

# Cultural Duality and Assimilation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Low Land*: A Study

P.S.S. Avadaiappan

Assistant Professor, Devanga Arts College (Autonomous) Aruppukottai

Jhumpa Lahiri is a Bengali American author whose debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Immediately her's is a popular name worldwide known for her ability to engross the readers in the different dimensions of the stories. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) brought her more laurels to fix a permanent place among the leading women writers. The novel was adapted into the popular film of the same name directed by Mira Nair. Lahiri is a member of the President's committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by the U.S. President BarakObama. She was born on July 11, 1967 in London, the daughter of Bengali Indian immigrants, her family moved to the United States when she was at the age of three. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Anar Lahiri worked as a Librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, so her family often visited relatives in Calcutta. These frequented visits make her understand the condition of her homeland and its culture. In 2008, *Unaccustomed Earth* was published. It is a collection of short Stories.

Since 2005, Lahiri has been a Vice President of the PEN American Center, an Organization designed to promote friendship and intellectual cooperation among writers. In February 2010, she was appointed a member of the committee on the Arts and Humanists along with five others. Jhumpa has also had a distinguished relationship with *The New Yorker Magazine*. In 2013, her latest novel *The Lowlands* was published and was immediately short listed for Booker Prize. But the air of fortune does not fly on her side; she now lives in Fort Greene, Brooklyn with her husband Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, a journalist who was once a Deputy Editor of *TIME Latin America* and her and two children, Octavia (b.2002) and Noor

(b.2005). She was awarded a number of reputed organizations.

Lahiri's writing is characterized by her "plain" language and her characters, often Indian immigrants to America who must navigate between the cultural values of their homeland and their adopted home. Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology, assimilation and behavior.

In 1964 THE COMMUNIST PARTY of India split into two. The CPI maintained a loyalty to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, whereas the CPM joined the Indian government. A few years later, in the village of Naxalbari near the Himalayan foothills by Nepal and Bangladesh, land conflicts came to a head. A feudal system was still in place. Darjeeling tea plantations were still run by British companies and were common in the area. Land was scarce.

A middle-class radical named Kanu Sanyal, allied initially with the CPM, was one of three men who led the rural poor against local landlords. The protests of the poor led to trouble with the police, many of whom were trained by the British, and these conflicts escalated into extreme violence. Landlords were beheaded. The peasants believed that because the CPM was in power, it was acceptable to right the feudal system on their own and thought the CPM would back their revolt. Instead, the CPM took the government's side and 1,500 policemen were installed in the area. Sanyal, after three years in hiding, was carted off to jail. Once released in 1977, he rallied a faction of Communist supporters and began organizing again. He died by suicide in 2010.

What transpired in Naxalbari inspired revolutionaries around the state of Bengal and a few other parts of India. Their fervor impressed the Maoists in China. “Naxalite” became a word used to describe a movement of radicals fighting the Indian government on behalf of the oppressed peasants and working poor of India. Eventually Naxalites formed a new party, the Communist Part of India (Marxist-Leninist), shortened to CPI (ML).

It is into this period of intense conflict between revolutionaries and the government in Bengal that Jhumpa Lahiri guides readers at the start of her second novel, *The Lowland*. Two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, grow up in Tollygunge, a neighborhood in what was then South Calcutta, near Technicians Studio, where Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray shot his acclaimed film *Pather Panchali*. The geography includes a plain known as the lowland, which would become flooded after the monsoon rains and covered with water hyacinths.

Our first hint of the events to follow happens during the boys’ childhoods, when younger brother Udayan convinces Subhash to sneak into the Tolly Club, an exclusive country club established by an Englishman over half a century before. A policeman catches the boys and beats them with a golf club. Such casual show of brutal force was common throughout India during British rule and for a while after independence was achieved, and this excess and corruption has motivated many to reject, in small ways and large, the legitimacy of Indian laws.

Subhash is reserved, thoughtful, introverted, and devoted to his brother. As you might expect, we spend much of the novel firmly planted within his sensitive but conservative perspective as he observes the natural world around him, a landscape teeming with mynas, egrets, jackals. Udayan is charismatic, daring, and taken with the Naxalites. At first, his character appears to be directly modeled after Sanyal, who had grown up in the middle class but abandoned his upbringing and his education in order to organize and help peasants in their uprising. When Udayan brings Subhash to a Naxalite meeting, Subhash feels invisible and unpersuaded by the “imported ideology” of Maoism: He remembered the silly signals he and Udayan used to send to one another, pressing the buzzer, making each other laugh. He didn’t know how to respond to the message Sinha was transmitting, which Udayan so readily received. Udayan soon starts painting slogans

around town, explaining: “The ruling class puts its propaganda everywhere. Why should they be allowed to influence people and no one else?” Subhash leaves Tollygunge to study marine chemistry in Providence, Rhode Island, a world entirely different from the one he has left behind. Capturing, with her usual dexterity, an emotion that is common to Indian immigrants.

