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## **The Ramifications of Insurgencies on Udayan, Subhash and Gauri – A Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland***

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### **Abstract**

In the context of the novel’s fictional characters, this paper has attempted to analyze the negative impact of confrontational political situations on the lives of Udayan, Subhash and Gauri. It has also tried to prove how insurgents or separatists’ groups, buoyed by their revolutionary zeal, get involved in nefarious activities; for which, many of them like Udayan as depicted in the book, face execution at the hands of law-enforcing agencies.

### **Keywords**

Violence, disharmony, unsettlement, disgruntlement, peace

Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the celebrated diasporic writers, zeroes in on the concept of family and what it pertains. According to Lahiri (as cited in Leyshon, 2013), family is her main focus when it comes to writing a novel in which she tries to understand the concept of family and the intricacies of economic policy-making. In the same interview, Lahiri says, “I often think the novel is, among other things, very much about what a family is, and what a family means.” In *The Lowland* (*TL* hereafter), Lahiri deals with the concept of family, its disintegration and regeneration in the context of the Naxalbari Movement, in which (“Naxal violence claims”, 2018), “As many as 12,000 people have lost their lives in Maoist violence over the last two decades, including 2,700 personnel of the security forces.” Lahiri collected the plot of this novel from an anecdote she had heard from her relatives about the murder of two Naxalite brothers, who were brutally killed in front of their relatives by law-enforcing agencies.

*TL* recounts the history of the Naxalbari movement where the revolting peasants in Darjeeling showed their angst at their landlords for not giving them substantial rewards in return of their strenuous efforts. As depicted in *TL*, Kanu Sanyal, the leading Marxist politician of that period, rallied the Naxal-

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bari peasants around to fight for more autonomy and equal land redistributions. During the ongoing protests, one police man was killed. Following that day in May, policemen ordered the rebels to return home. The agitators did not follow the order. Then, policemen took the matter into their own hands. They killed eleven people including eight women. In *TL* (Lahiri, 2013, p. 23) the mass-murder angers Udayan who views the Naxalbari Movement as “an impetus for change.” His wife, Gauri is initially apprehensive about Udayan's political motives. But Udayan persuades Gauri to change her point of view; as a consequence, they form an everlasting bond that grows stronger even after his death.

Udayan's revolutionary spirits spring up after reading some pamphlets written by Charu Majumdar. They were written when Charu was in prison before the Naxalbari uprising. In these pamphlets, Charu views India as “a nation of beggars and foreigners” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 24). He also denounces the government of India's tactics of killing masses with bullets and also allowing the foreign invaders like United States and the “Soviet Union” policy makers for interfering with India's domestic policies. Charu gleans examples from China to “take the Indian revolution” that “will invariably take the form of civil war” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 25). Udayan's brother Subhash says, “India isn't China” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 25). One day, Udayan takes Subhash to a politician's meeting presided over by “a wispy-haired medical student named Sinha” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 27). The meeting is attended by students in a “small smoky room” where each one of them is “called upon to prove their familiarity with events in Chinese history, tenets of Mao” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 27). Sinha reads out the agenda of that meeting, which is to form “a just society,” create a new party and end “the parlour game of parliamentary politics.” Their slogan is “China's Chairman is our Chairman! Our path is the path of Naxalbari!” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 27). Udayan believes, in order to achieve an equal status, he needs to dismantle the current system besmirched with corruption. However, Subhash opposes it. He does not think that the Maoist revolution of China will tilt in favor of India.

Following the Naxalbari movement, Udayan becomes a changed person. He lives and breathes in being a change-maker. His dormant thoughts of fighting the status-quo take a revolutionary shape following events of the Naxalbari movement. He absorbs the spirit of ending not only the juggernaut of autocratic socio-political structures but also forming a class based on equality. Marxist ideas on the state of capitalism pervade his mind. In “Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas,” Karl Marx (1818-83) and Frederick Engels (1820-95) show how the network of capitalism grips leading intellectuals or “producers of ideas” with “ruling ideas of the epoch” (Storey, 1998, p. 191). Udayan echoes Althusser's ideology of creating a proletariat base for a better superstructure that has parity in actions and thoughts. Subhash, a man with capitalist society's fixed sets of beliefs, continues to show his conformist attitude towards the oppressive regime. Louis Althusser (Leitch, 2001, p. 1487) identifies “the State as a force of repressive execution and intervention in the interests of the ruling class.” In *TL*, Udayan shows his resistance towards state ideologies. His brother Subhash warns Udayan to shun that part of his nature. Udayan continues his dream of

bringing equality against all the odds.

