turns into the independence of the revolutionary woman Gauri. *The Lowland* depicts the story of Gauri straddling the two spaces of India and the United States, and her experience of identity transformation. The novel describes how Gauri goes from enduring the restrictions brought by gendered space to immigrating to foreign countries, entering public space, and completing her identity construction in the process. Among them, feminism is a key point that is quite evident in Gauri's character transformation.

After its publication in 2013, *The Lowland* has received much attention among critics and scholars from home and abroad. Studies on *The Lowland* are centered on perspectives like immigration, post-colonialism, cosmopolitanism, female writing and so on. Few of them pay enough attention to their concerns about the gendered space and women's spatial resistance against the conventional rules in the patriarchal society. This paper intends to offer a feminist geographic reading of the character Gauri in *The Lowland*. First, the main ideas and influences of feminist geography will be introduced. Then, the focus turns to spatial confinement by gendered space, domestic space, and less social involvement. Finally, this paper will reflect on women's resistance from the perspective of remodeling the body, entering public space, and space movement.

## 2. Feminist Geography

Feminist geography developed from the late 1970s onwards, building on the second feminist movement of the 1960s and radical geography's challenge to examine and to transform spatial divisions in society. During the feminist movement of the 1960s, women began to fight for their rights to vote, to be educated, and to have paid work. Drawing on the notion of gender performance through daily repetition of Judith Butler, feminist geographers began to propose the concept of "constructing gender spaces based on daily activities in places such as the home, workplace, and street" [1]. The eminent feminist geographer Linda McDowell pointed out that gender "as a set of material social relations and symbolic meaning" was constructed from space through everyday practice "at a variety of sites and places" [2]. In fact, gender construction is closely related to various spaces and places. The intent of feminist geography is to investigate, reveal, challenge, and change gender divisions in society. These divisions usually manifest as spatial divisions, with men and women having different patterns of spatial activities, behaviors, and place experiences. Feminist geography thus seeks to understand the relationship between gender and spatial divisions, and to challenge their supposed naturalness and legitimacy. Feminist geographical crit-

icism is a new exploration of literary studies based on the relationship between women and space. It tries to study and interpret literary works from the dual perspectives of geography and feminism, which provides a new perspective for the development of cultural studies and feminism, and also injects vitality into the creation and criticism of women's literature.

### 3. Gendered Space and Spatial Confinement

For a long time, there has always been a clear boundary between the two concepts of domestic space and public space. Public spaces are seen as men, who go out to discover and transform the world; while domestic spaces are always places where women take on the obligation to provide men with a safe and stable living environment. "The home can thus be seen as part of a gendered cultural geography landscape, representing the idea of man as the 'breadwinner' and the home as the woman's 'domain' " [3]. In *The Lowland*, the male characters, Subhash and Udayan, are able to study in the United States, join revolutionary organizations and enter the social space. However, Gauri, a highly educated woman in India, is confined to domestic space and family life. The different treatment of men and women not only shows the gendered spaces in the patriarchal society, but also exposes the spatial confinement of women.

#### 3.1. The Confinement of Gendered Space

Women have long been divided into domestic spaces based on the family, while men have dominance and mastery over a wider and richer public space. Feminist geographer Massey pointed out that "limiting women's mobility in identity and space is the key to maintaining their subordinate status" [4]. Whether it is to shape women as "daughter" who need to be protected or as "angels at home", it is all designed to isolate women from public space, and thus form a profound dependence and obedience to men both materially and spiritually. *The Lowland* reveals the unequal occupation of space caused by gender differences.

In the patriarchal society, marriage means the deprivation of women's independence and space. Gauri is the most typical representative in the novel, who is bound by endless housework and child-rearing. As an Indian woman, Gauri is not allowed to pursue a life of her own. Gauri, like Udayan and Subhash, is originally an intellectual who showed great interest in reading and thinking. After her marriage to Udayan, Gauri is deprived of the right and opportunity to choose her own life. On the first morning, she is asked to give up her interests in reading books and becomes a housewife like most married women in India. The novel vividly depicts her tired and boring life: "Every morning she was up at five, climbing stairs to a new portion of the house, and accepting the cup of tea her mother-in-law poured, a biscuit stored in the cream cracker tin. The line for the gas hadn't been hooked yet, so the day began with the elaborate process of lighting the clay stove with coals, dung patties, kerosene, a match" [5].

Lacking a sense of resistance, Gauri never complains, but succumbs to every-

thing her mother-in-law and husband's arrangements. As a result, laborious and tedious housework prevents her away from social involvement and erodes her love and enthusiasm for life. Enduring the boredom of life, concealing discontent and discomfort, she immerses herself in the isolated domestic space.

