

## **The History within the Story, The Story within the History in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Lowland"**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

The paper deals with *The Lowland* (2013), the second novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, an American female writer of Bengali origin and a winner of Pulitzer Prize and many other literary awards. Subhash and Udayan, two brothers, whose stories unfold on the background of the 20<sup>th</sup> century India and its dramatic history, are in the center of the narration. Membership in an extremist Naxalite gang, spectacular assassination, immigration to the US, tragic love story – these and many other events are experienced by Jhumpa Lahiri's characters. Basing on family saga genre strategies and introducing them into the multicultural context represented, the writer contemplates the issues of the so-called "big", official history of the whole country and its interaction with the "small", private one, both of them in no way inferior to each other. The themes of assimilation, immigration, cultural clash and self-identification are also involved in the narrative, what has already become a hallmark of Lahiri's fiction.

**Key words:** American multicultural fiction, Indian history, Jhumpa Lahiri, the Naxalites, postcolonial issues, self-identification

### **Introduction**

Jhumpa Lahiri (1967) is an American female writer of Bengali origin and a winner of Pulitzer Prize, The O. Henry Award and many others. Having been born in London, where her parents immigrated from Kolkata, she moved to the US in early childhood and settled down in Rhode Island together with her family. Despite the biggest part of her life spent in America, Lahiri has been dwelling in Italy for the last 18 years with her husband and children. Moreover, she has also started writing in Italian language, what demonstrates the widening of national and ethnic frameworks in her fiction and allows talking about the transcultural character of her creativity. That is why to date it even seems to be unfair to call her only American writer – she might be referred to as Italian one as well.

What about the peculiarities of the author's method, it is noteworthy to mention that she has become famous as one of the prominent representatives of American racial and ethnic literature at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In her works the various issues of contemporary heterogeneous world are contemplated through the prism of multicultural, postcolonial, racial

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and ethnic discourses. Jumpa Lahiri highlights such topical issues of contemporary cross-cultural fiction as search of identity, assimilation, immigration, the role of history and interaction of cultures. Also, it would be quiet appropriate to refer to Sergey Tolkachev's opinion on nominal differentiation of multicultural fiction authors in 2 groups. The first one keeps to postmodernist model and recreates multicultural space in heterogeneous and hybrid way. The second is, vice versa, prone to realist linear and transparent narrative and displays a "straight" view on history and identity (Tolkachev, 2013). The latter must be referred to Jumpa Lahiri's prose featuring the delicate depiction of the characters' inner worlds and responds to their life twists and turns prepared by the fate. For instance, Zadie Smith – not less well-known female representative of British and American multicultural literature – in her essay *Two Paths for the Novel* has characterized suchlike manner of writing as "lyrical realism", contradicting it to more vanguard approaches to narrative organization (Smith, 2021).

The *Lowland* (2013), Lahiri's second novel and the fourth book in general, has received rather lukewarm reviews from critics in comparison with the previous works, but, in spite of this, it still has managed to achieve commercial success and gain partial popularity among the readers. It became #5 of the *New York Times* Best-sellers list; was placed on the shortlist for the 2013 Man Booker Prize; was shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction; won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2014; was also long-listed for the National Book Award for Fiction, and revealed to be a finalist.

## Methods

The article represents interaction of new and traditional methods of literary analysis. Due to the work of fiction chosen the postcolonial and multicultural discourses cannot but included in the research. In addition, the research undertaken has determined the interdisciplinary approach including the elements of culture and social studies. Also, it is essential to observe how the characters of the novel under study perceive the space of their existence within the narrative created by the writer, addressing to the concepts of national history, memory and culture. That is why the peculiarities of time and setting and their functioning are highlighted, too. The related works of such prominent scholars as H. Bhabha (1994), M. Tlostanova (2011), S. Tolkachev (2013), O. Karasik (2020), L. Khabibullina (2021), Z. Zinnatullina (2019), A. Vafina (2018) serve as the methodological base for our research.

