

JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE LOWLAND

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Lowland, traces the fate of tender fraternal bonds torn as under by violent politics. Lahiri's delineation of the narrative events purports to show how the absence of loved ones becomes covertly a portent haunting presence within the subconscious mind of the affected characters directing their overt actions to their own consequential ways of life through which they are goaded on. When their respective paths crisscross, Lahiri proves herself to be adept at depicting the unhappiness at the core of the intricate interpersonal relations that materializes. This write-up attempts to grasp the import of this novel by situating the author's unique presence both in the post millennium Indian English fiction as well as in the fabric of the narrative. Its analytical method moves from an elaborate study of the tortuous plot through a network of characterisation, scrutiny of the multiplex narration leading to a medley of themes that have contemporary appeal.

Key Words: *Transnationalism, Motherhood and Identity*

Indian novelists are muscling into the ranks of top English-language writers, making their way onto the best - seller lists and snapping up a disproportionate share of the literary awards. Names such as Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, and Salman Rushdie are just those who come to the minds of the readers without effort. Within this pantheon of literary achievers, the Indian -American writer Jhumpa Lahiri fits comfortably. Lahiri first made her name with the quiet, meticulously observed stories about Indian immigrants trying to adjust to new lives in the United States, stories that had the hushed intimacy of chamber music. Navigating between the Indian traditions they have inherited and the baffling new world, the characters in the first collection of short stories entitled *The Interpreter of Maladies*, (1999) which won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, seek love beyond the barriers of culture and generations. In her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) which was made into a popular film, Lahiri enriches the themes that made her first collection an international bestseller: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the conflicts of assimilation, and, most poignantly, the tangled ties between generations. Here again Lahiri displays her deft touch for the perfect detail-the fleeting moment, the turn of phrase-that opens whole worlds of emotion. Then the eight stories which appeared in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand, as they explore the secrets at the heart of family life. Here

they enter the worlds of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers. *The Lowland* is Lahiri's fourth book. It was shortlisted for the National Book Award in 2013, the Man Booker Prize 2013 and the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction 2014. She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2012.

In this novel, Lahiri goes back to post-independence India, but draws attention to the poverty that determined young and idealist intellectuals to envision violence against wealthy landowners and then self-sacrifice as the only possible solutions to change the system. The tumultuous political context in the wake of colonial rule in India marks the personal saga of a family deeper than in any other Lahirian book. As Stephanie Merritt remarks in her review for *The Guardian*, "*The Lowland* is a sweeping, ambitious story that examines in intimate detail the intersection of the political and the personal, encompassing nearly 50 years of Indian and American history through the lives of one family." The plot-generating chronotope (literally meaning time-space) in *The Lowland* can be summarized as follows: the two main characters leave Calcutta physically, but temporally they remain stuck in Tollygunge. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, chronotopes "are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative" The knot of this Lahirian text is tied at the intersection of the spatial distance from the homeland and the temporal proximity to the traumatic events of the Indian past.

The central difference compared to the other books is that the spotlight is on India, the country left behind presumably in search of a happier life abroad. The novel starts and ends in India, the title refers to a lowland in the neighbourhood of Tollygunge, and the motto reads: "let me return to my home town entombed / in grass as in a warm and high sea" (Giorgio Bassani, "Saluto a Roma"). There are numerous other chronotopic references and flashbacks to Calcutta, the Communist Party, and the Tolly Club (a recurrent symbol representing class difference and the colonial legacy). In fact, the whole plot hinges on some incidents that take place in India during a brief time span in the 1960s.

Growing up in Tollygunge, Subhash and Udayan are put in the same class at a Bengali medium school for boys. The two brothers learn how the neighborhood was formed: around 1770, the English "started clearing the waterlogged jungle, laying down streets". Major William Tolly makes shipping trade possible between Calcutta and East Bengal; later, when the English shift back to the center of Calcutta, Tollygunge becomes populated by Muslims. After Partition some Muslims stay behind, and the small mosque at the crossroads of Deshapran Sashmal Road remains a local landmark. In the early 1930s the tramline is extended so that the British can easily reach the Tolly Club, "to escape the city's commotion, and to be among their own" In the 1950s Tollygunge is a rather poor neighborhood, with lower middle-class Indian families living in simple huts, in stark

contrast to the exclusive Tolly Golf Club. Besides the golf field it has a swimming pool, a tennis court, stables, as well as a billiards and bridge rooms; it is restricted to rich British-educated Indians and visiting foreigners. Characteristically, a portrait of Queen Elisabeth II still hangs on the wall. Living in its proximity, Subhash and Udayan often jump the walls of the Tolly Club in order to explore this forbidden space. Udayan, the younger brother, is always the one who initiates the trespassing. Subhash prefers to spend his time studying the flora and fauna of the nearby ponds, and he is often frustrated with Udayan's daring and with his lack of it. Nevertheless, he has "no sense of himself without Udayan. From his earliest memories, at every point, his brother was there".