### 3.2. The Confinement of Public Space

Lefebvre believes that "The representation of space, dual in character: on the one hand the orbis and the urbs, circular, with their extensions and implications (arch, vault); on the other hand the military camp with its strict grid and its two perpendicular axes, cardo and decumanus—a closed space, set apart and fortified" [6]. Males dominate workspaces, political spaces and social spaces, while women are marginalized and excluded from the public sphere. Lahiri uses the spatial image of "balcony" in *The Lowland* to reveal the disadvantaged position of Indian women in domestic space and the desire for the access to public place.

Gauri is born into a well-to-do middle-class family and is educated from an early age, studying philosophy at university. A woman living in such a wealthy family does not even have her own room, only the balcony is her place. The balcony becomes the promised land of Gauri, and "she has observed the world from this balcony all her life" [5]. The balcony is her place of epiphany and enlightenment. When her family smokes and drinks tea in the house, she reads Descartes, studies philosophy on the balcony, and learns the wisdom of the predecessors. At the same time, she observes the people coming and going on the street from the balcony, longing for participating in the wider public space. "She was used to the noise as she studied, as she slept; it was the ongoing accompaniment to her life, her thoughts, the contrast din more soothing than silence would have been. Indoors, with no room of her own, it was harder. But the balcony had always been her place" [5]. To Gauri, the balcony is a place where she can connect with the world, and it gives her a sense of belonging which she fails to get from the domestic place.

The balcony is both a part of the home and an important area leading to the outside. As a woman, Gauri has no room of her own and can only move on the balcony. On the one hand, it shows her marginal identity; while on the other hand, the balcony, which is an accessory part of the house, is precisely the most open part of the domestic space. Gauri, who is excluded from the public realm, uses the balcony as a support, silently observes the world and persists in learning, laying the foundation for a broader public space in the future.

### 3.3. The Confinement of Women's Social Involvement

Less social involvement also plays an important role in contributing to confining women to home. The Indian immigrant women, coming from the third world, are in an oppressed position in the family and become dependent on men. Additionally, they also endure the oppression of colonial culture and become the "Other" in western cities.

Gauri, who follows Subhash to the United States, is confined to the private space of an apartment. Subhash gives her a seemingly independent space, leaving behind some dollars, departmental telephone number and the key to the door. While settling in a foreign country is a huge challenge for Gauri because everything is so foreign to her. Although she has studied English before, “she can barely understand the broadcast” [5] when hearing an American man reporting the news. As a newcomer, she also fails to get along with her neighbors successfully. “The neighbors were other graduate student couples, a few families with young children. They seem not to notice her. She hears only a door shutting, or the muffled ring of someone else’s telephone, or footsteps going up the stairs” [5]. Due to her distinctive appearance and accent, many American people keep at a distance from her and some of them even show stereotypes to her. Their indifferent attitude adds to her unwelcome feeling and makes her more reluctant to leave the apartment. What’s worse, she begins to look down on herself and feels that she will not be accepted by others no matter how hard she tries. She experiences the loneliness of social isolation and difficulties in entering the public places due to disappointment with her social network.

#### **4. Spatial Movement and Women’s Resistance**

Feminist geographers have long pondered how patriarchal culture acts as a form of spatial control to limit women’s mobility. Mona Domos and Joni Siegel argue that “The control of the women’s movement has long preoccupied governments, families, households, and individual men. It is hard to maintain patriarchal control over women if they have unfettered freedom of movement through space” [7]. Therefore, by breaking the shackles of the division of gender space constructed by patriarchal culture, women can give themselves more life choices in different spaces (including private and public spaces) for more freedom of movement. After Gauri arrives in the United States, she transforms herself from appearance to heart, from housework to work, and from domestic place to public place.

##### **4.1. Body Redefinition**

Feminist geography regards the body as a place, which is an unavoidable topic in the discussion of the relationship between gender and space. Gillian Ross compares the body to a map showing the relationship between power and identity, and she asserts that “bodies are ‘maps of power and identity’; or, rather, maps of the relation between power and identity” [8]. Linda McDowell assents to the spatiality of the body and puts forward that “the body is the place, the location or site” [9] in that there are always impermeable boundaries between one body and another. In accordance with Linda’s argument, the disciplines of women’s bodies by certain social practices set by the patriarchal culture lay a solid foundation for the oppression of women. The first step in Gauri’s self-construction is the transformation of body space.

Gauri's first resistance to the shackles imposed on women by Indian society is shown in her dress and hairstyle. Gauri has been wearing saris with long hair since her becoming 15 due to Islam's strict requirements on women's dress. Sari brings great inconvenience to women when they are engaged in labor, and is also a shackle for women's spirit. While in the USA, she cut her long black hair short and put it on the dressing table, and cut all the sari into pieces and scatters them in a corner of the room. Her behavior surprises her husband, who finds that "She had destroyed everything" [5]. Gauri bravely takes off the traditional Indian women's dress, sari, and put on comfortable short T-shirt and slacks. With the help of her hairstyle and clothes, she completely sheds her burdens and shackles, transforms into an ordinary American woman with an Indian appearance, and skillfully uses the reset of her appearance to exchange for a new way of looking at the world.

