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A Gendered Historical Discourse of the Naxalbari Movement

By Pritha Sarkar¹

Abstract

This paper analyzes the Indian English novel *The Lowland* (2012) by Jhumpa Lahiri and examines its representation of the Naxalbari movement's (1965-1975) gendered history to locate women, their roles, their marginalized position, and the growth of their individual independent identities. The Naxalbari movement is the first major peasant protest within 20 years of Indian independence.² Though the first actions of the movement were in a village of North Bengal, this paper mainly concentrates on the movement's activities after it was urbanized and joined by the middle class. It, therefore, tries to locate the position of middle-class women within the movement. In the endeavor to engage with the different narratives regarding the roles of 20th century Bengal middle-class women in the movement, the paper historically views and assesses two contradictory perspectives regarding the involvement of women. While a few narratives stress how the participation of women enabled them to attain a certain degree of emancipation from the confinement of the patriarchal society, my detailed study revealed a counter-narrative that stresses the androcentric underpinning of the movement. Hence, this paper analyzes how Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* engages with this problematic and contradictory location of women within the Naxalbari movement. Though there have been few studies on the gendered historical narrative of the Naxalbari movement,³ as discussed briefly in the following sections, its representation has not yet been significantly explored within the scholarly studies of Indian English Literature. I address this gap by analyzing the text through the lens of the movement's gendered historical narratives to foreground the representation of women's experiences in it. Thus, my goal is to analyze women as a subversive force within the movement who represent both the dissenting voice of the Naxalbari movement as well as the critical voice against the gender hierarchy within it.

Keywords: Gendered history, Naxalbari movement, Jhumpa Lahiri, Institutionalization of patriarchy, Patriliney, Sexual division of labor, Political widowhood, Protest movement

Women in the Movement

The movement began in a small village named Naxalbari, situated in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. According to historical records, the movement's first action occurred after the Tarai Krishak Sabha in 1967: "The farmers, sharecroppers and landless agricultural laborers of one of the villages of Naxalbari were largely against a tyrant landlord Buddhiman Tirke. When he killed a farmer named Bigal Kishan, the farmers of the area rose against him" (Das, 2014, p. 50). They raised the slogan "land to the tillers" and prevented the police from entering the villages of

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² There definitely have been many peasants' protests in Independent India. Some prominent ones took place in the last couple of years. However, this paper is concerned with the Naxalbari movement that officially began in 1967 and is the first peasant uprising in post-independence India.

³ Srila Roy, Krishna Bandopadhyay, and Mallarika Sinha Roy are eminent names in this field, and they have been explored in the following sections.

Naxalbari, Khoribari, and Phansidewa. In response to the villagers' protest, the state deployed many police in the area (Basu, 1979, 1982).

With the passing of days, the animosity between the authority and the local villagers increased, leading to an armed battle on 24th May 1967 (Ray, 1993; S. Banerjee, 2009; Dasgupta, 1974). While the police used force to enter the village of Naxalbari, the villagers prevented them with their bows and arrows (Chakravarti, 2017). In the violent tussle, two deaths took place: "On 24th May the peasants, armed with bows and arrows, resisted the police party that went to a village to arrest ... and a female policeman [by the name of Sonam Wangde] was killed" (Sen, 1982, p. 217). On the other side, a pregnant woman who belonged to the group of protestors was killed by the police (S. Banerjee, 2009). The death of the woman led to a march of the villagers of Naxalbari against the state authority and was led by another woman named Dhaneswari Devi.⁴ Sen writes, "The next day [25th of May], the police party ... fired eighteen rounds killing the peasants that included seven women and three infants" (1982, pp. 217-218). In a memoir, Abhijeet Das (2014) records the onset of the movement: "the police fired at a gathering of women to spread the message of land distribution movement ... killing ten women and a child. One of the bullets went through the breast of Dhaleswari and killed the child who was wrapped in a sling on her back" (p. 51). Though there lacks unanimity among historians and sociologists on whether the women were armed or unarmed, all accounts reference the firing of weapons in the women's gathering. Even to this day, the 25th of May is commemorated as Naxalbari Day. Despite several narratives regarding the initiation of the movement, one fact remains unanimous: the role and presence of women at its core during the beginning of the movement. Firstly, it was the death of a woman that led to a march or gathering organized by the women of the village, which was in turn led by a woman named Dhaneswari Devi. Secondly, the death of women and children in this violent encounter acted as a catalyst in spreading the revolution in several villages, cities, and university campuses of Bengal.

