

## Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* : A Study in the Presence of an Absence

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**Abstract.** This article is based on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*. The family which revolves around each other and is ready to do anything and everything for the good of the members faces a movement. The Naxal movement changes all the equation of the members and lead them to rethink what went wrong. The dependence of the members of an Indian family on one another is the theme of the novel. It also discusses how their decisions made their future unpredictable and they all did the same mistake without realizing they were doing it. But in the end of the novel everyone's perspective seems to be right.

**Keywords :** Migrants; revolution; naxals, search for identity; equality; unhappy family.

In this new era when globally we are getting closer and migrants are playing vibrant roles all over the world, diaspora, diasporic novels and diasporic consciousness which demands indepth study from different perspectives seems a flourishing topic. Many writers have tried to see this ancient topic through the modern glass. Among these writers one of the most prominent one who can describe sentiments of migrants as well as native Indians. She has written many novels and short stories. On the cover page of *The Lowland* the novel has been appreciated :

The Lowland is a classic story of family and  
ideology at odds, love and risk closely twined. An  
author, at the height of her artistry spins the globe  
and comes full circle. (*The Lowland*, cover page)

It is a story of a family which revolves around its two sons. One of them who is fifteen months elder is Subhas and the younger one is Udayan. Udayan is the one around whom two of the leading characters of the novel revolve. The family resides in Calcutta near a lowland and does everything to make their sons successful. But the definition of success is quite different when a youngster or a group of people gives the definition. Subhas and Udayan are living in the same house. The protective nature of both helps them to survive in this cruel world and when it comes to protect any of the two brothers both are always ready to sacrifice. Subhas who is elder and has a particularly good perspective for life always tries to pursue Udayan to change his mind and not to show bravery always. But it is Udayan who takes the ultimate decision and Subhas must agree to whatever his decision is. It is a trait of Subhas's personality that he never argues, instead of that changes his own path. Udayan is unaware of this fact and blindly relies on his brother. The childhood of both is same. They play together and almost most of the

time stay together. Suddenly when they take admission in college their ideologies as well as the way of seeing things changes from each other. Udayan become a rebel against the injustice of society in any way. The farmers' protest fuelled the fire in him, and he started supporting the protest which gradually became Naxal movement. Many prominent figures of Indian history participated in it and many of them sacrificed their lives. They are the unsung warriors of Naxal movement.

Subhas from the very childhood is impressed by Udayan. When both got caught in the golf course Udayan honestly came forward to save his brother. When and how their ideologies superseded their love for each other, that's a question to be asked. Is there actually a collision of ideology or the same thinking is just a decision away from each other? What if Udayan also had a chance to study abroad or Subhas would not have a chance to leave India? It is not that simple to answer this question. But an eagle eye's view gives us some interesting facts about both. Udayan is not only what he seems to be, and Subhas is someone different from what he seems to be.

Udayan is a revolutionary figure of the drama. His character which starts to flourish in his college days with small protest reaches its height after his death. From the very childhood his attitude impresses Subhas in many ways. The bravery, naughtiness and frank nature always impresses Subhas. But somewhere he is also careful about what his mother must bear just because of Udayan's nature. Eventually the aura of Udayan engulfed Subhas's care. Subhas starts craving for Udayan's achievements. But at the same time, he is taking a far different decision for himself and for his future. After college he applies for Ph.D in American University. Udayan on the other hand, participates in the revolution and birth of communism in India. In the starting of the novel, it seems that Udayan impresses Subhas, but it is opposite of the reality. Udayan feels strong on Subhas's shoulder. He is so much dependent on Subhas that when Subhas is ready to leave India, he requests him to stay. But sometimes we do not listen from our ears, we listen from our mind. Udayan's request is unheard by Subhas and he migrates. The scene where Subhas is in the train and is waiting for Udayan to come is symbolic that he is not happy with Udayan's decision. But the stubbornness wins the war and Udayan stays.

