

# Menaces of Ideal Motherhood – A Brief Study of 21st Century Motherhood in *The Lowland* & *The House of Hidden Mothers*

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## Abstract

Motherhood is not a decision taken out of choice. Many a time, women are compelled to become mothers due to the pressure from families, peers and society. It becomes an entrapment, where they are imposed with certain ideas and goals to fulfil like children and a 'happy' marital communication. The loss of one's own identity and accepting an 'ideal' one, which is congenial for the traditional setup, motherhood is thus, questioned. However, motherhood—or parenthood, for that matter—is not a proverbial Band-Aid. Not every woman is carved for motherhood, even though then entire world may tell her otherwise. Being biologically capable of giving birth does not mean every woman would want to go through with it. The twenty-first century fiction are paving a path for an obvious change in the image of mother. Authors have resettled themselves from ideal portrayals of enduring, self-effacing women, and toward conflicted female characters, those are in active search of their identity. In this regard, the paper will study Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Meera Syal's *The House of Hidden Mothers*, which depict the diversity of women, breaking stereotypes and the rejection of subordination, rather than limiting them to an ideal.

**Keywords:** mother, motherhood, women, fiction, birth, ideal

## Introduction

Motherhood is one of the long held views about women and the roles they play in society. The societies and individuals ascribe a specific gender role to women. As for India, motherhood comes with a divine disposition, or something, which could be worshipped. The age-long customs and practices of the country assigned motherhood to a sacrosanct position, which eventually became the ultimate determinant of the worth and identity of Indian women. Even this particular identity of motherhood has overshadowed other roles of women. Not only women are raised and cultured to be an ideal mother, but this very idea and glorification of motherhood has been traced in the promotion of popular culture. This discourse has taken place in various forms from past to present. For instance, during the argument over the Hindu Code Bill in the Constituent Assembly, Pandit M. M. Malaviya opined, "In the Brahman society the woman has been given the highest place. There is nothing higher than the mother." In a similar vein, other Constituent Assembly members

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like Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava and Krishna Chandra Sharma supported and glorified women's position as 'mother'. Ironically, the Brahmins and ancient Indian society always looked down upon women and giving importance to their 'motherhood' can be confirmed as a way of subordination. A thoughtful article by Nur Yalman, "On the purity of women in the castes of Ceylon and Malabar" (1963), shows that the sexuality and identity of women is the matter of social conscience. Yalman states that a basic proposition of any Hindu social institution is to put up a restricted structure to preserve women, property and ritual quality within it. The society from the post-Vedic times felt the need for surveilling women's sexuality. So, they started assigning strict 'roles' for women, like motherhood.

In the Indian history, the place of the mother has been erroneously obscured by equating the identity of the 'mother' with the idealised nation itself. Earlier India was referred to as 'Bharat Varsh', after the legendary and masculine leader, King Bharat. This shift from paternal to maternal origin is an exposition of the age-old perception of viewing women only as bearers of the family bloodlines. Moreover, protecting one's country always becomes synonymous with protecting one's mother from the dangers. People become altruistic with the notion of protecting mother, extending it towards imposing social restrictions on 'motherhood'. The nationalism becomes a sexist or gendered one, as it has more cultural sentiment than geographical one, "nation is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson, 1991)

One of the last bulwarks of patriarchy, idealizing motherhood, has been an inconclusive issue for feminists. Now motherhood and reproduction were a debatable issue from the emergence of the first wave of feminism. The aim of this first wave was to bring gender equality and open up opportunities for women, mainly focused on suffrage. The issues on motherhood were still ignored and latent. It was during the second wave when the feminist discourses started focusing on reproductive rights and motherhood. In the second wave, many feminists sought to reinterpret and reclaim motherhood and revalue them in their discourse. As Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey points out:

The reaction to the fifties' cloying cult of motherhood freed millions of women like us to consider motherhood a choice rather than an unavoidable obligation, but it may also have encouraged many to deny, or to defer dangerously long, our own desires for domesticity and maternity. (Rosenfelt & Stacey, 1987)