As the movement spread from the villages of North Bengal to the cities, it transformed into a struggle against the class hierarchy dominated by the middle class.⁵ Studies reveal that after the movement spread to the cities, it was primarily joined by middle-class youths from colleges and universities (Gupta, 2007). Among the middle-class youths, the movement gained equal popularity among both men and women, and thus many women also joined it. Krishna Bandopadhyay (2001) looks at how the movement acted as a tool for the emancipation of women from patriarchal social conventions. Bandopadhyay refers to Seema, an activist and a close friend of the revolutionary narrator, who relates how the interactions and stays in the rural villages during the movement enabled her to move beyond her conservative aristocratic family and live independently without any male guardian. In her article "Magic Moments of Struggle: Women's Memory of the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal (1967-75)," Mallarika Sinha Roy (2007) has written down memories of various women of the Naxalbari movement. Their experiences during this period enabled them to cope with multiple situations in their personal lives and experience life beyond their social

⁴ This woman is named as Dhaleswari Devi in certain books like *Footprints of Foot Soldiers* by Abhijeet Das and *Spring Thunder* by Arun Mukherjee. But in most of the other books about the movement, including Sumanta Banerjee's *In the Wake of Naxalbari*, she is named as Dhaneswari Devi. In the mouthpiece journals of the Naxalbari Movement, named *Liberation* and *Deshabrati*, her name is written as Dhaneswari Devi. Further, in my personal interview with her son, Pavan Singha of Naxalbari, and with other surviving members of the movement, I found the name Dhaneswari Devi. Hence, in this research she is addressed as Dhaneswari Devi. But within the quotations, the name is kept as the author had written.

⁵ The movement was gradually appropriated by the middle-class intelligentsia through the political organization of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) known as C.P.I. (M.L.). For details, see Dipak K. Gupta (2007), Sudeep Chakravarti (2016), Abhijeet Das (2014), Mallarika Sinha Roy (2009, 2010), and Biplab Dasgupta (1974).

boundaries. A woman named Naxalite with university education and upper-middle-class background recalls, “I think the experience of those years...even if I live to be a hundred...will remain most significant to me as long as I live...it’s the world that you get to see in its very naked form” (M.S. Roy, 2007, p. 214). Thus, beyond the larger vision and goals of the movement, the narratives of women, as found in the work of Srila Roy, show that the movement had also instilled in them the dream of creating a gender-free society where they would not be restricted by patriarchy or modern notions of femininity and could carve out their own identities (S. Roy, 2001).

Methodology: An Alternative Version of the Naxalbari movement and its Representation in *The Lowland*

A closer study on the movement reveals that gender inequality was visible within the very structure of the movement. Since most of the members of the urbanized Naxalbari movement descended from the middle class, the patriarchal characteristics that dominated the 20th century middle-class Bengali society seeped into the movement⁶ (Sarkar, 2021). This resulted in the marginalization of women on several levels. Taking cue of Kamla Bhasin’s argument on how the institutionalization of patriarchy expands from family to society, as the unequal power distribution in society with males remaining at the superior positions (Bhasin, 2000, pp. 88-91), this paper traces the marginalized narratives of women. Most of the mainstream historical representations of any movement follow the experiences encountered by men that are regarded as universal whereby the women are pushed to the background; the Naxalbari movement is not an exception (M.S. Roy, 2007). This problem motivates my analysis of the gender inequality within the movement. In most of the movements’ histories, “women are regarded to contribute something that existed without them” (Lalita et al., 1989, p. 20), and the Naxalbari movement is not an exception. Such contributory history (Lalita et al., 1989) fails to explore the manifold problems: it “not only marginalizes women but also mythologizes them according to the male-centred world” (Lalita et al., 1989, p. 15). In this context, women’s history is “an intervention ... an assertion that women have a history [different from the mainstream male-dominated history] although that history has been distorted” (Lalita et al., 1989, p. 18).⁷ The Naxalbari movement is not an exception to such an androcentric narrative in which women’s experiences are either silenced or attributed to contributory roles.

