

# The Ramifications of Insurgencies on Family Lives—A Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

*Nasib Ul Wadud Alam*

Chittagong Independent University

## **Abstract**

In this paper titled “The Ramifications of Insurgencies on Family Lives—A Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*”, this researcher has attempted to analyze the novel's fictional characters from Marx's views on “capitalism”; Beauvoir's analyses on men's domineering relationship on women: their struggles in society; Said's concept on “Intellectual Exile”; Gramsci's note on “Hegemony”; Althusser's discussion on “Ideology”; Heng's argument on “Third-World Feminism” and Chomsky's View on “Anarchy”. In light of these theoretical frameworks, the researcher has 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 Lowland*, face execution at the hands of law-enforcing agencies. Udayan's death crumbles his family members. This paper aims to show the ramifications of insurgencies on Gauri's life, Subhas' life and Bela's life.

**Keywords:** Hegemony, anarchy, execution, ramifications

In her interview with Cressida Leyshon (October 18, 2013), Jhumpa Lahiri says that family is her main focus when it comes to writing a novel in which she tries to understand the concept of family and what it pertains. Lahiri (quoted in Leyshon 2013) 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*, Jhumpa Lahiri (2013) emphasizes the concept of family, its disintegration and regeneration in the context of the Naxalbari Movement. She shows how one brother's involvement in insurgency puts a negative impact on the family lives of Subhas (Udayan's younger brother and his wife's future husband), Gauri (Udayan's wife and Subhas' sister-in-law before his death but his divorced wife later on) and Bela (daughter of Udayan born after his death; raised mostly by Subhash but initially by Gauri). Lahiri collected the plot of this novel from an anecdote of two naxalite brothers. They got killed at the hands of law-enforcing agencies in front of their own relatives. Of that incident, Lahiri (quoted in Lynn Neary) expostulates that the scene of those two brothers' deaths continued to horrify and motivate her to complete writing *The Lowland*.

As has been depicted in *The Lowland* (2013), the peasants in Darjeeling were angered by the continuous domination of capitalist landlords. Kanu Sanyal, the leading Marxist politician of that period, rallied the Naxalbari peasants to stage remonstrations against the suppressive stakeholders for more autonomy and equal land redistributions among all. The government's violent action led to the outbreak of massive protests in many parts of India. The Naxalbari Movement became a source of inspiration for many youths of that era. The Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist, CPI (ML) was officially formed in 1969. The members proclaimed themselves as Naxalities whose sole concern was to free the country from capitalists. During the ongoing protests, one police was killed. Following that day in May, police ordered the rebels to return home. The protestors did not obey. Then, police took the matter into their own hands. (Lahiri, 20-1) They killed eleven people including eight women. In *The Lowland*, Lahiri portrays Udayan to be revolutionary. He was living with the utopia of ending Indira Gandhi's tyrannical reign. His binary was Subhas, a Research Fellow (PhD) from the United States of America, a land. In the novel, Subhas believed in living with the status quo. He found comfort in the capitalistic mode of production.

Marx (Ryan & Rivkin, 2004: 656) in "The German Ideology" opines that the capitalistic mode of production creates a gulf between the haves and have-nots. For Marx, the rise of privatization reduces the workers' opportunity to express their voice; as a result of which, the bourgeois society continues to expand its unchartered territories at the cost of marginalized peoples' shrinking space. Therefore, Marx (656) argues that the 'haves' have a wide-range of networks that establishes their own ideologies. They compel the 'have-nots' to follow their ideologies. And, this relationship is one of subjugation.

Udayan absorbed the spirit of ending not only the juggernaut of autocratic socio-political structures but also forming a class based on equanimity. In "Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas", Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (John Storey, 1998: 191) show how the network of capitalism grips leading intellectuals or "producers of ideas" with "ruling ideas of the epoch". According to David Macey (2000: 31), "The classic Marxist theory of IDEOLOGY holds that there is a relationship of determination between an economic base (the forces and relations of production) and a superstructure made up of the state, and legal, political and ideological

forms.” Althusser in “From Infrastructure and superstructure”, compares base to an edifice and superstructure to “two floors” metaphorically and topographically. According to him, every base is as important as superstructure. The relationship between structure (base, my emphasis) and financial structure (my emphasis) can be autonomous and interdependent. For a social revolution, superstructure is the last determiner for abolishing the current base and creating a new form of superstructure. In his summary of “Marxist Theory of the State”, Althusser (Vincent B. Leitch, 2001: 1488) says,

...the proletariat must seize state power in order to destroy the existing bourgeois state apparatus and , in a first phase, replace it with a different, proletarian, State apparatus, then in later phases set in motion a radical process, that of the destruction of the state (the end of State power, the end of every state apparatuses.