Udayan does not anticipate the individual losses that might come with anti-state politics. He has the correct theoretical frameworks to end the political fiascos. However, he resorts to violent deeds for showing his colleagues the sense of his belongingness to the party's causes. More than working on his party's struggles to usurp the democratically elected government party, he becomes more obsessed with the idea of impressing his colleagues. He tries to show that he belongs to the party and that is why, he kills one police official. His individual aspirations have been born out of his aspirations to make himself counted among his peers. When police make an arrest warrant for Udayan for killing their colleague, Udayan's fellow members do not come to rescue him. Udayan becomes a victim of vicious party politics as depicted in the novel. Udayan's colleagues are more interested in hoarding money, grabbing posts and positions for their individual needs. They opt for violence only for meeting those needs.

Udayan is an active politician. Although he tries to stay true to his political ideologies, his constant run in with the law puts him in perpetual trouble. His space to move around and find a larger platform to impart his ideas and disseminate his party's information among general people is limited. He leads a peripatetic life. However, Subhash enjoys sharing a space with the bourgeois society. He is more interested in securing his own position in a society that he considers to be repressive. Unlike his brother, Subhash, out of the fear for his own safety and security, does not take part in any action. He does not inspire others to chase a dream of changing the overbearing nature of society. Udayan admonishes his brother for showing ignorance towards the plights of the down-trodden people.

Udayan's death brings catastrophic consequences for his parents. His parents are entirely forgotten. They become alienated from others. Their neighbors do not ask about their whereabouts. Although Udayan's parents warn him not to meddle himself in political affairs, they do not discourage him strongly enough to dissuade him from walking that path. Udayan's presence in the house leads to heated political discussions with his father at times. Some parts of those conversations are illustrated below:

Udayan's Father: This rhetoric is nothing new. Our generation read Marx, too.

Udayan: Your generation didn't solve anything, Udayan said.

Udayan's Father: We built a nation. We're independent. The country is ours.

Udayan: It is not enough. Where did it get us? Who has it helped? (Lahiri, 2003, p.23)

Udayan's father, Mr. Mitra dismisses Naxalbari and criticizes young people for getting "excited over nothing." Udayan criticizes his government-employee father for not taking any stand against the British Empire during the movement for the Indian Independence. He "was forbidden to speak out; those were the terms of the job. During the Indian Independence, "though some ignored the rules, their father had never taken such risks" in fear of losing the job and for "all our sake" as Subhash attempts to coalesce his brother into thinking

(Lahiri, 2003, p.24). Udayan's steadfast nature propels him through. He marries Gauri against his family's wishes. For all these reasons, Udayan becomes alienated among his family members sadly but truly.

Neither Udayan's dream of abolishing human sufferings from the state ends state oppression nor does it stabilize his family life on, before and after his death. Following the death of Udayan, in *TL*, Gauri fails to adjust to her newly widowed status alone and with her grieving parents-in-law. Upon his return from America, Subhash observes the miserable condition Gauri goes through in his parental home. Both Mr. Mishra and Mrs. Mishra (Gauri's parents-in-law) are shell-shocked. Their son's death has ended the joy of their lives. They are not overtly excited about the upcoming arrival of their grandchild. Gauri has no other place to call home. Because of eloping with Udayan, she is ostracized by her own family members. Moreover, the Mishras covertly blame Gauri for their son's death. The narrator says,

He thought of her remaining with his parents, living by their rules. His mother's coldness towards Gauri was insulting, but his father's passivity was just as cruel. And it wasn't simply cruelty. Their treatment of Gauri was deliberate, intended to drive her out. He thought of her becoming a mother, only to lose control of the child. He thought of the child being raised in a joyful house. (Lahiri, 2003, p.115)

Udayan's death makes Gauri an exile in her own land. Subhash thinks that he has rescued Gauri by marrying her. Gauri and Udayan had mutual attractions for each other. But her relationship with Subhash is one of responsibility. Gauri, also a PhD student in America, is unable to make a balance between home and her study. Having an unsettled mind, Gauri leaves her private space to nurture her talent in the public domain. Subhash, already a PhD, is selfishly attaining a postdoc 50 miles away from his family members. On the other hand, Gauri's rigorous study hours required to complete her PhD, add more pressure to strike a chord in life. Gauri assuages the pain of losing her ex-husband when she indulges herself in her studies. But the constant sight of Bela carrying Udayan's blood brings her back into her side of the past that disrupts her mind in the following years. Lahiri also shows the inefficiency of the Indian police when it fails to detect Gauri as a possible accomplice in the murder of their colleague. Policemen question her a few times but they fail to find her to be guilty even though she has some evidences of wrongdoings that they fail to detect.

Gauri decides to leave her husband and daughter to become a better scholar. In America, she tries to make the American capitalistic society happier. She wants to establish her position by keeping the capitalistic network content. By doing so, she loses her revolutionary zeal and paradoxically becomes more unsettled in her American life. To understand her condition, Said's theory on exile can give us a better understanding. Said (1993, p. 123) says,

You can spend a lot of time regretting what you lost, envying those around you who have always been at home, near their loved ones, living in the place where they were born without ever having to experience not only the loss of what was once theirs but above all the torturing memory of a life to which they can never return.