The few available narratives of surviving Naxal activists written down by eminent scholars like Mallarika Sinha Roy, Srila Roy, and Krishna Bandopadhyay give a different history of the movement from the standpoint of women. This article contributes to this gendered history by harnessing a literary text that reflects the movement from a woman’s perspective. Thus, reading this text through the lens of gendered history offers an alternative to the established pattern of scholarly readings within Indian English Literature that focuses primarily on men’s experiences within and representations of the Naxalbari movement. Although Mahasweta Devi’s fictions on the movement, translated to English, reveal the standpoint of women survivors and activists, yet the internal gender hierarchy resulting in marginalization of women within the movement is mostly absent in the literary discourse on the movement. Given these omissions, it is crucial to read *The Lowland* through the lens of gendered history. Thus, I argue that Jhumpa Lahiri explores the

⁶ This has been broadly discussed in my earlier paper on middle-class patriarchal ideology and how it penetrated in the movement.

⁷ They are the authors of *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in Telangana People’s Struggle*, one of the few eminent books that traces the female narratives of the Telangana movement revealing its gendered historical account.

movement and its popular representation in *The Lowland* through a feminist lens in order to provide a gendered history that subverts the mainstream historical narrative.

Reading the Movement through the Lens of Gendered History

To read the movement and its representation in the text through the lens of gendered history, it is necessary to identify the patriarchal characteristics of the movement that resulted in the marginalization of women. Since the members of the movement failed to recognize its patriarchal construction, they unwittingly participated in its construction within the movement. The first patriarchal characteristic that can be recognized in the movement is patriliney. In this context, Nivedita Menon (2012) argues that gender bias regularly takes precedence over the prioritization of age and its association with positions of authority. In her words, within a patriarchal society, “power [is] distributed along gender and age hierarchies, but with adult men trumping older women” (Menon, 2012, p. 32). As a result, in the families, property and authority pass from father to son, even in the presence of older women. In the absence of a son, the property passes on to the son-in-law (Menon, 2012, pp. 32-34). This patriliney is visible not only within the family but also beyond it. The pre-independence nationalist movements had men in almost all the decision-making and authoritative positions. Even post-independence, it was chiefly men who held the authoritative position in the legal or economic fronts; women seldom played any role in any decision-making committees. The Naxalbari movement was not an exception to this, and the gender discrimination was rooted in the fact that it was mostly men who held key positions, whether in any action or in the core committee of the newly formed political party. This is in cue with Kamla Bhasin’s (2000) argument regarding the institutionalization of patriarchy as it expands beyond family to become a norm in society. As far as the movement was concerned, its leaders also failed to overcome patrilineality. In this regard, Mallarika Sinha Roy (2009) has noted, “Women’s participation in the movement has perfunctory mention in the academic history and has been largely deemed as supportive rather than front-ranking revolutionary activism by the Naxalite leadership” (pp. 209-210). Thus, the institutionalization of patriarchy dominant in the larger society also intruded into the movement. A similar narrative is detected in the story of Supriya, a female Naxal activist, in the study by Srila Roy; she speaks of how women were reserved for the role of informers and healers:

In general female cadres were employed to do tech *kaaj* (technical work), mostly courier work, including the transportation of papers, arms, and information...only a few were employed to organizational works like recruiting people for the party, campaigning and forming squads...fewer women were in local committees, and none were in senior positions of leadership. (S. Roy, 2001, pp. 191-192)

They were prevented from participating in campaigning and creating barricades since they were considered too fragile to be involved in these activities. Their tasks, therefore, remained limited to work as informers and couriers (S. Roy, 2007; Bandopadhyay, 2001; S. Roy, 2001). Thus, similar to the larger society where women were limited to the supporting roles of their male counterparts, the movement too followed patriarchal notions and limited their women comrades to be only supporters. Women were neither granted any position in the central committee nor asserted any leadership role.