Udayan echoed Althusser’s ideology of creating a proletariat base for a better superstructure that has parity in actions and thoughts. Whereas, Subhas, endowed with capitalist society’s fixed sets of beliefs, continued to show his conformist attitude towards the oppressive regime. Althusser (Vincent B. Leitch, 2001: 1487) identifies “the State as a force of repressive execution and intervention in the interests of the ruling class”. He further comments that the state always attempts to keep the ruling class happy. A state attempts to establish its position by supporting the bourgeoisie ideology. Udayan believed that there is a reciprocal relationship between the government and its bourgeoisie class. The state ensures that the bourgeoisie society would avail maximum opportunities in trade and commerce, which, Udayan, in the society he lives in, had. And, the ruling class also tries to provide enough opportunities with sustenance that comes from its material mode of production. Both of these agencies, in a capitalistic society, function their activities in their frequent struggles for power which Udayan did not want to be a part of. Udayan showed his resistance to state ideologies. He continued to show his rebellious nature against the authoritarian state. His complicit intellectual brother Subhas warned Udayan to shun that part of his nature off. Udayan continued to dream of bringing equality against all odds.

The Indian capitalistic society, built upon the strong networks of ruling ideas, contained and constrained Udayan’s freedom of movement. Subhas’ tryst with the bourgeois ideology helped him settle down easily; whereas Udayan’s constant run in with the law put him in constant limbo. Udayan was branded a rebel. His space to move around and find a larger platform to impart his ideas and disseminate his party’s information among general people was limited. Leading a peripatetic life, he was always on the run. However, Subhash enjoyed having more space the bourgeois society had stipulated for him. Gramsci (John Storey, 1998: 210) notes that the more powerful group has its functionaries which come in the form of intellectuals, who, through social, cultural and political networking systems, continue to show others their ways. Subhas was one of that kind. He did not believe in raising his voice against any kind of oppression. He was more concerned about his individual safety and security.

*The Lowland*, partly an epistolary novel, has one letter exchanged between Udayan and Subhas; the former, being a Marxist, admonished the latter for showing ignorance towards the plights of the downtrodden people. The Guardian's Jason Burke (28 May 2010) comments on Maoists' struggle against state-sponsored agencies which the noted writer Arundhati Roy also supports. Roy (31 August 2018) claims that private companies encroach upon farmers' lands for establishing new industries. Many of these landless farmers, seeing no other way to end their financial problems, commit suicides. Although she supports the idea of the communist parties' continual to struggle for workers' rights, yet the lynching, mob violence and massive murders that come with them are denounced by her. Thus, she has been urging the states to treat landless farmers' rights delicately and as sensibly as possible. Roy criticizes the states for their use of arms for disbanding mob congregation,

The poststructuralist Udayan, with the help of his educated wife Gauri, got inspired by his party leaders' political ideologies to kill a police official. Gauri, though not actively involved in the party activities, helped him with information about the policeman's whereabouts. The Naxalite Movement inspires not only the male participants, but it gives many women the chance to vent their furies at the oppressive Indian government. They have their freedom of expression and own space to maneuver around, but only in a limited capacity. Like Gauri, many of them assist their male counterparts in disseminating information while working as double-agents for the states and the rebels. Geraldine Heng (Ryan & Rivkin, 2004: 873) in her seminal article, "A Great Way to Fly": Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism", argues that the guerilla warfare or any nationalist movements do not appreciate female participants' activities in mass movements. They restrict women from taking active decisions. Many of them are allowed to devolve but only under patriarchal observations and monitoring systems. Heng opines that women should speak for themselves; they should have their own associations to show their oppositions. Wanting equality under the patriarchal gaze will not give them enough room for improving their rights. For Heng (873), "in Third-World states, ultimately, all feminisms are at risk; all must write their own scripts and plot their continuing survival from moment to moment". She opines that revolutionary men downplay women's contribution. They make women subservient to their wills and desires. There is a class division in these groups where women from affluent classes receive more perks than females coming from less-privileged families. Moreover, the female participants leave the party fearing for their own safety. State oppresses them and party insiders do so. Women like Rebeccas (BBB report, 20 November 13) join the rebellion for staging remonstrations against state agencies but they do not stay there much longer. Disillusioned, they accept the government amnesty that is on offer.