The brothers look almost identical and their voices are nearly indistinguishable. However, their temperaments differ greatly. Udayan "was blind to self-constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors. But Subhash strove to minimize his existence, as other animals merged with bark or blades of grass". As a child, Udayan's most enduring transgression is disregarding the instructions to remain indoors the day the dirt surface is paved. He steps outside and leaves his trail of footprints in the cement.

The boys are admitted at two of the city's best colleges: Udayan studies physics, and Subhash pursues chemical engineering. They put together a shortwave radio because Udayan is eager to hear more news of the world than what comes through their parents' old radio, or what is printed in the daily Bengali papers. He searches for any foreign signal, listens to news bulletins from Radio Moscow, Voice of America, Radio Peking, or the BBC. In the summer of 1966, they listen together to the World Cup football final between England and Germany. In the spring on 1967, they start hearing about peasants revolting in Naxalbari, a village in the Darjeeling District, at the northern tip of West Bengal. Located at the foothills of the Himalayas, nearly four hundred miles away from Calcutta, Naxalbari is closer to Tibet than to Tollygunge. But Udayan is impressed by the injustice of ruthless landowners against hardworking villagers in that faraway region. Still living in a feudal system, they are denied revenue from the crops they grow, some of them starving for lack of food. Bengali communists help organize the uprising in Naxalbari, while several demonstrations take place in Calcutta in support of the peasants' cause. For a few months there are fights with the police, some peasants lose their lives, and a few landowners are also abducted and killed. In July, the rebellion is brought to its heels, but for Udayan it represents "an inspiration, an impetus for change". He is outraged that the government has turned "victims into criminals". Ironically, this is what will happen to him also: from a young intellectual genuinely concerned with the well-being of poorer countrymen, he imperceptibly changes into an accomplice to terrorist acts.

The Naxalite Party is formed, and on May Day 1969, ten thousand people march to the center of Calcutta in support of the movement. Udayan is excited: "The revolutionary situation was ripe, both at home and abroad (...) A high tide of revolution was sweeping

through the world”. He joins the guerrilla warfare against the Indian state, while Subhash starts applying for Ph D in the United States. His younger brother senses that once he leaves, he will not come back. He accuses Subhash of being selfish, of not wanting to jeopardize his career and personal future for their country’s prosperity. All their lives they had been as one, but now their paths are parting.

Subhash arrives in Rhode Island in 1969 to pursue a PhD in marine chemistry. In the beginning, he has to make huge efforts to translate between Indian and American cultures: “The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In the enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them; he was the sole link. Here life ceased to obstruct or assault him. Here was a place where humanity was not always pushing, rushing, running as if with a fire at its back”. Despite the discrepancies, Subhash sees the positive side of immigration: nobody knows him in the United States, so he can begin anew.

In spite of his rebellious acts, Udayan has stayed by his parents’ side, attached to the ancestral land. Subhash, on the other hand, sends money to help his parents with the house renovations, but has not traveled back to see them in a year and a half. What is more, Subhash starts dating Holly, an American woman older by almost ten years. Holly has lived in Rhode Island all her life, in a tiny and isolated cottage by the beach, which had belonged to her grandparents. Subhash, the recent migrant, is probably also fascinated with her firm roots. One evening, at Holly’s place, he glances at the calendar and notices that the following day is August 15, Indian Independence Day, a holiday in his home country, an ordinary day in the United States. He remembers that in August 1947, while India was celebrating, both Subhash (close to four) and Udayan (just two) had a fever and were taken to the doctor. This represents the earliest memory of his childhood, one that comes back to him in an American woman’s house, reconnecting him strongly and unexpectedly to his past, his family, and his country. After a while Holly breaks up with him and tries to mend things with her husband, and Subhash longs to return home. And he does so when the tragic news of Udayan’s death reaches him.

While his brother is studying abroad, Udayan befriends another Naxalite, Manash, and falls in love with his sister. A student in philosophy, Gauri shares Udayan’s ideas as well as his love for Calcutta. Her grandfather, a professor at the Sanskrit College, “died with a book on his chest” and inspired her to study. Udayan and Gauri get married in secret, without celebrations. His parents find out after the civil registration and they are outraged to have been excluded. Not only did they not arrange his marriage, but they actually had no idea he was seeing someone.