The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them; he was the sole link. Subhash starts an affair with a woman who has a child, learns to cook for himself, and lives a life of careful routine. Subhash’s traditional and protective views are subtly revealed in his handling of that relationship, in his disapproval of the woman’s husband for leaving and hurting wife and child.

In contrast, Udayan’s letters to Subhash indicate he is devoted to his vision of what India could become, leading a secret double life as a Naxalite, blowing off classes to go to the party’s meetings. We are introduced to his wife, Gauri, a withdrawn philosophy student who never intended to marry, through her own perspective, rather than Udayan’s. Her brother and Udayan are friends, and she and Udayan fall in love. They marry, much to his parents’ distress. The reader is told the parents dislike Gauri and hoped to arrange Udayan’s marriage, but the reason for the dislike is not immediately apparent. Shortly thereafter, Udayan is dead, killed by the police for his Naxalite activity, the nature of which is slowly revealed in the latter half of the book. He tries to hide beneath the water in the flooded area of the lowland, but is unable to escape the police. Gauri discovers she is pregnant after his death. After this exciting political departure from Lahiri’s usual domestic fiction, a more conventional American immigrant saga unspools. Because she is pregnant and his parents hope to separate her from her child, Subhash marries Gauri and brings her back to Rhode Island, where she gives birth to a daughter, Bela. He promises her she can continue to study philosophy, but once she gives birth, his conventional Indian views on child rearing lead him to want her to stay home. Nonetheless, he alters his schedule to accommodate hers. Gauri’s difficulty with the transition to motherhood even as her intellectual prowess and philosophical interests are cultivated serves as an important plot point.

The situating of the deeply personal within the political is what one initially thought would differentiate *The Lowland* from its predecessor, *The Namesake*. However, it is the narrative architecture of the novel that makes Lahiri's sophomore novel so much more resonant. *The Namesake* was very good when it focused on the story of the parents Ashoke and Ashima, but somehow, when it focused on Gogol Ganguli, it lost freshness and verve. Gogol's ennui and second-generation difficulties forging an identity within America were absolutely believable. He is a particular kind of Indian American — a Bengali lodged in the upper-middle class in America — but his experiences of a divided identity are common to the children of Indian immigrants from all different states and language backgrounds. Arguably, encapsulating this division was the whole point of the book. But Gogol's internal conflict had very little dramatic potential, and by the time he learns what his name meant to his father, the reveal does not offer much payoff to anyone except the staunchest literary reader, for whom stunning prose and subtle emotions are all. Surprisingly, the film version directed by Mira Nair presented a more compelling plot than the book. While watching it the other day, one found himself crying during the scene in which Ashima learns her mother has died in India, as Gogol stands at the door in the darkness watching his father comfort his mother. This scene has undoubtedly transpired in countless Indian American homes, as parents are woken in the middle of the night by telephone calls notifying them that their parents and siblings, last links to their original homes, have died.

Like the cinematic version of *The Namesake*, the plot of *The Lowland* is driven not only by subtle observations but also by drama, and in this way it satisfies those of Lahiri's fans who have been waiting for her to live up to the gifts she last fully exhibited in *The Interpreter of Maladies*. The drama comes in the form of political forces at work in both the United States and India. Subhash's dedication to a brother who cared more for political ideals than family is a critical aspect of the novel, but the drama of the death of that brother at the hands of the police gives the novel its crucial cause and effect. All of the events of the novel unfold from Udayan's death. While not a mystery novel, the details surrounding Udayan's death are withheld, creating a propulsive energy.

In her *New York Times* review, Michiko Kakutani characterizes Gauri as a “cold, selfish witch,” apparently faulting Lahiri for creating an unrelatable character. While Gauri is cold and withdrawn in response to Subhash's kindness, a careful reader sees clues throughout the novel that indicate there is not only more to Gauri; there is also more to her decision to escape her in-laws by marrying their other son. Gauri's fascination with and graduate study of German nihilist Arthur Schopenhauer centers around his concept of time, a theme that informs the novel and bestows its lovely, slightly elliptical structure. Schopenhauer believed that the present moment is all there is — both past and future are simply concept. He pictured time as an eternally revolving sphere, in which the part of the sphere that is sinking is the past and the part that is rising is the future. The point that touches the tangent of these is the extension less present, and it is always our reality, all that we have. Under this outlook as it is commonly understood, the world and our choices within it are emptied of any intrinsic meaning.