Lahiri also shows the inefficiency of the Indian police when it failed to detect Gauri as a possible accomplice in the murder of their colleague. Police questioned her a few times but they failed to find her to be guilty even though she had some evidences of wrongdoings that police failed to detect. Udayan's death made Gauri an exile in her own land. To make matters worse for her, she was also expecting a child. Subhash thought he had rescued his sister-in-law Gauri's fate

by marrying her. Gauri and Udayan had mutual attractions for each other. But her relationship with Subhash was one of responsibility devoid of passion and mental attachment. Said will be helpful here for understanding Gauri's situation. He (Stein, 2013:123) says, "Finally, as any real exile will confirm, once you leave your home, you cannot simply take up life wherever you end up and become just another citizen of the new place". Having an unsettled mind, Gauri left her private space to nurture her talent in the public domain. Beauvoir thinks that women have not done enough to resist patriarchal domination. She laments that men have more opportunities for grooming themselves up for creating a better career pathway. In *The Lowland*, Subhas, already a PhD, was attaining a postdoc 50 miles away from his family members. On the other hand, Gauri's rigorous study hours required to complete her PhD had added more pressure on her. She found it arduously difficult to maintain a balance between home and work. Gauri could assuage the pain of losing her ex-husband when she indulged herself in her studies. By going through the process of sublimation, she could at least mitigate her pangs of frustration. But the constant sight of Bela carrying Udayan's blood brought her back into her side of the past that would disrupt her in the following years. It took her a lot of time to come to terms with the loss of her ex-husband. Said (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 had decided to leave her husband and daughter to become a better scholar. When she lived in India, she had a revolutionary spirit but her family tragedy transformed her into complicity. In America, she tried to make the American capitalistic society happier. She wanted to establish her position by keeping the capitalistic network content. By doing so, she lost her revolutionary zeal and ironically became more unsettled in her American life. Said (2013:117) 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. After a prolong thought, Gauri went on her separate ways with Bela and Subhash. She found a job as a college teacher in another state. She failed to find the image of Udayan in others. Her relationship with a fellow female student doing a PhD on naxalites turned out to be a sour one. Gauri was searching for her sexual identity. After making love with her female student, she felt that she was neither a frigid nor a lesbian.

Subhash, despite being an open-minded person, could not accept Gauri's departure with calmness. Beauvoir feels that a liberal man, despite being empathetic towards women, may not understand a woman's pain. In "Biological Data" Beauvoir (2011: 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". Gauri did not want to face a metaphorical death when she became a mother. She found her recluse in her profession. As a result, she put more focus on her professional career growth, not household chores.

In “Women and the Proletariat” Babel (quoted in Beauvoir, 2011: 65) calls women and proletariat as “oppressed”. Both of them, according to Beauvoir and Babel, need to battle hard against economic dependency for establishing their rights. However, Beauvoir criticizes Engle for not putting emphasis on women’s condition. It is not also clear, Beauvoir argues, whether women become more of victims because of the establishment of private companies. If men and women only work as workers, without thinking of reproduction, then society will stagnate itself. By leaving her family members, Gauri did not emphasize family reproduction; instead, she got busy in her scholarly pursuit. Beauvoir also emphasizes the need to allow more women to work and have flexible options for helping them find a balancing act between home and work. Beauvoir thinks that women’s domestic errands are labourious and they do not contribute a significant lot to the overall economic mode of production. Beauvoir (2011:75) rightly says that women’s domesticity produces “nothing new” but we should not underestimate the significance of domestic labour. What we should highlight is the men’s lack of activities in running household errands. As a result of men’s apparent languishing attitude towards household chores, women have to work more at home. It makes their life tougher to maintain a balance between home and job. They do not have enough space and energy left for working equally.

Beauvoir also notes that society shows more attention to the one who murders, not to the one who gives birth. She calls the exclusion of woman in “warrior expeditions” as “the worst curse on woman”. Beauvoir urges women to continue fighting for their existence not as women but as human beings for establishing their position. She wants them to fight for equal roles without gendered specificity. Beauvoir also shows the differences between male students and female students who have less time for study because they have to give into social pressure of living an organized life. Beauvoir does not think that women have less talent to shine. She fails to understand why women give up their passionate interests after getting married or becoming a mother. That is why; she encourages women to earn money on their own. She wants them to have more say in the decision-making process. Beauvoir also thinks that women choose to get married for a better security system. Meagre salaries also prompt many of them to get married for a better financial package. In many cases, she becomes (quoted in Beauvoir 2011: 75) “an object to be purchased”. Just to make her husband happy, women give dowry, sacrifice their desire and busy themselves in making others happier. Beauvoir criticizes women for putting too much importance on their household chores. She opines that many women consider doing household chores as a part of their godliness. Women sacrifice their interests for the welfare of their family members. Then comes a time when the married mother becomes more frustrated after she finds her family’s male members blossoming in their field at the cost of her sacrifice. She plays a peripheral role in assisting her breadwinning husband who continues to enjoy all the privileges at the expense of his (Beauvoir 2011: 484) “subjugated, secondary, parasitic’ wife”. Beauvoir (Beauvoir 2011:658) argues that women performs the best when “the future is open to her”, and “she no longer hangs on to the past when women are concretely called to action, when they identify with the designed aims, they are as strong as brave as men”). In *The Lowland*, Gauri was one such woman who showed her rebellious nature by ignoring her family

responsibilities. She thought about making a bigger contribution towards society. She tried her best to create a professional identity regardless of age, race and gender.