The presence of patrilineality led to the absence of women’s issues within the objectives. A study of the objectives of the movement decided by the All-India Coordination Committee

reveals that the movement failed to address the problems of women due to the patriarchal structure in society. The difficulties encountered by women within the family or in the larger society were overlooked by the leaders of the movement. Although the movement wanted to create an equal society, their institutional assertion of women's issues as secondary is evident. The unequal treatment of women in society was not given any attention by its leaders. The leaders of the organization assumed that changing the class hierarchy and disrupting the feudal structure would automatically result in bettering the situation of women (Bandopadhyay, 2001). This was simply due to a lack of comprehension of the patriarchal chains of women. They failed to understand that a "qualitative change for women does not just follow as a result of a struggle centered elsewhere. Women's chains are not just feudal" (Lalita et al., 1989, p. 21). Thus, the movement never aimed to bring any change to the heteronormative patriarchal structure.

The third patriarchal trait recognized in the movement followed the sexual division of labor in which men and women were given tasks based on their gender. In the initial phase of the movement, all the tasks were done by both men and women (Bandopadhyay, 2001; Chakravarty, 2017). Women fought in the first rank, becoming martyrs, which led to the popularity of the movement. But after the spread of the movement, the tasks assigned to women were limited to *tech-kaaj*⁸ (courier service and nurse for wounded male comrades). The association of healing with women follows the sexual division of labor. According to the patriarchal notion, women are designated as natural caregivers and nurturers: "Nursing and teaching (particularly at lower levels) are predominantly considered women's profession...the feminization of teaching and nursing is because such work is seen as an extension of the nurturing work that women do at home" (Menon, 2012, pp. 11-12). The movement that claimed to not follow any conventional ideologies and traditions was not an exception to sexism. Krishna Bandopadhyay speaks vehemently about the caregiving and nurturing tasks accorded to women: "We women activists underwent a nursing training course in Medical College...Now I wonder the principle idea behind this training was that our male comrades will get wounded and we women will nurse them back to battle condition" (Bandyopadhyay, 2001, pp. 4-9). So, the work given to women were an extension of the *ghor*⁹ (household chores). Thus, a movement claiming to create an egalitarian society failed to identify the discrimination meted out towards women due to this patriarchal ideology. Hence, it followed the same patriarchal notion and assigned the so-called feminine duties of caregiving and nurturing to women. This ideology of the political party reaffirms the peripheral position given to women within the movement.

Due to the dominance of patrilineality, women failed to hold any authoritative position in decision-making committees. This led to the fourth patriarchal characteristic—ignoring the problems encountered by women within the movement. Similar to the absence of women's objectives, the absence of women in the decision-making committee¹⁰ resulted in the women's contributions and the problems they encountered being unrecognized by the core committee. In the mouthpiece journals of the Naxalbari movement like *Deshabrati* and *Liberation*, women recede to the periphery: there is a negligible reference to the participation of women in the activities. One must hunt to find names of women Naxal activists in these journals. Only a few records of the surviving Naxal women foreground their roles in the movement. As far as women's

⁸ This characteristic and its gendered historical narrative is discussed in the later section of the paper that deals with Gauri and how she was misinformed about her activities by the members of the movement.

⁹ The difference between *ghor* (home) and *bahir* (world) as far as the division of labor is concerned has been identified and discussed by Partha Chatterjee, the eminent historian, in his book *Empire and Nation*.

