

# Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*- the Tale of Choice between Freedom and Duty

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## ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri is a prominent Indian American novelist and short story writer. Her works focus on Indians living in the USA and their cultural tensions. She imagines India as a she has lived abroad. *The Lowland* (2013) is her latest novel that narrates the story of two brothers. The younger one is a Naxalite who is killed in a marshy land near Calcutta in a police encounter. His pregnant wife Gauri accompanies the elder brother of her deceased husband to the USA and marries him. In the USA, Gauri is trapped in a permissive life style abandoning her duties as a mother and husband. She is completely disconnected from her family while Subhash looks after her daughter Bela like a true father. At last, Bela comes to know that Subhash is not her real father but contrary to Subhash's fear, she is united in love with her Godfather. The novel questions Gauri's indifference to familial duties in favour of independence. The focus of the novel is human need for love and companionship.

**Key words**: tension-Naxalite background - Indifference towards familial Duties - Parental feelings - Need for love and companionship in human life.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the prominent Indian American writers today. She belongs to the next-generation of Indian English writers who have now turned to more realistic works of fiction than magic realism of Rushdie era. Jhumpa's real name is Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri. She was born on July 11, 1967 in London. Her family moved to the USA when she was only two years old. Lahiri calls herself American. She was born in

England but always felt like USA-born. Jhumpa grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island where her father was a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Her mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali culture and heritage. She often took her family to Calcutta to visit their relatives. That is the reason why Jhumpa's stories and novels have Bengali characters and

locale too in addition to the American or English setting.

When she was a kindergarten kid in Kingston her teacher called her by a pet name Jhumpa as it was easier to pronounce than her Bengali name. She recalls that "She always felt embarrassed by that name."(Wikipedia). Her ambivalence over identity was the inspiration for her novel *The Namesake*. Lahiri graduated from South Kingston High School and got B.A. in English literature from Barnard College in 1989. Later She did M.A. in English and M.F.A. in creative writing and M.A.in comparative Literature and a Ph.D in Renaissance studies. She taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design.

Lahiri married Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, a journalist of TIME ( Latin American). She now lives in Rome, Italy with her husband and two children. Octavio ( b. 2002) and Noor (b.2006). Jhumpa Lahiri's major works are as follows:

1. *Interpretation of Maladies* (1999)  
( A collection of short stories)
2. *The Namesake* (2003) (A Novel)

3. *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) (A collection of short stories)

4. *The Lowland* (2013) (A Novel)

Lahiri's short stories faced rejection from publishers in the beginning. Her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* was published in 1999. The stories in the collection deal with themes of marital discord in the lives of the Indians and Indian immigrants, generation gap, miscarriages etc. She was not unaware in the beginning that she was dealing with Indian-American experience. She received positive reviews from American critics but mixed reviews from Indian and Asian critics. However, she can be termed as a distant author who lives abroad and imagines about India. She depicts India as she wants. As Md. Ziaul Huque remarks,"the writer must have every possible right to paint the word the way he/she thinks appropriate.( Ziaul Huque, Md.)

Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* sold 600,000 copies and she received Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000.Her first novel *The Namesake* was published in 2003. It spans over thirty years in the life of a Bengali family- the Gangulis.The young

couple immigrated to the USA where their children Gogol and Sonia grew up. They experienced the constant cultural and generational gap with their parents. Gogol, the famous Russian writer was the favourite of the boy's father but the name distanced him from his real identity. He was always dissatisfied with the name and reacted sharply about it against his father, A fine film featuring Irfan Khan and Tabu has been made by Mira Nair in 2007.

Lahiri's second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* was published in 2008. It topped the New York Times Best Seller List. Lahiri has published a number of her short stories in the New Yorker Magazine with which she has a strong bonding. Her non-fiction works have also appeared in The New Yorker. Lahiri has been the Vice President of PEN American center since 2005. In 2010, She was appointed a member of the committee on the Arts and Humanities.

Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* was published in 2013 and it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. However, the prize went to 'The Luminaries' by Eleanor Catton. Lahiri's works are

characterized by autobiographical touch, the themes that deal with the lives of Indian immigrants to America and the cultural conflicts that the immigrants face in their lives. Her language is simple and lucidly plain. She examines the struggles, conflicts, anxieties and prejudices of immigrants' psyche. In her earlier short stories, she dealt with the problems of immigrants in raising their children in a country whose culture and values are entirely different from their own. The Indian immigrants make desperate efforts to hang on to their traditions and culture and to keep their children acquainted with India and her heritage. They often fail miserably as their children have no roots at all in India. Their upbringing and environment naturally distance them from their parents and mode of thinking.

*Unaccustomed Earth* deviates from her earlier short stories. It deals with the second and third generations of immigrants. They have by now assimilated into American culture and they are also quite comfortable with their Indian Origin. They are no more undergoing pull and push their parents

and grand parents experienced between their homeland and the country they had settled in.

Jhumpa's Latest novel *The Lowland* refers to a marshy stretch of land between two ponds. In monsoon floods and ponds mix up making the stretch muddy and full of shallow water. It is a region that is prone to flooding during the rainy season. In summer, the water evaporates leaving it shoddy and dry area. The two ponds are connected by flooded water and yet separated during hot summer. They symbolize two brothers in the novel Subhash and Udayan. The novel opens in Calcutta during the 1950's and 1960's. Even as the story moves, it moves back to Calcutta and the opening period of the novel. During the late 1960's Udayan was a college student. He was drawn towards Naxalite Movement that aimed at emancipation of the poor and the downtrodden from exploitation and poverty through violent means.