Gauri had to sacrifice her personal life to become professionally successful. Subhash did not have to make the same sacrifice. The patriarchal society assigns too many responsibilities on women. It does not give women enough scope to shine. Satirically, Lahiri shows how the patriarchal society is going to heap praise on Subhash for marrying the widowed Gauri and giving her a life in America.

In *The Lowland*, Gauri's departure gave Bela the space to establish her position in society. When Gauri met Bela for handing her the signed divorce papers, Bela had not received her long lost mother gleefully and cordially. Bela did not mince her words. She continued to berate Gauri for leaving her and her adoptive father Subhas behind. Gauri became a social pariah, an outsider. Being alone, she was not able to give a suitable reply to her daughter. George Elliot's Eppie and Jhumpa Lahiri's Bela were territorial in nature. They did not allow outsiders like Godfrey, Nancy and Gauri to encroach upon their territories. They defended 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 made Gauri more unsettled. Of Gauri, Lahiri 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 will blame Gauri for her desertion. She has 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, is a flawed creature made of flesh and blood. She is just a victim of circumstances that were out of her control.

Emma Goldman (1910) argues that anarchism brings out positive results in society. She criticizes others for calling it "violent" and "impractical". Instead, she believes that anarchists oppose to all forms of violence. They protest against the use of governmental ideological interpellation and manipulation that restrict human beings from professing their free wills. Goldman in the same article, says,

Anarchism therefore stands for direct action, the open defiance of, and resistance to, all laws and restrictions, economic, social, and moral. But defiance and resistance are illegal. Therein lies the salvation of man. Everything illegal necessitates integrity, self-reliance, and courage.

Therefore, Goldman proposes the same Marxist belief that people will dismantle the existing disorder in the lethargic system for bringing socio-political, cultural and financial sovereignty. Gauri, until she lost Udayan in a skirmish, preserved the same belief of Goldman. His murder put a dent on her belief of ending social disparity. Her latter life was overshadowed by the capitalistic belief system that she had received from America. Gauri and Subhash

became willingly unwilling subjects of state ideologies. They believed in the order of things. But Goldman castigates these people becoming subjects of the corrupt system and obeying to the state rules and regulations that are contrary to the liberation of the mind and body. Noam Chomsky (quoted in Michael S. Wilson, 2013) purports that private companies do not bring solutions the same way Adam Smith dreamt of by assuming that private ownerships and governmental non-interference would lead society towards equality. Chomsky terms it Libertarianism, the binary of Anarchism. Chomsky postulates (in Wilson, 2013),

Anarchism is quite different from that. It calls for an elimination to tyranny, all kinds of tyranny. Including the kind of tyranny that's internal to private power concentrations. So why should we prefer it? Well I think because freedom is better than subordination. It's better to be free than to be a slave. It's better to be able to make your own decisions than to have someone else make decisions and force you to observe them. I mean, I don't think you really need an argument for that. It seems like ... transparent.

Chomsky (in Wilson, 2013) analyses that libertarianism; in other words, believing in Adam Smith's ideologies, is virtually an acceptance of the unequal system that obliterates our original thoughts and subjugate us into believing something that we do not like to accept. Gauri went through the same phase. She did not have any control over her working condition. The pressure of earning money and leading a stable life to be a valued member of the capitalist society abrogated her from finding peace in her family life. Professionally, Gauri made a steady growth but at the cost of her family settlement and contentment. She never stopped Udayan from getting involved in violent activities. After Udayan's death, she opted not to follow her husband's revolutionary path. She used Subhash as a ladder to re-situate her own position in America. Ironically, Gauri lived the capitalistic life that Udayan always hated. On the other hand, Subhash, not as professionally active as Gauri, had been depicted to have found happiness in life with his daughter Bela (biologically not his own), son-in-law Drew, granddaughter Meghna (biologically not Drew's own) and newly-wedded wife Elise. By giving the novel a happy ending, Lahiri puts forward her premise of a settled family life. She shows how political death; even though it disrupts Gauri's life and makes her a libertarian, gives Subhash the scope to rise up from dolefulness and move on with life which he finds amidst the comfort of his close family members.

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