Next, we see Gauri as an important part of Udayan. Owing to his love for her he is ready to do anything. Gauri is a naive girl who knows nothing about the society. Her balcony is her world, and she sees everything from there only. Udayan falls in love with her and decides to marry her against all the odds of society. He marries a naive girl but gives her all the responsibilities of a patriarchal society and of a mother-in-law. This unfair decision of Udayan towards both Subhas and Gauri destroyed everyone's life. After marriage the husband Udayan is opposite of the naxals Udayan. In the outside world he is fighting for equality but inside his house he is not ready to take a glass of water or to serve his own dinner. It is her mother's duty to do his daily chores and to help him to prepare everything. After his

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marriage he transfers his expectation from his mother to his wife.

Gauri is not expecting in her marriage this lack of adventure. She marries someone who is different from all the other boys but when marriage takes place, she realizes that different boy is different for the world, not for her or his family. Eventually Gauri accepts her destiny and starts doing her wifely duties. That is not enough for the family. Now Udayan's mother expects that Gauri should stop her husband from doing those works which she never dared to talk about. But it is a fact that nobody can stop anyone like Udayan from doing what he wants to do. The better option is that Gauri and her mother-in-law should start working together on whatever the issue is. But she plays the role of that typical mother-in-law who blames her daughter-in-law for everything wrong. Every character takes a step back in his or her respective roles and then blames destiny for that. When Udayan starts his duty towards the poor farmers of Naxalbari he sacrifices everything for that purpose. He goes to a secret place and when he returns from there his aim is surer than ever. After that he listens to no one for what he is doing in his life for the farmers. But every strong man needs a soft heart to open and a soft hand which can soothe him and tell him that everything will be all right and he will win. That heart is generally of a woman and it is very natural to feel so but unfortunately the world fails to see this. They believe that a wife is only to blame the husband and to make him a family man. If Gauri is wrong then why do we call Kasturba Gandhi right.

Some hasty decisions of Udayan are responsible for the twist of the plot in the story. When he starts his fight, his main anger is towards the present government. He believes that fighting for food is not a crime and in China even stealing food is no crime. Then if the farmers are protesting for good food and better lifestyle why is government trying to suppress them in such an inhuman way. When government fires on the group of farmers Udayan exclaims People, are starving, and this is their solution, he eventually said. They turn victims into criminals. They aim guns at the people who can't shoot back." (*The Lowland*, 26) But when he kills Nirmal Dey it is line crossing of two of his own rules. First, he ensures that Nirmal must be off duty that means without gun. Second, he felt betrayed when he saw and felt the pain of Naxalbari and there he realizes that government and the leaders of CPI (M) are on the same ground and fighting for power and turning hungry farmers to their pawns without their acknowledgement. That's what he does with Gauri. He uses her in getting the information of Nirmal's routine and decides not to let Gauri know about the purpose of the information. If Udayan felt betrayed then Gauri should also feel the same. When she got the information of the murder her heart gnawed for what Dey's son must have felt. She repents her whole life for that mistake. Udayan does the same thing what he is fighting against. When Udayan kills that police officer he ignores the fact that man is just a government employee and is doing his duty and nothing else. He is not making the rules. The difference between him and Udayan is that they are

representing two different parties. The most important thing is that the police officer is working for his family and to give them a comfortable life he is following the dictates of the government; it never means he is the real culprit of the farmers.

In revenge the police kills Udayan mercilessly. Not only Udayan lots of others also are tortured in jail. That is not the way to react to show one's reaction to the citizens but that's the reality. The jail at that time was full of young college going students who supported the Naxals. Government forgot that they were all youngsters, and some good words are enough for that group to prepare them to kill or to be killed. Both two parties forgot that "A eye for an eye and tooth for tooth would lead to a world of the blind and toothless,"(87) Udayan lets go many of his philosophies on different occasions. That's what Nirmal Dey and Gauri do, and government should handle all these cases in a different way but that's not how history writes itself. It must have blood and thunder.

