



Cultural Translation and Hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri's the Lowland

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, tells the story of two main characters Subhash and Udayan Mitra, who leave Calcutta physically, but temporally they remain stuck in Tollygunge. Subhash is more careful and pragmatic, so he leaves the troubled city of Calcutta in order to pursue an academic career on the East Coast of the United States. His younger brother is more radical and, driven by a sense of equality and justice, joins the Naxalite movement in the 1960s. Caught in the midst of the communist movement taking place in West Bengal, Udayan is eventually executed by the police in the lowland behind his parental house. His sibling returns home, hoping to pick up the pieces of the shattered family, and marries Udayan's widow out of a sense of duty. He takes Guari to Rhode Island with him, although she is pregnant with his brother's baby.

KEYWORDS

immigration, hybridity, nostalgia, eco-feminism.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) portrays the story of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, who are born only fifteen months apart and are inseparable while growing up. 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.

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" (*Lowland* 13). Major William Tolly makes shipping trade possible between Calcutta and East Bengal; later, when the English shift back to the center 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"(14).

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"(6). 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 spring of 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"(23). He

is outraged that the government has turned "victims into criminals"(22). 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 terrorists acts.

As usual, Subhash is more cautious and wonders: "what good are bows and arrows against a modern state?" (21) Even after attending a Naxalite meeting with his brother and helping him paint slogans on neighborhood walls he still is not convinced that the Maoist ideology can solve India's problems. Their father, a government employee, also dismisses the movement saying his generation has built a nation and there is no need for further upheavals: "We're independent. The country is ours"(23).

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"(33). He joins the guerilla 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 to Rhode Island in 1969 to pursue a Ph. D in marine chemistry. In the beginning, he has to make huge efforts to translate between Indian and American cultures. Soon he manages to find some common points between the two places initially impossible to compare: both Rhode Island and Calcutta have "mountains to the north, an ocean to the east, the majority of land to the south and west"(34). He shares a house with Richard Grifalconi, a Quaker from Wisconsin. Richard is a Ph. D student in sociology who strongly opposes the Vietnam War and even organizes peaceful protests against it.

Subhash inevitably reminded how far away he is from his family in both space and time. He sends money to help his parents with the house renovations, but has not travelled back to see them in a year and a half. Subhash starts dating Holly, an American woman older by almost ten years.

While his brother is studying abroad, Udayan befriends another Naxalite, Manush, and falls in love with his sister. A student in Philosophy, Guari 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" (57) and inspired her to study. By 1970, the Naxalites are operating underground, carrying out attacks and ransacking schools, blasting cinemas and banks. They are responsible for "sadistic gruesome" (87) killings of unarmed traffic constables, affluent businessmen, members of rival parties, and even educators. They take control of certain neighborhoods, including Tollygunge. Udayan and Guari get married in secret, without celebrations. His parents find out after the civil registration and they are outraged to have been excluded.

Gauri loves her husband so much that she helps him plan the assassination of the police officer. While tutoring two students in Sanskrit, she observes from the window a policeman's timetable. The comrades need him out of the way and she tells Udayan the fact that his day off is Thursday. On this day the officer is unarmed and he always takes his son home from school. That is when they attack and murder him. Guari is now a widow and about to become a mother too. During Pujo, the whole city celebrates, but their house is in mourning. Simultaneously, Guari separates from her first husband and is preparing to marry his brother in a desperate attempt to get away.

After Udayan is executed by the police, Subhash returns to Calcutta for the first time in three years. As Udayan is executed now Subhash thinks that "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. Subhash walks aimlessly in the streets of Calcutta. He buys a turquoise shawl for Guari, an inappropriate color for a widow. He is ready to return to the United States and is determined to take Guari 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).

After few months, Guari gives birth to a child named Bela but never really becomes a mother. 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. When her daughter is twelve, Guari moves to California and dedicates herself to teaching and research. This radical, seemingly unexplainable act performed by an Indian mother, can be interpreted as a self-imposed punishment for being Udayan's accomplice in his terrorist acts, then betraying him and marrying his brother, and for lying to Bela about her father's identity. Running away from her daughter and not contacting her for over two decades add to her penitence.

In 1967 America celebrates its bicentennial and Subhash marks his seventh year there. He and Bela share a connection "at once false and true"(156). She is extremely attached to him, ignorant of the reality that he is "an uncle, an impostor"(146). Guari is increasingly dedicated to her research, detaching herself from both Subhash and more importantly, her girl. Guari enrolls in a class of German philosophy and spends every evening away from her family. She is the only woman in the class, and feels a kinship with her professor, Otta Weiss. Therefore, Guari is comfortable to confess her story to the professor: "My first husband was killed. I watched it happen. I married his brother to get away"(166). Guari dedicates herself to writing the thesis, aware that she is neglecting her parental duties.

After her mother deserts her, Bela enters puberty and shuts Subhash out, probably blaming him for Guari'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 her 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" (221).

According to Shoma Sen, the novel features two types of feminism: "an individualistic kind of feminism in the character of Guari,(...) who abandons everything to pursue a career in Philosophy, and a kind of eco-feminism in her daughter Bela(141). At thirty-four, Bela is "Brown, sturdy, unadorned" (Lowland 261). 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. 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. After a couple of months, she gives birth to a daughter and names her Meghna.

As the plot approaches its denouement, a letter arrives in Gauri's 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: Guari envisions a future relationship with her granddaughter, Subhash starts to travel with his new wife, Elisa and Bela commits to a romantic relationship with Drew, a farmer. 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 factors and instances of intercross are superseded by an overwhelming preoccupation with family secrets and unresolved past traumas, drawing them back like a magnet to their country of birth.

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