¹⁰ Mallarika Sinha Roy has discussed in detail about the absence of women in the core decision-making committee.

safety was concerned, Deepa, an educated Naxalite woman, recounts the problem of getting shelter houses for women activists. She reports how the problems related to women were never addressed in any meetings, and women were left to fight their own battles (M.S. Roy, 2007, pp. 220-222). Another woman from Birbhum district obliquely alluded to sexual advances by male comrades, “[Among] Our men comrades...some had different ideas about women ... even though they showed a progressive attitude towards women outwardly, they believed in quite different ideas” (M.S. Roy, 2009, p. 221). These problems encountered by women comrades were hardly discussed in any of the party proceedings. Further, their experiences were not included in any of the mouthpiece journals that reported the problems, the tasks, and the achievements of the Naxal members. Thus, the narratives show that similar to the Telangana and Tebhagha movement, in the Naxalbari movement “women did have special difficulties which the organization was not able to deal with” (Lalita et al., 1989, p. 24). It was chiefly because the core committee members, consisting only of men, failed to recognize these issues as important. Thus, they failed to politicize these issues and seek a permanent solution. Instead, as the narratives reveal, the leaders of the movement trivialized these issues by showering sympathy upon the victimized women. The leaders further prevented women as a whole from taking up organizational tasks of recruiting people, forming squads, or assuming leadership roles. They failed to realize that if these problems remained unaddressed and un-politicized, with “its dimensions rationally encountered, its contradictions analyzed” (Lalita et al., 1989, p. 25), then they would not resolve.

Finally, the chains of political widowhood imposed on the widows of the comrades (M.S. Roy, 2007) establishes the limitation to personal freedom of women within the organization. The limitations on the widows placed by the leaders of the movement is a form of paternalism. Gerda Lerner had opined, “Paternalism or more accurately paternalistic dominance describes the relationship of a dominant group, considered superior, to a subordinate group, considered inferior, in which the dominance is mitigated by mutual obligations and reciprocal rights” (Lerner, 1987, p. 239). The personal choices of the activists were mostly decreed by the senior male members of the party (S. Roy, 2001). As far as remarriages were concerned, the party could never agree to the remarriage of a Naxalite widow to a non-activist. Srila Roy (2001) speaks about it in her article, “The Everyday Life of Revolution: Gender, Violence and Memory”:

Political widowhood carries with it a public ownership of the female body...women found it hard to win approval for their future relationships...the irony is that within the radical redefinition of marriage in the movement, the labels of ‘wives’ and ‘widows’ were largely rendered redundant. Yet as wives and widows, women were made to perform symbolic and actual roles...and expectations of femininity in the political domain. (p. 192)

This extract reveals how the paternalistic drive interfered with the personal choices of women activists and reduced the organization to a larger patriarchal family. These historical narratives demonstrate that for some women, the movement acted as a medium for personal liberation and a promise for a gender-free society. However, this dissenting movement that tried to create an equal society failed to assert the importance of equality for women. The various narratives of women reveal that the Naxalbari movement had its limitations; it had its own set of regulations for women and its margins towards the treatment of women. Thus, though women played significant roles in the initial phase of the movement, they gradually moved to the margin as the movement gained popularity.

Patriarchy among the Members of the Movement

Beyond the historical narratives, a textual analysis of Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* and her protagonist Gauri through the lens of feminism reveals the marginalization of women within the movement. This novel draws out the gendered history of the movement and subverts the mainstream historical records. *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri is a text that deals with the activities of the Naxalbari movement in urban Bengal and its impact on the middle-class families of the cities. As literary critic Moussa Pourya Asl argues, "The novel reconstitutes a gendered history of the movement in which women's story of engagement is...removed and erased" (Pourya Asl, 2018, p. 103). The attitude of the members of the movement towards their relationships with the family or their partners provides a marker of their mentality and thus becomes a tool to understand their patriarchal outlook.