In spite of certain decisions made explicable by her fascination with Schopenhauer's time, Gauri is firmly rooted in the moment of Udayan's death. When Bela asks to stay home rather than walk across a rain-drenched lawn covered with worms, Gauri thinks: “Another mother might have brought her back, let her stay home, skip a day of school. Another mother, spending the time with her, might not have considered it a waste.” And then she remembers:

How, at the height of the crackdown, the bodies of party members were left in streams, in fields close to Tollygunge. They were left by the police, to shock people, to revolt them. To make clear that the party would not survive, the moment, the horror of the attempted revolution, is always with her. The genius of this novel is in how, after several pieces of exposition about Bengali history at the start of the novel, it manages to ground the personal within the political, to show how even faraway political events can transform and devastate lives.

*The Lowland* is a breathtaking achievement, taking into account four generations and almost 70 years. While certain readers, may wish for more of Udayan's perspective — we so infrequently see anything of India's dissenters or revolutionaries in realistic literary fiction — it is hard to imagine the thorough application of Lahiri's delicate, observant, American prose to a

charismatic revolutionary abroad. Or even to certain conventional axes of Indian social conflict — caste, religion, language. We never learn what the brothers' caste is, for example, even though caste in the 1960s was a preoccupation and serious point of division (and is still in some circles). We know that they are likely middle-class, that their father was a railroad cleric, a government employee with little sympathy for radicalism.

Perhaps it's for the best that revolution serves only as a catalyst for the more sedate American story that follows. The pleasure of *The Lowland* is the tension between the political and the personal, the novel's consistent demonstration that the moment may be all that is, but that our individual choices matter intensely, that the knitting together of our relationships through both personal and political actions are crucial to the stories of our lives.

In *The Lowland* Jhumpa Lahiri returns to her favored themes of cultural duality and assimilation. The late 1960 was a turbulent time in India with widespread poverty and few job opportunities for educated young men. Udayan becomes involved in the Naxalites, a radical Maoist movement to help the poor. Subhash, his cautious older brother, immigrates to the USA for a PhD in science.

After tragedy strikes in Calcutta, Subhash makes a personal sacrifice to bring his brother's wife to the USA. Young Gauri arrives pregnant in a sari to Rhode Island in winter. She only feels at home when she audits a Philosophy class. The saga unfolds over decades as we follow the family through shifting points of view *The Lowland* is centered on Subhash and only tangentially on his rebellious brother. Subhash was a kind, likable character, but he lacked the charisma to carry a novel, and Gauri was too selfish to rouse much empathy. For a student of Philosophy, Gauri lacked a moral code. The readers wish there had been more about her daughter, a lost child of two cultures. Bela reminded the readers of Gogol in *The Namesake* (Lahiri's first novel), but Bela's story was abridged. It's a sign of a good book when you reach the last page longing for more.

The *Lowland* traces the fate of tender fraternal bonds torn asunder 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 materialises.

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. These are the reasons why this novel was short listed for Booker Prize. But luck did not favour Lahiri. *The low land* is a powerful portrayal of two brothers and their opposite ideologies. Udhayan dies because he embraces Naxalite groups. On the contrary Subhash turns out to be a scholar. The lowland mentioned in the novel is a mighty symbol which foretells the following happenings to make this novel achieve worldwide acclaim.

Suspenseful, sweeping and piercingly intimate, *The Lowland* is a masterly novel of fate and will, exile and return. Shifting among the points of view of a wide range of richly drawn characters, the novel reaches its highest point. It is at once a work of great beauty and complex emotion. It is an engrossing family saga at very high stakes; and a story steeped in history that seamlessly spans generations and geographics. A masterpiece and an instant classic, this is Jhumpa Lahiri at the height of her considerable powers.

The novel's action is divided between the middleclass precincts of Calcutta and the academic world of Rhode Island. The plot revolves around two momentous incidents, one taking place in Kolkata in 1971, the other in Rhode Island twelve years later. The readers of the novel don't have to be in a certain place, at a certain time to be able to catch the faint thrum of the lifeblood coursing through the pages of this book, to live the heartbreak of its characters, to develop a sense of solidarity with their loss and desperation, to gaze at the spectacle of their unraveling fates across continents. . The pleasure of *The Lowland* is the tension between the political and the personal, the novel's consistent demonstration that the moment may be all that is, but that our individual choices matter intensely, that the knitting together of our relationships

through both personal and political actions are crucial to the stories of our lives.

Cultural conflict is treated here as Cultural Duality. This arises because of the differences in values and norms of behaviour of people from different cultures. This situation can lead to conflict. Lahiri effectively portrayed these issues in *The Lowland* with a class of maturity.

#### REFERENCE

- [1] Lahiri, Jhumpa *the Lowland*, Random House, London, 2013.
- [2] Raul, Kama Kumar, Ed. *The Cultural Landscape of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai*. Atlantic. New Delhi, 2015.
- [3] Das, Nigamananda, Ed. *Dynamics of Culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri* Adhyayn Publishers, New Delhi, 2013.
- [4] Das, Nigamananda, Ed. *Jhumpa Lahiri Critical Perspectives* Pencraft International New Delhi. 2008.