Subhash the elder brother focused on personal improvement earning a scholarship to study science in the USA. He lives away from the family as a student in boarding house. Udayan his

revolutionary brother is killed by the police in a marshy stretch between the ponds. Subhash had to rush back to Calcutta to comfort his parents and Gauri, the wife of his deceased younger brother. Gauri was pregnant and unwelcomed widow in her parents-in-law's house. Udayan had married Gauri against his parents' wishes. Gauri was a dark-skinned young girl who studied philosophy. Subhash persuades Gauri to marry him and accompany him to America where she could pursue her study in philosophy. They marry and head for America where they raise Gauri and Udayan's daughter as Bela. Bela is unaware of the fact that his father was dead and Subhash was not her real father.

Gauri is a rebellious woman who breaks away from traditional role of a woman-wife, mother, daughter-in-law. She decides to live on her own terms after her marriage with Subhash. Once she is in America, she decides to live like an American woman free and unfettered. She gets a short bobbed hair in place of her long black hair. Though she is married, she has an intense liking for an

unknown man and out of sexual excitement, masturbates in a public bathroom. She attends her philosophy class while her little daughter is left alone at home. Bela spends hours in an apartment alone while Gauri is totally unconcerned about the lonely child at home. She seems to be completely indifferent towards her duties as a mother. Lahiri takes no sides or shows disfavor or dislike for her but leaves it to readers to decide whether her independence and the decision to live on her own terms is a worthy resolve. Does independence mean renunciation of duties and obligations? Can freedom be understood as synonym of 'I- Don't Care' attitude? Are human beings or for that matter any living creature really independent in literal sense? Lahiri asks no question but the questions do surface from the reading of the novel, no doubt.

Gauri throws away all her conventional duties and obligation for freedom and personal gratification. However, she experiences no fulfillment or inner happiness. She has married Subhash but never truly loved him. Subhash acts out of the sense of duty towards his dead

brother, his widow and the child inside her womb. He saves Gauri from domestic and social persecution by marrying her and taking her to the USA, the land of freedom, personal development and material comforts. In the USA, she gives birth to Udayan's child whom Subhash names Bela.

Gauri adopts the American notion of freedom focusing on individual independence, personal progress and life with no family obligations. Gradually, she distances herself from Subhash and Bela almost dumping them as inessentials for her. On the other hand, Subhash devotes his time and energy in raising Bela like a doting father. Time comes when Bela lives like a nomad changing jobs now and then. She wanders in different parts of the country for work. Subhash continues to provide her unconditional love and support. Bela often returns home to seek shelter and care. Subhash's heart lingers on hope that some day Bela will give him shelter in her heart.

Subhash feared that if Bela came to know the fact that he was not her father, it would break their relationship forever. However, his fear proves wrong. The

knowledge that her father was Subhash's dead brother brings them together. She understands Subhash's faith in genuine bond of love and duty which ultimately unite them in love. This also removes Gauri out of their life forever.

At the center of the novel is Gauri's Indifference as a mother. By and by, she is so self-absorbed that she cares neither for her husband nor for her daughter Bela. She became obsessed with philosophy a discipline that is profoundly connected with problems of life, love, destiny, God and so on. The critical preoccupation with philosophy makes her indifferent towards actual human life, love, and family bonding. Subhash on the other hand plays the role of a mother in addition to the role of a father. He is an epitome of sacrifice, love, and care. Gauri's selfish attitude makes her a character that readers may not love but Lahiri does not want her to be detested. She is at the most an example of a woman who chooses individual freedom over duties and relationship. She becomes somewhat flat character and lacks philosophical depth and inner conflicts. It can be assumed that her lack of

sensitivity and indifferent attitude towards her child and husband benumbed her psyche. She lacks the true feminine sensibility which not only defeminizes her but dehumanizes her. The central theme of *The Lowland* is need for love, companionship and familial bond. It also deals with how belligerent political philosophy affects human lives.

Jhumpa Lahiri was recently in India to participate in Jaipur Literary Festival. She called herself a writer without a real language. She said that the term global literature is misleading. A great work is always local as well as global, temporal as well as universal. Lahiri stated that she was deeply interested in the idea of a family. She said that the family bonding is a complex issue involving many dysfunctions and dissimulations. She realized that there is a great divide between the inner and outer lives of the people. In India, the social boundaries are quite porous which makes the inner lives of the people rarer and richer. In the USA, one remains locked in airtight apartments completely cut off from people outside.

Referring to her diasporic dilemma, she said, " Language, identity, place, home: these are all of a piece-just different elements of belonging and not belonging. The essential dilemma of my life is between my deep desire to belong and my suspicion of belonging."( Jhumpa Lahiri/ *The Lives of Others*) She always said that her parents were ambivalent all their lives as if caught between India and the US.

Lahiri herself grew up in the US. She never felt completely rooted there. Neither could she feel at home in Calcutta. She also experienced the tension between language- English and Bengali. However, she felt that Bengali made her connect with her mother and the family. While In Calcutta, she always spoke in Bengali. Now she lives in Rome and speaks fluent Italian also. These three languages often seem to jumble her identity. Lahiri says that her mother always missed Calcutta where the center of her gravities lies. On her part, there is no center of gravity , no sense of history.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri refers to the Naxalite Movement of the 1970's. It is a history that was not the part of her

experience. She had heard about it from her parents, particularly from her father, She also borrowed a few books from her father on the Naxalite movement and read them. Lahiri had heard from her father the story of two brothers in the neighbourhood of her parental family home in Calcutta. The two brothers were rounded up by the police for their suspected alliance with the Naxalite movement and one of them was killed by the police in a broad daylight. In *The Lowland*, lahiri has employed the two brothers showing how the lives of the people are affected by violence. Gauri's life takes altogether a different direction on account of her husband's death. This is how Lahiri employs the political movement of the 1970's in otherwise family story. Violence, in every form and for any cause destroys and distorts the lives of the people.

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