

Beyond the Catastrophe: Trauma and Memory in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland***K.C.Lalthlamuani**

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Abstract

*This paper examines Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* by intersecting postcolonial trauma theory and memory studies. *The Lowland* has been widely studied as a narrative of diasporic alienation, and political extremism. It is often analysed through traditional trauma theories, where the characters' trauma originate from a single catastrophic flashpoint: the Naxalite Movement of the 1970s. Conversely, this paper contends that *The Lowland* functions as a complex representation of the theoretical paradigms of Maria Root's insidious trauma, which accounts for the slow, cumulative and systemic traumatic experiences, that are not overtly violent, but which are nevertheless traumatic (240). To supplement this analysis, the paper utilises Michael Rothberg's notion of "multidirectional memory", which emphasises the dialogical, non-competitive nature of mnemonic practices (16). By synthesising these two theoretical frameworks, the paper proposes that Lahiri's narrative extends beyond traditional trauma theories, demonstrating how specific historical atrocities can provide the vocabulary to articulate and make sense of disparate, marginalised histories.*

Keywords: *insidious trauma, multidirectional memory, Naxalite Movement, Postcolonial trauma theory*

Introduction:

Scholarship surrounding Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) has been largely dominated by thematic investigations of diasporic alienation, cultural dislocation, and the political radicalism of the Naxalite Movement. The novel is often analysed through the lens of Western centric trauma models, pioneered by figures such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana

Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra. In this Western centric model, trauma is conceptualised as an “overwhelming experience of sudden and catastrophic event” which remains unassimilated until it forces its way back into consciousness (Caruth 11). This definition of trauma assumes the existence of a stable pre-traumatic state to which the subject might ideally return once the specific traumatic wound is worked through or integrated (Craps 33). However, this has garnered criticism from postcolonial theorists due to its negligence of non-Western traumatic experiences. In a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* (2008), the editors Gert Buelens and Stef Craps argued that the foundational texts of classical trauma theories focused exclusively on white Western experiences of suffering (2). But Michael Rothberg, in his response essay in the same journal, proposed that the limitations of classical trauma theory were not limitations of race, but rather a structural limitation, in which trauma studies remain bound to a rigid, un-comparative Eurocentric framework (“Decolonizing Trauma Studies” 227). According to Craps, in many marginalised non-Western societies, trauma is not an unusual and unexpected event, but a continuing background noise, where “there is no pre-traumatised state of being that can be restored in any straightforward manner.” Consequently, he identifies the concept of “insidious trauma,” developed by Maria Root, as one of the possible paradigms to move beyond classical trauma theories (33). Additionally, Irene Visser in her article, “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects” (2015) provides an in-depth overview of how postcolonial literary scholarship has challenged and expanded upon traditional, Eurocentric trauma theory. Visser challenges Caruth’s deconstructionist view that trauma is “unsayable”. Instead, she highlights how postcolonial literature demonstrates that narrative is often an empowering and necessary act for cultural survival and the integration of traumatic memory (256-257). Thus, this instigated a decolonial turn in trauma theory where postcolonial scholars gradually moved away from classical trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartmann.

This paper contends that Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* (2013) represents a move beyond the traditional Eurocentric trauma models. Through the integration of Maria Root’s concept of insidious trauma, the paper highlights how the novel portrays trauma as slow, cumulative, systemic violence. Rather than limiting the trauma to the tragedy of Udayan’s execution during the Naxalite crackdown of the late 1960s-1970s, this paper argues that

Lahiri's characters are subjected to "‘normative,’ yet nevertheless traumatic experiences" (240).

Moreover, to articulate and make sense of these complex manifestations of insidious trauma, this analysis contends that Lahiri's narrative constructs a web of multidirectional memory, which, as defined by Michael Rothberg, is the conception of memory as "subject (ed) to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (16). Characters in the novel draws dialogical connections between disparate historical atrocities such as the 1943 Bengal Famine, the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, and the struggles of other nations to articulate and make sense of their own traumatic experiences. Through the synthesis of these frameworks, the paper argues that specific and globally visible atrocities can provide the necessary platform and vocabulary to articulate unrepresentable, marginalised histories.