## Results and Discussion

Jumpa Lahiri's works are somehow distinguished by auto- or biographical elements, as generally all the pieces of racial and ethnic literature, in which the writers have always contemplated and reflected the experiences of inhabiting pluralistic and versatile reality of contemporary multicultural world. This novel, significantly inspired by a real story the writer has once heard from her relatives in Kolkata, is not an exception. Two young brothers, who had risked involving in a controversial political movement, were executed in the vicinity of the author's grandparents' home in Eastern India. The brothers' family members were forced to observe their murder. "That was the scene that, when I first heard of it, when it was described to me, was so troubling and so haunted me – and ultimately inspired me to write the book," as Lahiri explained in one of her interviews (Neary, 2021). Moreover, the setting of the novel, represented by two loci – West Bengal in India and Rhode Island in America – also alludes to

the author's biography. The university in Providence, where Subhash Mitra, the protagonist, works after his move from Kolkatta, vastly reminds the University of Rhode Island – the institution where Jumpa Lahiri's father, an academic and an immigrant from West Bengal, worked in a library.

The *Lowland* is structured into 8 parts featuring fragmentary, non-linear narrative, within which the omniscient author covers the time span from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>-the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, alternately entering the minds of the central characters. According to Sergey Tolkachev's opinion, "the plurality of the narrative voices as well as the polyphonic effect produced by the concord of various ethnic and cultural tonalities, seem to be particularly interesting while reading multicultural novels". In his scholarly researches he comments on the representative character of the novel genre as "the form of open and collective world understanding, capable to give voices to support ones' own identities and history", what, in its own turn, could be noticed in *The Lowland* (Tolkachev, 2013).

So, the narrative starts with the portrayal of the 1950-s India after British Empire fall. Tolly club, the abandoned golf club, the ex-stronghold of colonial epoch, is now the place for children's games of Subhash and Udayan Mitra, two brothers, so close to each other but so opposite by their nature at one and the same time. Their story unfolds on the background of the strife between Indian Muslims and Hindus, West Pakistan's separation as Bangladesh, starving refugees overwhelming Calcutta and Naxalite revolutionary groupings, inspired by Maoist anti-imperialist ideals and having tried to spread radical Communist ideology throughout India. After growing up Udayan decides to become a member of the violent movement, which echoes, by the way, could be really heard even in 2018. American landscapes and reality in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are shown with the help of Subhash's storyline as one of Indian intelligent academic circles' representatives immigrating to the US. The movement within the narrative space is realized by means of miscellaneous flashbacks viewed through the prism of the main characters' perception, what also actualizes the problem of memory as well as the issues of its subjectivity in terms of any history reproduction.

The images of 2 brothers, mirroring each other almost in everything, figuratively embody 2 ways of possible reacting to the outer reality. If Udayan is a rebellious fighter, even ready to sacrifice his own life for the sake of the social and political ideals, modest and thoughtful Subhash has always preferred to "cultivate his own garden", seeing truth more in an individual's honest living than in sanguinary weekdays of revolution. The only what have made them forever inseparable are Gauri, Udayan's pregnant widow who Subhash decides to marry and take away from the place that hurts by the memories of the beloved's death, and Bela, Gauri and Udayan's daughter adopted and brought up by Subhash. The lowland – two ponds nearby the Mitra brothers' home, usually flooded in monsoon and becoming the one whole due to the excess water – symbolizes the relationship of the brothers, "at times separate; at other times inseparable", as an Indian scholar Dr. Pius writes in his paper dedicated to the novel's analysis (Pius, 2014). Plus to that, this locus functions as the symbol of time's cyclicity and fluidity, especially in the context of Indian culture and religious beliefs proclaiming reincarnation. This unusual place is the first one that comes to Subhash's mind in his recollections of home far away in Rhode Island; the lowland is what Bijoli, the brothers' mother visits every day to honor the memory of her deceased son Udayan, executed by the police officers because of his engagement with the Naxalites.