So, in the attempt to expose the gendered history of the movement through the text, the first step is to decode the patriarchal construct which defines the relationship of Udayan, the character associated with the movement, and his wife, Gauri. Udayan descended from a middle-class Bengali family;¹¹ his father held a clerical position in the government sector, while his mother was a housewife whose sole concern lay in looking after the family (Lahiri, 2012). The family structure of this typical middle-class Bengali household calls attention to the structural gendered division of labor (Menon, 2012). While Udayan's father performed the role of breadwinner, the mother took care of the household, thereby re-affirming the *ghor* and *bahir* dichotomy (Chatterjee, 2010, p.163) in middle-class Bengali families. The *ghor* is the Bengali word for home, which was the domain of women, and *bahir* represents the world outside which was the domain of men. The family structure resembles Christine Delphy's analysis of marriage as a labor contract in which the household chores remain the female domain that is often considered unproductive work, in opposition to productive work by the men (Delphy, 1984). Associating this labor contract with the concepts of *ghor* and *bahir* treats the household chores (unproductive work) as women's work and *ghor* (productive work) as men's work. During his college days, Udayan met Gauri, the younger sister of his comrade. She is introduced in the text as a young girl pursuing her bachelor's degree in philosophy without many friends besides her brother. Gauri "did not want family, marriage" but "kept herself to books" (Lahiri, 2013, p. 97), and she wanted to be a teacher before she fell in love with Udayan. Thus, Gauri had always wanted to transgress the sexual division of labor and thus attempted to avoid marriage completely. From being a damsel in love with Udayan to being a mere pawn in the Naxalbari movement (through the hands of Udayan), the character development of Gauri exposes the patriarchal structure of the Naxalbari movement, thereby focusing on the hitherto neglected experiences of women. Through this relationship, the text locates the inherited patriarchal strain within family and marriage to show how the movement was influenced by it. Though Udayan seemed to support personal freedom and equality, he failed to treat his wife as an individual with her own set of thoughts and ideas. Like most middle-class families, Udayan's relationship with Gauri also followed the paternalist approach wherein he was her guardian. Within families, paternalism can be located in the mutual domination and subordination in marital relationships or between the head of the family and other members (Lerner, 1987; N. Desai, 1977; Menon, 2001, 2012). Hence Udayan, the husband, became responsible for the economic, social,

¹¹ The characteristics of the middle class used here are as outlined by Sumit Sarkar, a historian who extensively worked on theorizing the middle-class family structure in post-independent Bengal. They are, firstly, engagement in professional service or a government job, secondly, importance given to the Western model of education, and thirdly, ownership of land or a house. All the characteristics are similar to the family of Udayan; his father was a service holder, the family extensively focused on the education of the children, and they owned a house.

and physical well-being of Gauri, the wife. In exchange for it, he held complete authority over Gauri's sexuality, mobility, and identity. The image of "Udayan shielding Gauri from the sun and the crowd with his hands and his shadow" (Lahiri, 2013) in their first formal date is symbolic of their whole relationship. It is further re-affirmed through his singular decision of moving in with his parents due to the cash-crunch (Lahiri, 2013). Udayan paternalistically assumed that he had the right to make decisions for them both. Moreover, like his parents, Udayan also unquestionably conformed to the sexual division of labor. We see this when Lahiri points out, "Udayan had wanted a revolution, but at home, he'd expected to be served; his only contribution to his meals was to sit and wait for Gauri or her mother-in-law to put a plate before him" (Lahiri, 2014, p. 151).

This demonstrates that Udayan adhered to the strict gender role division whereby the man of the house is responsible for breadwinning while the woman looks after the household affairs. Menon (2012) has argued, "Only the actual process of pregnancy is biological, all the other work within the home that women do—cooking, cleaning and so on (the whole range of work which we may call domestic labor)—can equally be done by men. But this work is called women's work" (p. 11). Hence, the women were expected to concentrate on family. Her job, if she had one, was always secondary: "Whether it is their choice of career or their choice to participate in politics, women are to limit themselves to their primary responsibility of family" (Menon, 2012, pp. 13-14). Following the norm, Udayan contributed as the family's breadwinner by working in a school while providing no assistance with the household chores, characterized as women's work. Udayan, thus, did not act differently from the larger 20th century middle-class Bengali society, which categorized work based on biological essentialism (De Beauvoir, 1972). He sought to bring changes in society and fought against the class hierarchy but failed to recognize or politicize gender inequality. However, her marriage with Udayan brought significant changes in Gauri's life. Post-marriage, Gauri could "hardly move out of the house" (Lahiri, 2013, p. 231). This was because she was compelled to complete her "primary responsibility" (Menon, 2014, pp. 10-11) of household chores to maintain the gender role division. Her primary responsibility became limited to *ghor*: "In Udayan's family, Gauri could leave the house only twice a week for her college" (Lahiri, 2013, p. 233) after completing all her tasks at home, that is, her primary responsibility. Hence, she witnessed an inversion in the priorities of her life. Her education and college, which had been primary responsibilities in her life, became secondary. Though Udayan told his mother not to involve Gauri in regular work, he could not support her because of his lack of involvement in domestic life.