#### 4.2. Becoming an Urban Flaneur

Another representation of the movement of women in space is to be a flaneur, wandering the streets of the city or traveling between cities. "A flaneur is a bystander in the city, an anonymous person who watches but does not participate in the development of the city." [2] Gauri in *The Lowland* fights against the marginalization of women in social space by bravely stepping out of her peaceful prison-like home, refusing to be "angel at home" and joining the ranks of urban flaneurs.

Taking advantage of her freedom in the United States, Gauri enriches herself with being an urban flaneur. Overcoming her initial timidity and inertia, she steps out of her apartment into a campus where she sees many things. She finds men in jackets and women in woolen coats, smoking and chatting. Along the way, she also enters the Department of Philosophy, which she studies in Calcutta, India. The re-encounter with the philosophy injects vitality and freshness into her boring American life. After that, she takes philosophy class twice a week and actively participates in class discussions. In addition, while on campus, Gauri read a campus newspaper, from which she learns about some problems in the radical society at that time. The newspaper transforms her from a victim of patriarchy and parochialism to an empowered woman to determine her own path in life. Returning to the campus as an urban flaneur and resuming her unfinished philosophical dreams in India, Gauri redefines herself in this way. Her roaming from her apartment to the campus provides her with a unique perspective on urban life, and the flaneur experiences marks the transformation of Gauri from private space to public space.

#### 4.3. Spatial Movement from Rhode Island to California

Doreen Massey [4] argues that restricting women's movement in space is a key means of subjugating them. In the era of globalization, in which men become the majority of society, women are connected with stability and adherence to their

homes. Therefore, for women, rejecting fixedness and enhancing spatial fluidity is the way to effectively resist the fate of being marginalized and despised. Gauri in *The Lowland* enter a wider social space and public sphere by spatial movement.

Moving from Rhode Island to California is not just a change in geography, but also a personal growth and transformation of Gauri. In the Rhode Island apartment, Gauri stays at home all day doing the housework. Without physical and emotional support of Subhash, Gauri gives up all social life and stays home to care for their daughter Bela. “On weekdays, as soon as she picked up Bela from the bus stop and brought her home, she went straight to the kitchen, washing up the morning dishes she’d ignored, then getting dinner started. [...] She was never able to understand why this relatively unchallenging set of chores felt so relentless. When she was finished, she did not understand why they had depleted her” [5]. Although what Gauri does doesn’t seem challenging, but all these trivial things wear her out physically and mentally. The repeated work day after day has extinguished her passion for life, and her philosophical studies are the only support she can survive in displacement.

Gauri asserts her individualistic subjectivity after she leaves her family life and finds a job in a college in California. Gauri, in California, is no longer a taciturn and sullen Indian housewife, but a friendly lady who is “approachable” [5]. In Rhode Island, she always presents herself with a wife or a mother, she is just a “household manager”. While in California, she becomes a professor and “an alternate guardian to a few”. In Rhode Island, after a long day of housework, Gauri doesn’t care what Subhash and Bela eat, and even does not want to stay with them. But in California, she supervises students from India, whom “she invited to dinner, catering biriyani and kebabs” [5]. Moving from Rhode Island to California makes Gauri realize that it will be difficult to survive abroad without transforming herself to deal with her marginalization. Therefore, the movement of geographical space brings about the transformation of Gauri’s personal identity, and she gradually realizes her own subjectivity and the meaning of life.

## 5. Conclusions

According to feminist geography, societal ideology and gender stereotypes about the division of gender into separate spaces create feminized private spaces, and prevent women from moving freely into public spaces. Private space also reproduces and reinforces women’s otherness, which leads to women being bound in a small and closed domestic space and eventually losing the ability to control their own destiny. Although gendered space constrains women’s activity space and discourse space, women can still resist the fate of being marginalized by gendered space through spatial movement. Therefore, under the guidance of feminist geography theory, this paper analyzes the socially constructed spatial dilemma of Gauri in *The Lowland* in terms of gendered space, domestic space and public space, and finds out feasible space resistance strategies.

*The Lowland* is the most feminist of Lahiri's novels, showing gender differences in the distribution and flow of geographical space. "Lahiri offers divergent perspectives on the gendered dimensions of migrancy and alternative transnational imaginaries" [10], noting the gendered spatial constraints experienced by immigrant Indian women. *The Lowland* showcases Lahiri's extraordinary art of storytelling and her belief in a new concept of women, as well as her concern for women's destiny and her strong belief in feminism. The social relationship between gender and space reflected in *The Lowland* is worthy of attention and disclosure, and it also has important practical significance for the study of women's plight and their ways of resistance.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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