The thorough description of real historical events and geographical characteristics of both Indian and American locations – these are how the novel chapters often start, as if the ones imitating chronicles or documentary features. Even the minor characters are shown on the background of the so-called “Big”, official history having influenced on their “Small”, private one. For example, it can be noted concerning the image of Otto Weiss, an American Jewish university professor and Gauri’s academic mentor, who in his childhood has gone through a Nazi concentration camp, where he lost his family. Gauri begins reflecting on her tragic past and disharmonious present while observing how Weiss appreciates his wife and children, having already experienced the loss of the closest ones due to the cruel turns of 20<sup>th</sup> century history. The heroine herself feels either unable to let the passé, connected with the deceased husband’s fatal involvement into the history of Indian political environment, or totally incapable to tolerate with her new life as a remarried mother. Tired of the poor attempts to be a loving parent and a decent wife, she abandons her teenage daughter, leaving her with Subhash. The reason is her psychological trauma, provoked by the story of her first marriage having been affected by the history of West Bengal social and political affairs. In this case we can also dwell on trauma studies, paid great attention to by such scholars as Roger Luckhurst (2008), Oksana Moroz and Ekaterina Suverina (2014), Lilia Khabibullina (2021) and others, and especially the impact of the aforesaid studies on contemporary fiction and its interpretation. Within the theory of trauma such notions as witnessing, posttraumatic stress disorder and historical trauma are usually defined. It is possible to trace them all having been reflected in Lahiri’s characters’ fates, whether we appeal to Gauri or Subhash and Udayan’s parents, who have watched Udayan’s fustilade; or to Subhash, Gauri and their daughter Bela, all having experienced the loss of the closest one, no matter if it is death or leaving and parting. Actually, all the main heroes are portrayed as the victims of historical trauma this or that way burdened several generations of the Mitras family.

## Summary

On the last pages of the novel we find out about the deeper roots of Gauri’s traumatized consciousness – her implication in the spectacular murder of a policeman, which was planned and performed by Udayan and his Naxalite associates. She explains her own widowhood with the sin she has once made reporting on one’s husband and father’s movement in the streets to assist those who organized his further assassination. This appalling interconnection of two stories as a part of the whole Indian revolutionary history brings her back to the native land in search of repose and reunion with Udayan’s spirit; while her ex-husband Subhash and daughter Bela continue developing their lives in the US, the place which has always provided them space for healing the soul wounds and the chance to proceed their own stories, independent from the past. In the final chapter we, in the first and the last time, penetrate into Udayan’s mind on the day of his execution, what allows comparing him with the intermedium, the point where the circle is eventually closed and all the stories of the portrayed heroes logically come together.

Besides these all, the genre peculiarity of the novel deserves special attention. Despite evident presence of multicultural and psychological novels’ features, Jhumpa Lahiri addresses to family saga strategies. Traditionally those, who choose this genre, depict several generations of one and the same family, comparing and contrasting their peculiarities and following their development in the context of a historical epoch. In this instance, the history of a fictional family is perfectly able to encompass the history of a country in the moment of dramatic changes. As a rule, within the narrative concentrated on historical, cultural, social and political

events going hand by hand with the personal and intimate doings, every generation symbolizes the step to a new stage. By the end of *The Lowland*, the reader will have got acquainted with the four generations of the family portrayed. Instead of the degradation and devolution, so typical for family sagas, here we observe a sort of transformation canonic for multicultural fiction – socio-cultural blend and gradual “extinction” of Indian roots and identity. Bela – Udayan’s biological daughter, born and bred in Rhode Island and brought up by Subhash immigrated to the US with her mother Gauri – has completely assimilated with American culture. Indian one has seemed absolutely strange and unknown for her during her visit to the grandmother, so thus she continues living her American life together with the daughter Megna, whose name is easily contracted to Meg as well as her Bengali roots are cut to slight Asian facial features. Elderly Subhash remarries an American woman of Portuguese origin in an attempt to erase the painful memories of his unsuccessful marital life with Gauri. The latter, in spite of her final come back to the native land, motivated more by her strong need of putting an end to the tragic love story with Udayan than by any necessity of reunion with mother culture, is shown as the one leading a life of a US independent feminist so different from the cliché image of an Indian woman. Subhash and Udayan’s mother Bijoli dies having lost her mind, soon after their father’s demise, unfortunately incapable of complete forgiveness and spiritual closeness with the family of Subhash due to her unfair preference of Udayan, the even more loved son because of his dreadful doom.

## Conclusions

Summing it all up, it might be concluded that Jumpa Lahiri constantly bounds global and individual histories in order to demonstrate their codependency and to embody the plurality of histories’ principle. In this connection any of the histories is in no way inferior to each other, both for the author and for the characters. Thus, as Dr. Pius writes, “*The Lowland* has been considered as a story about two brothers, but it could easily be the story of ideology and how it shapes the family” (Neary, 2021). Despite the interweaving of “Big” and “Small” histories’ concept, obviously addressed to by the writer, and fragmentary plot structure, the novel cannot be named postmodernist at all. It is a sample of contemporary realist prose, within which Jumpa Lahiri varies main tendencies in 21<sup>st</sup> century fiction and contemplates the issues of history and memory in their influence on individuals’ perception of human being.

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