Subhas on the other hand after his migration feels that he should start hiding things from Udayan and in some cases he feels guilty for that like when he first has a sexual encounter with a girl. He feels that he is betraying Udayan. He always misses his brother and talks about him to his roommate. But surprisingly he is not happy with his own nature of getting impressed by his younger brother. We can call it sibling rivalry, but that rivalry makes Udayan so alone that he loses his life without even knowing how his brother feels about his aura. After the death of Udayan Subhas comes back for few days to perform the rituals and expects that he will get more love because he is the only son now :

In their childhood in spite of differences one was  
perceptually confused with the other. (26)

But unfortunately, he is now the reminder of his deceased brother and is ignored by his mother. He gets neither the bravery of his brother nor the love of his part from his mother. One good thing that happens in this journey is his marriage to his sister-in-law. This is disliked by his parents and the marriage is only a way to escape from tolygunge for Gauri. Subhas is unaware of what Gauri is thinking. When he first meets her, he feels that there is simplicity in her which is quite enchanting. But while living with Gauri in America he realizes that the magic was only for Udayan, no matter how hard Subhas tries, he can not be what Udayan always remains for her. No matter how a girl's nature is but she should always be a good mother for her child and that's how the life goes on. But the wife in Gauri is so prominent that she loses the game of motherhood. When she gets the chance to reside in America, she starts exploring herself. In this exploration Subhas is just a person shoulder on which Gauri is economically dependent. He is just a security for her. When she leaves her family it is only then she realizes that her main aim from the very starting was always to give the world something memorable. But deep in her heart she always wants someone who can understand her value and love her for what she is.

She marries twice and in both marriages one of her aspects is always missed by her husbands. Her first husband Udayan understands her but underestimates her value, while on the other Subhas loves her but never understands her. In both the case she is undervalued and that's unacceptable to her. She leaves everything but the love in her heart remains forever. It is just that she gives priority to some of her dreams and that is not only her decision it is the society which makes her so.

Udayan, Subhas and Gauri are the main characters of Lahiri's *The Lowland*. All of them are similarly different from one another. They made the same mistakes and believed that the decision they had taken were the last and the best one. Deep inside their hearts they knew that they all had a decision that they could take but instead of all the problems they decided to save their self-respect. Subhas and Udayan are not only characters they are the real heroes or better to say real men who were killed in the real event. Lahiri took her inspiration from a real incident where two of the brothers were killed by police officers in front of their families. What happened and what could be done is not in the hands of those who are suffering but with the passage of time everyone forgot about the Naxal movement and the sacrifices of young men. Lahiri not only portrayed the events that were going on at that time, but she also tried to portray those Indians who were living in a parallel world and were not exposed to these types of violence.

The characters of this novel have an absent presence in each other's life. They expect each other's help and at the same time try to be someone different than the other two. They are trying to replace one another and the person who is at the centre of this replacement is Udayan. He never tries to be like Subhas but always wants him in his life and journey. Although he wants to change the world, still has some faith in Indian tradition, for instance he marries before his elder brother but not ready to be a father before his brother's marriage. This is not only a belief in tradition but this is brotherly love. However, the decision that was not proper and against the law lead him to death.

*The Lowland* which is symbolic of the life in the water and of the life after the water evaporates describes two main characteristics of the protagonist and his brother. Udayan represents someone who cannot live in every situation; he needs freedom to breathe. But Subhas represents those who either escape before the summer or evolve themselves to live in the marshy land where there was water one day with the hope that it will rain and the land will fill itself from that water, in between they will survive in mud or search for a new pond. Gauri is a character of different colours. Once she was a naive girl, then she became a lover, a married woman, a daughter-in-law, a widow, a mother and then a wife again. But above all she is a dreamer. She dreams her dream and leaves everything to search herself. She tries to love life in every way possible. When it comes to a homosexual encounter, she hesitates not to try it just for real love. If living one's own life in a

way one wants is a crime than all three of them are criminals. The least offensive one is Subhas who is not subjective in what he does. But it is Udayan's aura which attracts the other two characters. It is also a possibility that it's not the aura but the relationship of Udayan which is common between Gauri and Subhas. Leo Tolstoy in his book *Anna Karenina* has written, "Happy families are alike: every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (*Anna Karenina*, 1) No one can point what went wrong in this family, but everyone is right in the family and few decisions of all of them are wrong and that's where the gem of the story lies. It wrenches our hearts out and asks us to move on.

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