After Udayan is executed by the police, Subhash returns to Calcutta for the first time in three years. The streets are clamorous and packed with people, just as he remembered them. Upon reaching Tollygunge, Subhash is “assaulted by the sour, septic

smell of his neighborhood, of his childhood. The smell of standing water. The stink of algae, of open drains” Calcutta, the “city with nothing, with everything”, is unchanged. But the small house Subhash has grown up in “had been replaced by something impressive, ungainly”. Udayan’s footprints are still visible in the concrete, but nothing else is the same. The house feels unwelcoming, its layout is confusing, and there is no space for the remaining members of the Mitra family to gather. Subhash feels he does not belong anymore; his parents are always on the top terrace, gazing at the neighborhood, shutting their only remaining son out. Every day, at the same hour, his mother goes to a memorial stone put up by Udayan’s comrades in the place where he was executed. She and her husband are still shocked by what they have seen: their son being shot, his body taken away in a van, never returned to them. Subhash thinks his brother “had given his life to a movement that had been misguided, that had caused only damage that had already been dismantled. The only thing he’d altered was what their family had been”

He is ready to return to the United States and is determined to take Gauri with him: for his sake (he is alone), for hers (she would have been driven out by her in-laws after giving birth), and for the baby’s (it would be raised in a place where nobody knows the painful truth and they could be a family). And yet, the bond between Subhash and Gauri is “a shared awareness of the person they’d both loved”. They are connected by the past and project a future together, although they do not share a love in the present. A few months later, Subhash, “the wrong father”, waits for Gauri at Boston airport. He is her brother-in-law and her husband, but resembles Udayan only externally: Yet he is a mere replacement of his brother, and Gauri has married Subhash as a way of staying ‘in touch’ with her lost love. Everyone opposed the marriage: the Party, her in-laws, her own family. Even Gauri understands that it is a useless act, “just as it was useless to save a single earring when the other half of the pair was lost”. Is immigration “a lifelong pregnancy “for Gauri, too? In her case, I think the metaphor refers to her inability to escape the past and ‘deliver’ a completely new self in the United States. She gives birth to a child, but never really becomes a mother. She lives in a time before Bela was conceived, before her biological father was killed. She stays away from India for forty years, yet she behaves as if she were perpetually pregnant with feelings of guilt and unresolved traumas. Gauri thrives professionally in the United States and travels the world to attend various conferences. Immigration thus empowers the woman in her career and enables her to become a transnational citizen. But on a personal level she is not empowered; on the contrary, she is unable to cope with powerful emotions so she literally runs away a second time. When her daughter is twelve, Gauri moves to California and dedicates herself to teaching and research.

Interestingly, Gauri’s timeline only includes the past and the future, eluding the present. To the right she sees the recent past, the year she had met Udayan, the year she

was born, 1948, “prefaced by all the years and centuries that came before”. To the left she sees the future, “the place where her death, unknown but certain, was an end point”. The baby’s existence is “represented by a separate line creeping forward”, and “Udayan’s life, no longer accompanying her own as she’s assumed it would, (...) formed a grave in her mind’s eye”. However, she is unable to pin the ‘now’ on this map: “Only the present moment, lacking any perspective, eluded her grasp. It was like a blind spot, just over her shoulder. A hole in her vision”

In 1976 America celebrates its bicentennial and Subhash marks his seventh year there. He and Bela share a connection “at once false and true”. She is extremely attached to him, ignorant of the reality that he is “an uncle, an imposter”. Gauri is increasingly dedicated to her research, detaching herself from both Subhash and, more importantly, her girl. She engages in some activities with Bela, but they are perceived as chores which prevent her from studying. She rarely smiles when she looks at Bela’s face and seldom kisses her spontaneously. Gauri does not complain to Subhash about her life with him, but she seems incapable to love him or Bela with all her heart. In fact, “it was as if she’d reversed their roles, as if Bela were a relative’s child and not her own”.

When Bela is almost twelve, Subhash takes her to Calcutta. Tollygunge is changed and changing - water is turned into land so that new houses can be built. Udayan’s mother still takes flowers to his stone every day and tries to keep the area uncluttered by the garbage. Time has passed, but Udayan’s ghost still lurks inside the house and around it, as it does throughout the novel. With one son dead and the other in America, she and her husband cling to a past when things were still promising a happy future. Strangely, the same can be said about Subhash and Gauri. They have left the (low) land, but have not broken up with the past, and Bela is their most powerful reminder.