A strong and heated discourse on motherhood emerged with the feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone and Betty Friedan, who found a connection between the naturalized position of 'mother' and women's subjugation. They clearly rejected the notions of motherhood, as Deborah Babcox and Madeline Belkin opines, We are not against love, against men and women living together, against having children. What we are against is the role women play once they become wives and mothers (Babcox & Belkin, 1971). This idea developed further with other feminists and critics encouraging women to deny any maternal desires. Eventually as the feminist movements went further and started to counter-act against the sense of impasse on the later movements. Debates became more critical with mothers-to-be, mothers and the cultural identities of motherhood. The arguments started concentrating on 'lesbian mothers', 'bad mothers', 'slave mothers', etc. Jane Price Knowles makes a corresponding suggestion in the Introduction of *Motherhood: A Feminist Perspective*: The challenge of mothering seems to be not how to be 'good enough,' but to dare to believe in our goodness enough to also be 'bad enough. (Cole & Knowles, 1990)

Now, the main concern of this paper is to relate this argument on Indian context. The Third World feminist context remained as a silenced object of analysis for a long time. Barbara Smith, in this context, says:

And not only am I talking about my sisters here in the United States...I also talking about women all over the globe...Third world feminism has enriched not just the women it applies to, but also political practice in general. (Smith, 2000)

Looking back into the historical background of the awakening of feminist powers in Indian context, one can study it in parallel with the waves of feminist movements. The strong voices of Indian women resonated with the Suffragette movement in the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth times. The social reformers and intelligentsia, though sensitive to the European and British ideals, found this as a mode of resistance for the colonial hegemony. With their Western ideas on progress and rationalism they tried to give birth to a new society which would be aberrated from all the social impediments to the progress of Indian women. The British rulers on the education and equal rights enforced reforms for the women, according to their viewpoints on Western rationalities. It is the Gandhian times when women's public activities expanded, legitimized, and further incorporated in the freedom movement. Endorsed as the quintessence of strength, protection and endurance, the 'mother' figure eventually integrated into the struggles for both gender equality and nationalist goals. Formation of various women's associations (like WIA, AIWC) during twentieth century revolutionized the movement by

putting pressures for the reformation of the family laws regarding wives, daughters and mothers. Although in the 1940s and 1950s the movement progressed towards revaluation and redefinition of the Indian motherhood notions in the prevalent discordant ideologies. Challenging the traditional orthodoxical idea of Hindu religious system was not an easy task, as counter-responses came with the cries for the preservation of the age-old morals and customary practices. The opposite side counteracted and remained unshaken with their ideal notions on 'matritya' or motherhood. Even the Hindu Law Committee's efforts for a formation of progressive and modern nation was resisted and thwarted by the orthodox and religious segments. This segment always wanted women to remain in the domesticated 'pativrata' ideal form. For them women's role has always been a 'progenitor', which signifies an immensely virtuous position in Hindu religion. Through the modification of Hindu Code Bill after 1950s, women's status was empowered into a profound level. However, still the critical position of mother is contested until now.

This paper has tried to analyze three things in the context of Indian motherhood - 'perfect' and 'good' mother, a woman's struggle to becoming that one and a pathetic disillusionment with a strong refusal for society's idealism. Motherhood is not a decision taken out of choice. Many a time, women are forced to become mothers due to the pressure from families, peers and society. This forcible imposition oftentimes leads to disastrous events in their lives. The lives of two mothers, Gauri and Shyama, can be discussed in this context. A complex and schismatizing character is Gauri, in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, who turns back on her own husband and daughter. She is complex and non-transparent with her thoughts and feelings, which could make harder for her to survive easily in some tough situations. Thanks to her dominant characteristics and intellect that helped her to survive in several life crisis. Traditionally, Gauri failed to be a 'good' mother and even a traditionally 'perfect' woman. She was born in a Bengali family in Calcutta and lived with her brother Manash after her parent's untimely departure. Both the siblings were sent to their grandparents in America. This uprooting from her origin and devoid of any sense of 'family' had a great impact in Gauri's later life. The detachment created a complex sense inside her about family and relationships. However, Udayan always cherished and admired her autonomy. Her independence and education helped her to contemplate her life, which she did from her grandparent's balcony, her "Bodhi tree"- like place. Gauri's estrangement was not only for 'family', but also for the traditional societal beliefs. She preferred books rather than sari and bangles. Her critical way of thinking was respected by Udayan, but despised by her mother-in-law. Udayan married a woman of his choice, but not of his family, which was the first breach in the bonding. Gauri did not conform the conventional patriarchal norms of female behaviour, even she had a strong view on the institution of arranged marriage. Both Udayan and Gauri's beliefs resonated against the established ideas on marriage and motherhood.

