
Allo-portraits of a Mother: Photography and Diasporic M(o)therhood in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract

A third of the way through Jhumpa Lahiri's latest novel *The Lowland*, tragedy strikes. What seems until then to be a novel about the lives of two brothers Subhash and Udayan, developing along parallel transnational tracks as one moves to America and the other remains in India, becomes instead Subhash's story as Udayan is mercilessly murdered by the police because of his involvement in a radical political movement sweeping through Bengal at the time. Subhash marries Udayan's pregnant widow and returns with her to begin a new life in America. However, despite Subhash's intentions, he is unable to form a family in diaspora as Gauri abandons Subhash and their daughter in pursuit of her own career. Gauri's character has been read by reviewers as "stunningly selfish" and "the folktale parody of a cold, selfish witch." I go against the grain of such readings and argue instead that Gauri fails as a mother in diaspora because she is haunted by the past and unable to recover from it. I will also posit that she is worthy of our sympathy because she is in fact marginalized from the beginning of the novel and left out of the circuits of familiarity. My starting point for the analysis of motherhood and the themes of diasporic mourning and loss in the novel are some photographs that never actually appear in the novel, but which Lahiri describes at significant length. Using photographic theory in general and Marianne Hirsch's work on family photographs, the familial gaze and the connection between photography and motherhood, I will argue that Gauri is a more sympathetic character who fails to fulfil the hegemonic familial ideology imposed upon her. The trope of photography, I will argue, allows us glimpses into Gauri's inner life and provides a more nuanced portrayal of motherhood in diaspora than the monstrous mother that Gauri is often simplistically assumed to be.

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