

### THREE MAJOR ISSUES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

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#### 1

Jhumpa Lahiri (1967) is an (Indian-) American writer of fiction, short stories and essays in English. She has also written in Italian as she divides her time between America and Italy. We shall call her 'Indian' in bracket because she was only born to emigrant Indians in America and she claims to be an American as once Bharati Mukherjee refused to be called Indian-American.

As for occupation, Jhumpa Lahiri is an author. She was born in London, and migrated to America. She graduated with masters from Boston University besides having a creative writing program. Her first book of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won her the Pulitzer Prize for short fiction. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) won her popular acclaim being a better work than *Interpreter of Maladies*. It has become a popular film. Her next book of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) won her Frank O' Conner Award. Lahiri's second novel *The Lowland* (2013) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and National Book Award for Fiction, winning her USD 50,000/- prize.

Lahiri's postcolonial concerns are modernity, hybridity, emigration, displacement, multi-culturalism, racial encounters, and existential angst. Like Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* her novels and short stories depict the people moving westward from Bengal to London, Boston and beyond. Wikipedia adds, that, "Lahiri explored the immigrant experience in America." (Wikipedia 1). Lahiri moved to Italy and published a novel in Italian called *Dove mi trovo*, besides editing *The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories*. Now Lahiri has been a professor of creative writing at Princeton University.

#### 2

The present article focuses on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*. The text, as Nilanjan Chatterjee thinks, espouses three issues, "relating to the Naxalbari movement in Bengal, sexuality and the interface between displacement and belonging." (Chatterjee 102) Jhumpa Lahiri, who was born in London, UK, settled down in the USA. She is too clear that she is not an Indian. Then the critics doubt of her emigrant/exile stand. Though she claims that she has inherited exile experience from her parents, her presentations about exile in both of her novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* is doubtful.

#### 1. Naxalbari Issue

But the question is: whom are these writers representing? While talking about this issue, Natarajan observes, 'the writers are distinct from those they write about. Typically, they have led cosmopolitan lives. Often, they have received acclaimed awards, held prestigious academic appointments' (Natarajan xvi). Since Lahiri and other diaspora writers write from an elite diasporic subject position, their representation of the diasporic experience in their fictional works may be suspected to be inauthentic. As far as Lahiri is concerned, though her novels deal with the diasporic experiences of the ordinary Bengali immigrants in the US, she herself belongs to the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by the US President Barack Obama himself. So, Lahiri seems to hold an ambivalent position as a writer. Though in her fiction, she seems to play the role of a knower of the diasporic experiences of the ordinary Bengali immigrants, she is perhaps not completely acquainted with the experiences of their lives. This has created the problem.

In the post 9/11 era, the American government persecuted (Muslim) Indians, and Muslim (Indian) writers like Khaled Hosseini questioned it. But Lahiri did not. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* tells the story of two brothers - Udayan and Subhash - who wish to choose two different lives in two different halves of the world. While Udayan chooses to stay where he grew up (i.e., Kolkata) and join Naxalbari movement, Subhash decides to go to the USA and pursue his research from the University of Rhode Islands. By 1972, the Naxalite movement is banned by the government and Udayan is assassinated by the paramilitary force for carrying on secret organizational work. Hearing this, Subhash comes to Kolkata and eventually meets Gauri, Udayana's wife who is now expecting. In the course of events, Subhash marries her. Gauri settles with Subhash at Rhode Islands and gives birth to Bela. The story moves forward with Bela's coming of age, her daughter out of wedlock, her discovery of the hidden past and her attempts to cope with the complicated present.

Lahiri's depiction of Naxalbari movement is not convincing. For example, she writes:

Disorganised mobs representing rival communist parties, running helter-skelter through the streets .... Naxalites were operating underground. Members surfaced only to carry out dramatic attacks .... Then the targets turned specific. Unarmed traffic constables at busy intersections. Wealthy businessmen, certain educators. Members of the rival party, the CPI (M). (ibid. 87) (*Lowland* 87)

## 2. Sexuality

The second issue is about sexuality. There is a talk of incest in *The Lowland*. Nilanjana Chatterjee writes, "It has to be admitted that unlike other sexual relationships, Udayan-Gauri bond is shown to be the fulcrum of the novel. Udayan-Gauri's sexual experience during the two years of their married life haunt Gauri even in her late fifties when she dreams, 'He undrapes her sari ...' [TL 230]. But, even this otherwise powerful short-lived relationship does not leave any deep impact on Gauri's life." (Chatterjee 107)

Later Subhash Gauri's daughter Bela leads a perverted life. Even Bela's daughter looks like real American chick going berserk.

## 3. Exile and Belonging.

Critics are of the opinion that Lahiri's presentation of Indians' exile in America and their belonging is not clear. The authenticity of Subhash's depression - the readers are told make Subhash feels that in Rhode Islands 'some part of him' is 'missing' (*Lowland* 40) or, for 'a year and a half he has not seen his family and not 'sat down with them, at the end of the day, to share a meal' (*Lowland* 63) - is in question as he does not take any initiative to return to his family in Kolkata or to solve their problems. Subhash's take on the Bengali practice of arranged marriage cannot escape criticism as well. In the 21st century Bengal, arranged marriages are 'out-of-bounds' (*Lowland* 262) though Subhash thinks that, 'If he'd raised Bela in Calcutta it would have been reasonable for him to bring up the subject of her marriage. Here it was considered meddlesome, out-of-bounds. He had raised her in a place free from such stigmas' (*Lowland* 262). This is unquestionably a distortion of what the Bengalis think of marriage in the present.

This is how, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* is not an idealistic or realistic portrayal of Indian-American experience.

## References:

1. Chatterjee, Nilanjan. "Contextualizing *The Lowland*. *Contemporary Indian Diaspora*. Ed Augshuman Kar. Jaipur: Rawat, 2015.
2. Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. New York: Random House, 2013.
3. Natarajan, Nalini. "Reading Diaspora," *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. New Delhi: OUP, 2010.
4. Wikipedia, Jhumpa Lahiri.