Upon their return to Rhode Island, after six weeks in India, the landscape is unchanged, but the house is empty. The windows are shut and locked, leaving the rooms’ dark and the soil of the houseplants dry. There is no food in the fridge and no sign of Gauri. Subhash finds a letter in which she announces she has moved to California to teach at a college. From now on, Bela only ‘sees’ her mother in a shadow that appears briefly on her wall each day, reminding the girl of Gauri’s profile: “In this apparition, every morning, Bela recognized her mother, and felt visited by her. It was the sort of spontaneous association one might make while looking up at a passing cloud. But in this case never breaking apart, never changing into anything else”

After her mother deserts her, Bela enters puberty and shuts Subhash out, probably blaming him for Gauri’s departure. Her grades drop, she has no friends, sees a psychologist but the results are not encouraging. She even tries to commit suicide. After a critical year she turns outward: she joins the marching band, plays the clarinet, and embraces ecology and recycling. She is never at home anymore and does not reconnect with her father. Bela

majors in environmental science at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, but does not want to “spend her life in a university”. Motherless and rootless, Bela concentrates all her efforts on her work. At thirty-four, Bela is “brown, sturdy, and unadorned”. She becomes pregnant but does not want to tell Subhash who the father is, nor does she want to involve him in the child’s upbringing. Still, she asks for Subhash’s help with raising her baby: “The coincidence coursed through him, numbing, bewildering. A pregnant woman, a fatherless child. Arriving in Rhode Island, needing him. It was a reenactment of Bela’s origins. A version of what had brought Gauri to him, years ago”. Burdened by his past decisions, Subhash avoids involvement in American society and leads an individualized existence – he has a stable job, but otherwise remains quite passive. Nevertheless, he does not want to become a ‘grandfather’ in the same fraudulent way, so he finally tells Bela the truth. At first she is angry and leaves, but after a few months she makes peace with the facts and returns to the house she grew up in, determined to live with the one who raised her and loved her like a father. She gives birth to a daughter and names her Meghna, after a river that flows into the Bay of Bengal. After four decades of burdening guilt, Subhash eventually manages to move on. He meets Elise Silva at his friend Richard’s funeral. She has been Bela’s American history teacher and now works at the local historical society. Her husband died and her three children have made their lives in Lisbon, Denver, and Austin. She is a woman who lives in the present, despite her job which makes her deal with stories of the past. At 70, Subhash finally writes a letter asking Gauri for a divorce. He marries Elise in the church he had admired as a PhD student long ago, and they go on a honeymoon to Ireland. Bela meets Drew, a farmer whose family had lived on the same homestead for several generations. Bela has traveled to India and across America, while Drew is rooted in an idyllic Rhode Island. They become close and, after initially lying to Drew that her mother died of an illness in India, she confesses that Gauri abandoned her. She admits this is the reason why she avoids being with one person, or staying in one place. As the plot approaches its denouement, Gauri stops in Boston on her way to a conference in London. She plans to sign the divorce papers in a face-to-face encounter with Subhash, so she rents a car and works up the courage to drive to Subhash’s house. The building is unaltered, but everything else is very different. Subhash is away with Elise, so only Bela and her daughter are at home. The encounter is shocking to both Gauri and Bela. Gauri remarks that Meghna resembles her mother and tries to communicate with the girl. But Bela brutally interrupts the tentative conversation, telling Meghna her grandmother had died and Gauri is just an aunt. She speaks with hatred; her words are “like bullets”. After Gauri leaves, “Bela felt the urge to strike her. To be rid of her, to kill her all over again”.

This brief and harsh contact determines Gauri to change her plans: instead of travelling to Europe she flies to Calcutta for the first time in forty years. Her brother and a part of his family still live in their grandparents’ apartment. Yet the two ponds and the

lowland are gone, dwellings built in their place. Nevertheless, the house in which Bela was conceived is still standing, seemingly oblivious to what had happened in Gauri's youth. "The purpose of her return was to take her leave", both metaphorically and literally. Only by returning to the spot where time and space fuse together can she achieve this break-up. Now she leaves India again, this time without looking back. Several months later, a letter arrives in her mailbox in California. Bela writes that Meghna is asking about her and says maybe one day when Meghna is older and knows the truth they might try to meet again. For once, time starts to move forward for all the three characters: Gauri envisions a future relationship with her granddaughter, Subhash starts to travel with his new wife, and Bela commits to a romantic relationship with Drew, leaving the door slightly open for a possible reconciliation with the mother who had rejected her. However, the novel ends with another flashback to India. It is revealed that Udayan did not kill the policeman, but dipped his hand in the dead man's blood and wrote the party's initials on the wall. *The Lowland* is a novel in which the main characters migrate, but their primordial concern is not that of assimilating in the host land. Processes of cultural translation and instances of hybridity are superseded by an overwhelming preoccupation with family secrets and unresolved past traumas, drawing them back like a magnet to their country of birth. The main female character, Gauri, is obsessed with ideas about the past and the future, and unable to live in the present moment. Interestingly, she does not perceive immigration as an uprooting. Quite on the contrary, she feels instantly comfortable in the United States and other transnational spaces, and avoids traveling back to India. In spite of her reluctance to do so, Gauri has to go back to Calcutta in order to resolve the interior conflict that has tormented her for four decades. In her place of birth the two pivotal axes (space and time) intersect and she is finally able to see the whole picture. Her subsequent return to the United States strengthens the overall message that a transnational model of belonging is the most suitable for contemporary migrants.

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