The only assurance Udayan provided to Gauri is "patience" (Lahiri, 2013, p. 121). As the historical documents pointed out, the belief of the members in the movement was that the changes made in the social structure would spontaneously generate changes in gender inequality. Udayan, too, was not an exception. Being in a privileged position, he did not see any problem with the gender hierarchy prevalent in his family or society. Though Udayan claimed to ponder critically over social inequalities, the text foregrounds that his ideas were focused only on class inequalities. Through the character of Udayan, the text reveals how patriarchy subconsciously existed within the members of the movement. Unaware of the patriarchal structure but unconsciously being a part of it, the members of the movement brought these sexist traits into the movement.

Women as Tools for Men in the Movement

This paper analyzes Udayan's character and his relationship with Gauri as a road map to identify the patriarchal traits that seeped into the movement. Thus, scholarship has drawn attention to "the cultural archive of middle class intellectual Bengali patriarchy" (De, 2021), and I draw

upon this scholarship to examine the inscription of middle-class Bengali patriarchy within the movement. In an attempt to unravel the gendered history of the movement, this paper not only locates the secondary position of women but also reveals how the movement appeared to the women who were kept apart from decision-making and only assigned particular tasks.

As the text shows, Gauri was engaged in the movement through her husband: “He began to ask her to do certain things. And so, in order to help him, in order to feel a part of it, she agreed” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 356). Thus, her limited involvement in the movement was chiefly out of her love for Udayan. However, Gauri’s limited task as an informer echoes the role accorded to the majority of women in the movement. In her article “The Everyday Life of Revolution,” Srila Roy (2001) records: “Courier work remained the predominant form of political labor that women performed during this *andolan* ... They actively deployed the female body in order to exploit the cultural meanings that this body signifies” (p. 191). Readers see Gauri’s first task as an informer through a small episode where she passes information to Chandra, a woman working in a tailor’s shop: “Chandra used the curtain to conceal in the pretense of taking her measurements and tucked it [the note which Gauri gave] inside her own blouse, underneath her brassiere” (Lahiri, 2014, p. 357). This small episode reaffirms how women used their bodies and social identities for the movement, while the leaders did not see such exploitation of women’s bodies as problematic. So, biological essentialism (De Beauvoir, 1972) was equally prevalent within the movement where the women were assigned roles either according to the gender role division or because of their bodies and the cultural connotation that they carried. Thus, instead of recognizing gender inequality, the movement chose to work within the patriarchal framework.

Through Gauri’s experience, the paper shows how complete plans for action are kept hidden from the women so that they are unable to understand the impact of their role (Bandyopadhyay, 2001; S. Roy, 2001; M.S. Roy, 2007). Gauri was given a set of tasks, but its cause or result was never revealed to her, “She asked Udayan but he would not tell her, saying this was how she was being most useful, saying it was better for her not to know” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 357). This statement of Udayan not only reflects his paternalism over Gauri but also the overall guardianship and protective mentality of senior leaders over women. It entitled him not only to conceal the results and causes of her action but also to not seek Gauri’s consent for the task. Through the lens of gendered history that gives prominence to the thoughts of the female characters to read their silenced voices (De Beauvoir), the paper unmasks pertinent questions that remained in Gauri’s mind while performing the tasks accorded to her by Udayan. She felt disheartened as she was clueless about her actions: “It was like performing in a brief play, with fellow actors who never identified themselves, simple lines and actions that were scripted, controlled” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 357). Thus, from the standpoint of Gauri, she was reduced to a tool in the movement where the results of her action were never disclosed to her.