Things became disastrous for Gauri when the officers for his strong connection with the Naxalite movement, shot Udayan to dead. In future, that experience haunted and affected her. Udayan's brother Subhash, knowing the harsh treatment on pregnant Gauri in his house, proposed to marry her and take her away to his place. The Mitra family had no regards for Gauri, and that coldness towards her was unbearable for Subhash. Both of them cutting all familial ties, he brought Gauri to America. It was awkward for Gauri, as she tried to 'adjust' herself half-reluctantly. There she gave birth to a girl-child, Bela, for whom Gauri was always anxious about the disclosure of her real biological father. But her estrangement and displacement never abated, even her daughter's birth made no change to that. She became disillusioned, isolated herself from her 'origin' and changed herself and her attire too. At this stage, Gauri became more desirous to pursue her education, her thirst for knowledge and eventually pursued a doctorate. She became more and more reluctant to her marital duties and motherhood and her mother-daughter relationship grew contentious. Eventually, she left Bela and Subhash for her teaching job in California.

Meera Syal, however, comes up with a different story of motherhood in her *The House of Hidden Mothers*. Unlike Gauri, here a middle-aged woman desires to become a mother through surrogacy and another young woman, as a surrogate mother, wants to be free from her toxic domestic circumstances by becoming a mother. Quite complex and intricate plot, where the author tried to blow off the myth of traditional 'Indian motherhood', it becomes a story of a 'different motherhood'. Here, Shyama, who is in her mid-40s, tries to become a mother once again. She is a successful businessperson in London, divorced and left her first husband and daughter. Toby is her new lover, who is a few years younger than she is. As one can imagine that, there have been times when she has not been hesitated to walk against the traditional patriarchal norms for Indian women and mothers. Yet at heart, she still feels her ties to her origin. Shyama always wants to be different from her parents. She has a bitter scepticism for traditional Indian middle-class lives and ageing process. She has the courage to break through the barriers of stereotypical Indian minds. This attitude and strong belief of her leads to the decision of surrogacy, as she and Toby have been unable to conceive a child. So, they go to India in search of a surrogate mother. In this complex ethics of surrogacy, a rural Indian woman, Mala, is caught up. At this point, both of their life-journeys become intricate and inexorable. Mala is poor Indian woman from a rural area. Bitterness comes into her life when her father is deceased, which eventually terminates her desire for further education. Mala is married to Ram, an ignorant, drunkard and bully, whose source of income is just an 'inadequate' dowry. Somehow, Ram gets the license to treat Mala like a chattel. Mala's life is degraded, which she cannot alter anyway, as she has to fit herself in this marital communion. However, when she gets to know about the surrogacy and the one-time huge offer by Shyama, she thinks of her

freedom. Ram is ready to lend his wife's womb to be rented, as for him money matters the most. Mala, for the first time, becomes determined to act on her own accord, as for her surrogacy becomes a power and an escape from her degrading existence.