Gauri feels remorseful about losing Udayan from her life. She has left her birthplace. She is living as an exile with the memories of her husband and home. Udayan is physically absent but mentally she is present with him. She hopes to return to him after her death. Said analyzes that exiles yearn to find their home in a foreign land but the idea of home remains an illusion for them. Their yearning for home never comes to fruition. Her relationship with a fellow female student doing a PhD on Naxalites turns out to be a sour one. Gauri is searching for her lost sexual proclivity. After making love with her female student, she feels that she is neither frigid nor a lesbian either. Although she resorts to solo-sexuality just to forget the image of Udayan, “she was finding it impossible not to think about him” (Lahiri, 2003, p.164). She gets bogged down with the idea of getting married. Her nonchalant nature comes to the fore when she leaves her daughter Bela alone for ten minutes. Subhash returns home to find out the five year old Bela alone in the house. Subhash says, “You don't deserve to be a parent. The privilege was wasted on you” (Lahiri, 2003, p.175). After a prolong thought, Gauri goes on her separate ways. She finds a job as a college teacher in another state. She fails to find the image of Udayan in others.

Subhash, despite his belief that he is an open-minded individual, is unable to handle Gauri's departure with calmness. In “Biological Data,” Beauvoir (2011, p. 32) compares mother to a male mosquito which at times dies after the process of “Fertilization.” Similarly, a woman, literally or metaphorically, “dies as soon as the next generation’s future has been assured” (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 32). Gauri does not want to face a metaphorical death when she becomes a mother. She finds happiness in her profession. As a result, she puts more focus on her professional career growth than on household chores.

In *TL*, Gauri's departure gives Bela the space to establish her position in society. When Gauri meets Bela for handing her the signed divorce papers, Bela does not receive her long lost mother gleefully and cordially. Bela does not mince her words. She continues to berate Gauri for leaving her and her adoptive father Subhas behind. Being alone, she is not able to give a suitable reply to her daughter. In this respect, Lahiri's Bela bears an interesting analogy with Eppie in George Eliot's (1819-1890) *Silas Marner* (1861). Eppie from *Silas Marner* and Bela from *TL* are territorial in nature. They do not allow outsiders like Godfrey, Nancy and Gauri to encroach upon their territories. They defend their positions against more affluent members of society. By secluding Gauri from the mainstream society, Lahiri, in the novel, devoices Bela and gives her more time and space to establish her position amidst her family members. The settlement of Bela makes Gauri more unsettled. Of Gauri, Lahiri (as cited in Neary, 2013) says in one of her interviews, “She's in love with her revolutionary husband. She watches him shot in cold blood. She discovers after the fact that she is carrying his child. How does one move on from that?” Lahiri opines that patriarchal society blames Gauri for her desertion. She has an empathy for her. That is why, Lahiri covertly requests her readers to analyze Gauri from a different angle. Definitely, she is neither an angel nor a devil in the house. Gauri is, like each of us, a flawed creature made of flesh and blood.

In the novel, the Naxalites believe in the dictum of human rights that propel every citizen to raise awareness and protest against any form of injustice. In this sense, the researcher also agrees on Udayan's point of view that we should take into account the plights of poor people who do not receive basic rights from society. However, there should be peaceful demonstrations to seek justice, improved living conditions and working facilities for all. The article titled, "Facts, fiction, naxalbari and widening discourse" (2013) published in *The Times of India* says,

The Maoists themselves, inadvertently or otherwise, drew attention to Naxalbari earlier this year (2013) when they launched their biggest attack ever on the political class, killing former Union minister V C Shukla, Salwa Judum founder Mahendra Karma and other Congress leaders crossing a forested area of Chhattisgarh in a convoy. The date was May 25 - the same as 1967 when the killing of peasants in Naxalbari gave birth to the movement spearheaded by Charu Majumdar.

The Naxalite party has become a terrorist party which kills innocent people for realizing their demand of an agrarian society. Instead of showing the brilliant young students the right path, the path of peaceful demonstration, these groups have metamorphosed students like Udayans into murderers. Instead of reducing the rate of poverty among peasants, these political group members have increased the scale of anarchy, amassed plenty of individual wealth, and made the states and general people feel hapless and insecure with their domineering nature.

In fine, *TL* shows how confrontational political situations bring a family into disrepute. I have showed that it is not possible to make a united family when one of its members is involved in committing a murder. Lahiri does not support violent activities. Although Udayan is physically absent among her family members, yet mentally he is always present. Udayan's activities estrange himself from his parents. Udayan's family members go through, as Lahiri (as cited in Blintiff, 2003) says, "emotional violence" because of Udayan's "politically-motivated violence." At the end of the novel, Lahiri gives Subhash and Bela stable lives. They have new family members with them. In the novel, Lahiri succeeds in preserving the idea of a stable family.

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