Udayan also lied to Gauri while involving her in a murder plan. Using Gauri’s identity as a woman, Udayan asked her to watch over a policeman for the purpose of sheltering some of the comrades (Lahiri, 2013, pp. 358-359). Udayan instructed her to take the job of a private tutor in a particular house to keep a record of the policeman and his rounds. Gauri followed his instructions and provided all the information to Udayan, only to learn that she was used as an informant in a plan to murder the policeman. Thus, the truth of the entire operation was undisclosed to her. This incident echoes the historical section, which detailed the institutionalization of patriarchy (Bhasin, 2000) in the movement where men held the key positions in all tasks. Reading the movement through the lens of feminism reveals that such operational procedures reduced women like Gauri to mere tools in the hands of their male counterparts and alienated them from the movement.

Chains of Political Widowhood

The role of paternalism and institutional patriarchy dominated the movement to such an extent that the senior members of the movement imposed specific rules on women, particularly the widows. Gauri's decision to marry Subhash and leave for the United States was not accepted by her in-laws. Gauri was accused of being selfish, and Gauri's decision was not supported by the comrades of Udayan either. As Srila Roy had argued, though the movement rejected the rituals and traditions associated with marriage, its members could not escape the conventions associated with it. So, the leaders considered her marriage with Subhash as a betrayal to Udayan and the movement: "The party had opposed it too. Like her in-laws, they expected her to honour Udayan's memory, his martyrdom ... [and] deemed her second marriage unchaste" (Lahiri, 2013, p. 152). As the text unfolds, the main problem with Gauri's choice, according to the Naxal members, was that she exercised autonomy over her life. She did not let the Naxal party be the guardian of her life but decided to fabricate her life according to her own choices. This incident reaffirms that paternalism was institutionalized within the movement so that the leaders, most of whom were men, considered themselves to be the guardians of the widows of their fallen comrades. They did not expect Gauri to choose a new life partner without their consultation or approval. The leaders expected her to live in seclusion and grieve her husband's death while continuing to work as an informant and eventually remarry with their approval. Though the movement aimed to change the social order and create a free state, its members failed to accept the individual decision of Gauri and ostracized her. Their decision was motivated not only because she chose to marry a non-Naxalite, but chiefly because she had challenged and dismissed the role of the Naxal members as guardians. Believing it impossible to find any solution to the patriarchal hierarchy within the movement, Gauri chooses to establish an identity completely detached from it.

Conclusion

I have provided an alternative narrative of the movement through a parallel study of *The Lowland* and the gendered historical narratives to identify women's experiences in the movement that had been mostly neglected within scholarly studies of Indian English literature. The paper, therefore, contributes to exposing a different version of the movement. The relation of Gauri with the Naxalbari movement suggests the superfluous position of women within the movement. Her ostracization from the organization on account of her personal decision of remarriage verifies that, similar to the larger patriarchal society, women were prevented from asserting individual choices even within the movement. The movement, therefore, acted as bondage to women's independent identities. It was only by breaking said bondage that Gauri could shape her identity according to her own choices. Because she can not find understanding or respect among Udayan's comrades, Gauri creates an individual identity through a complete detachment from the movement. Thus, any attempt to change the conventional patriarchal attitude of the members was at best tentative. More often than not, the women failed to shake off the strong grip of patriarchal control within the movement and chose to altogether escape it by disassociating themselves and fashioning their own identities. The article confirms how patriarchal characteristics pushed women and their roles to the periphery. While some women experienced the movement as magical and unforgettable (M.S. Roy, 2007), this study of the gendered history of the movement through a textual analysis of Gauri's behaviors confirms its patriarchal framework. Thus, the paper not only strengthens the existing gendered narratives of the movement by representing them within literary studies, but also opens up scope for further analysis of the movement's gendered history.

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