Now, the initial plan of the couple was to travel India, staying there to look after the surrogate mother and taking their child. As for Mala, she has to be impregnated with a donor egg and sperm, receiving the huge amount of money and giving away the child for whom there will be no substantive attachment. Mala will be taken into care in the clinic during her gestation period and after delivery, she will hand over the baby. However, it gets complicated as the couple decides to bring pregnant Mala in their home in order to take care of her. This decision broadens the rift in the mother-daughter relationship between Shyama and her first daughter, Tara. Tara is always furious about her mother's self-absorption and now she despises her mother's decision of taking another child. Eventually, Shyama's self-centred involvements prove fatal for her marital life also. At the end, as it is implied, that Toby becomes interested in spending time with Mala and his child. Shyama is left to navigate her own journey. Tara, on the other hand, is finding her own voice as a feminist activist after being sexually assaulted and following the events of the Nirbhaya case. It indicates the end of Shyama's domestic life, her desire of becoming a mother and Mala's freedom from her cursed life.

These women characters have redefined and restructured the arguments on Indian motherhood. The three parameters that the paper has suggested will analyse the cases of these women or 'mothers'. For Gauri, she never believed the institution of marriage and family, as her familial or maternal ties are incomplete. She lost her parents and then sent to her grandparents' place, which initiates the estrangement and detachment, which she suffered through her whole life. For this reason, she grew on a sense of autonomy. Now, the Indian patriarchal societal system always considered less autonomy for women, and it is true for other Third World countries. As it is said earlier, 'motherhood' has always been a contested terrain in India particularly. The sham glorification of motherhood is just another name of putting limitations on women. Gauri goes through such ordeal when she marries Udayan and enters into the Mitra family. Udayan's mother, being an Indian middle-class woman, despises Gauri's 'independent' behaviours. Except Udayan, the Mitra family becomes eager to fit Gauri into the role of a traditionally 'perfect woman' with the patriarchal ideas of feminine behaviours, dress, appearance, marital status and motherhood. Women within patriarchal boundaries who accept the patriarchal norms for feminine demeanours are rewarded, and women like Gauri, are resented and becomes unwanted daughter-in-law. Gauri's entry in the Mitra family, therefore, is a shock for Udayan's parents as she is not traditionally a very attractive



woman. Moreover, she is an obstacle and eyesore in their huge expectations of grand marriage of their son. But Udayan's mother expects that by getting married her son will stray away from doing politics. The Indian society always consider a wife to be a 'healing factor' for the husbands, as they are married just to look after them and serve the family obediently. No family wants their daughter-in-law to concentrate on studies and books and ignoring the daily house chores. However, Gauri loved Udayan and faithfully followed him until his sudden death. She joined him in his politics, in order to feel the part of him. Without questioning, she followed him like a true homemaker. Things drastically change after the death of Udayan. Subhash comes after getting the news of his brother's death. He witnesses Gauri's miserable condition; she is pregnant, but abhorred by the family. The ideas of 'wife' and 'mother' become a proper disillusionment for Gauri when she comes with Subhash, as a wife, and becomes a mother of a girl-child. Her name resonates with the Hindu goddess, Gauri, the wife of Shiva, whose one side signifies purity, domesticity and motherly ideal, and other side shows the 'Kali' form – the destruction incarnate. After her first marriage, she accepts to Udayan's wishes, and so she becomes involved in a passive way with his political activism. This can be rendered as her first form, the goddess Gauri form, an obedient, passive and pure wife. Later in her second marriage with Subhash, Gauri's character resembles more with goddess Kali, the destructive energy, which can be considered by her rebellious acts - cutting her hair, her saris, and eventually destroying their nuclear family. True, Gauri fails to conform to the patriarchal norms of ideal womanhood and motherhood. But one can consider her 'Kali' form to be another side of her motherhood. The mental struggle and psychological torture she faced during her living with Mitra family, finally results in her violent acts of not conforming to Subhash's ideas of a caring mother and a devoted wife. Both Udayan and Subhash are blind to the psychological trauma that Gauri experienced as a result of succumbing to obedient feminine roles. She even leaves her the ultimate connector to the motherhood, her own daughter, Bela.

For Shyama, it is also always her own priority, which seems quite rebellious like Gauri's path. Her first marriage fails, and she divorces her husband and starts living with her daughter, Tara. Unlike Gauri, Shyama has her monetary sources from her business foundations in London. In addition, she gets into a relationship with her partner Toby, much younger than her. She cannot become a mother because of her "inhospitable womb", so she seizes on the idea of doing surrogacy. Now from the beginning, Shyama has always opposed the Indian culture and the patriarchal norms for women. She already has decided not to be fit for that role of 'ideal mother'. Shyama's struggle is no less than Gauri, only the former one has the monetary strength along with her independency. Bringing Mala home to take care of her during the pregnancy, changes their domestic scene drastically. Shyama struggled to be fit into the role of a mother. But her fate resonated quite similarly

with Gauri's. Both of them desire for autonomy, a world of their own, where they have not to conform themselves to some blind ideals. These two women crossed various vexed situations, like the trials of relationship, the anguish of motherhood, mother-daughter conflict and the issues on surrogacy exclusively for Shyama. The issue of surrogacy, which crosses the lives of Shyama and Mala, has raised many questions regarding motherhood. Shyama is born of Indian origin but her decisions and choices do not conform to the Indian cultural values. Her relationship with Toby who is much younger than her, would have never been permitted in Indian society especially for the women who are in their mid-40s. Moreover, the relationship between the mother and the daughter is not much pleasant according to the Indian context.

Abandoning one's husband and daughter is a ruinous act that splits the family. Both of their decisions are destructive, morally deplorable act discordant with typical Indian motherly ideals. It is also evident that the act of nurture and destruction are actually going side by side in these two novels. These women's lives are portrayed in the background of the 'good versus bad mother' moral balance. Destruction can also be comprehended as another mode of creation. In Hindu religion also, the destructive forces are mentioned as a necessary measure for peace and liberation. If one considers Gauri and Shyama's abandonment of familial ties and motherhood as an act of destruction, then it can also be an act of liberation and a valid form of motherliness. Even both of their names can be related to the Hindu goddess, Kali. Kali is regarded as the Divine Mother incarnate in Hindu beliefs. The destructive capabilities of her pave the way for rebirth. She is considered as an ideal protector and her ferocity or destructive behaviour is not to be feared. It is impossible to dissociate both forms of femininity, active and passive, from each other. Both of them try to be fit into the role of a nurturing mother, but they have destructive consequences inherent inside them, which demonstrates the complexity of motherhood in its resistance to conform to strict ideals. Both the women are capable of motherly behaviour, as long one broadens the definition of 'motherly' beyond the domestic, nurturing ideal. Situating Gauri and Shyama within the wide context of motherhood provided by the Hindu myths and religion provides a more sympathetic framework for understanding both of their 'failure' in terms of traditional motherhood. By abandoning their daughters and family, Gauri and Shyama embrace the role as another redefined mother, who liberates their daughters through metaphorical destruction, paving their way for rebirth. While it is tempting to see these actions as un-motherly, this analysis reveals that motherhood can take on many valid forms and attributes, which all stem from the same source.

Is motherhood a commitment taken out of a woman's choice? In reality, oftentimes, women are compelled to become mothers, as the patriarchal society and



families pressurize them. Moreover, after marriage, children play the role of the proverbial healing factor for any breakdown in the enforced or arranged marital communication. However, the motherhood or parenthood is ultimately an entrapment, a patriarchal ideal to limit women's autonomy. Not every woman is fit for motherhood, and being biologically capable of giving birth does not mean that she would want to go through with it. Gauri, Shyama and others like them are mothers, but they are also ordinary human beings. They are entitled to their flaws and mistakes. As *The Lowland* and *The House of Hidden Mothers* show, motherhood is something they are not perfect at. In the 21st century, all those numerous social media posts and memes about motherhood, and even those "Happy Mother's Day" greetings are attached with a particular ideal of motherhood, which sees the woman as the ultimate homemaker who slaves away all day in the kitchen. No one wants to ask them about their desires. Perhaps it is because people are scared that if mothers were given more autonomy, it would be burdensome for male members. The glorification of the mother as a deity and as someone who would go any extent for her children, reduces not only her agency as a woman, but also gives her little scopes in her life. Because, as history witnesses, that it is easier to make women the scapegoats.

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