To understand the intersection of insidious trauma and multidirectional memory within Lahiri's narrative, it is crucial to trace the context of the novel's plot, which spans across three generations and two continents. The story centers on Subhash and Udayan, brothers who grew up in the Tollygunge neighborhood of South Calcutta, which is adjacent to a low lying, marshy area, called "the lowland," that periodically floods during the monsoon season. Although born thirteen months apart and starkly different in personality, the brothers were inseparable in their childhood. But their paths diverged sharply in 1960s, when Udayan, the more passionate and impulsive younger brother, becomes deeply involved in the radical Naxalite movement, a movement inspired by the Maoist peasant revolution in China. The Naxalite Movement began in the village of Naxalbari, where exploited peasants raised arms, using bows and arrows against their feudal landlords. This created a "prairie fire" which spread to different parts of the country over the course of the years. According to Prakash Singh:

The Naxalite movement erupted violently in 1967, its flames spreading to almost all parts of the country. Some of the finest brains and the cream of India's youth in certain areas left their homes and colleges to chase the dream of a new world, a new social order (8).

But Subhash, the older brother, chose a life of quiet academic pursuit, as he moves to Rhode Island to pursue a doctorate degree in chemical oceanography to escape the growing political volatility in his village.

While Subhash is in America, Udayan marries Gauri, a young philosophy student who shared his intellectual curiosity and his desire for revolutionary uprising. Udayan's involvement in the movement culminates in his complicity in the murder of the local policeman, Nirmal Dey, a crime in which Gauri unwittingly participates in by monitoring the schedule of the policeman. However, during the 1971 brutal counter-insurgency efforts of the Indian government, the paramilitary forces hunt for Udayan in the Tollygunge enclave. Udayan is eventually discovered hiding in the flooded weeds of the lowland and is executed in cold blood in front of his parents and his wife. Learning of his brother's death, Subhash returns to a devastated household, where her mother, Bijoli has descended into obsessive mourning, and Gauri, pregnant with Udayan's child, is neglected by her in-laws, who blames her for Udayan's radicalisation and his eventual death. Recognising Gauri's precarious position, Subhash decided to marry her out of a sense of duty, and brings her to Rhode Island, where they raised Bela, Gauri and Udayan's child, with the pretense that Subhash is her biological father.

However, in the United States, Gauri's psychological detachment intensifies as she is unable to reconcile her role as Udayan's widow, Bela's mother, and Subhash's wife. She retreats into academic and philosophical pursuits, which results in her abrupt abandonment of Subhash and Bela where she moves to California to become a university professor. Subhash raises Bela alone, but as Bela grew up, she adopts a nomadic, uncovetous lifestyle that centers on environmental activism, reflecting her inherited radical spirit from Udayan.

Decades later, the secret that Gauri and Subhash have kept for years began to unravel itself. In his old age, Subhash finds companionship with Elise, a former high school history teacher. Bela becomes a single mother and gives birth to Meghna. Subhash feels compelled to reveal the truth of Bela's biological parentage, which sparks a temporary estrangement between Bela and Subhash. Gauri, now an isolated academic in California is forced to confront her decision to lie to Bela. After a brief and unsuccessful attempt to reconcile with Bela and her granddaughter Meghna, Gauri returns to Calcutta, only to find that the Tollygunge ponds and the lowland have been paved over and replaced by modern housing.

The novel concludes with Gauri contemplating suicide from her balcony, juxtaposed with Udayan's final moments in the weed filled waters of the lowland forty years prior.

Insidious Trauma and Multidirectional Links

Insidious trauma, according to Maria Root, is defined as an experience of trauma that is neglected. She proposes that insidious trauma is “usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power” (240). Unlike acute trauma, the impact of insidious trauma shapes the worldview of the one experiencing it, rather than shattering assumptions about the world. The foundation of insidious trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is rooted in the socio-political landscape of post-partition Tollygunge, Calcutta. The Tollygunge Club (Tolly Club) that stood at the banks of Adi Ganga is a foundational element of insidious trauma. The Tolly club used to be a protected haven for the British during colonial times, but after Subhash and Udayan's birth, it became an exclusive country club that was restricted for wealthy elites and foreign expatriates. In the decade following the 1947 partition of India, Southwest Calcutta was overwhelmed by the influx of refugees fleeing Dhaka, Rajshahi, and Chittagong. This displaced population which “Calcutta accommodated but ignored” lived in makeshift shelters, and woven bamboos next to garbage heaps, stripped of their ancestral land. This massive displacement turns the Adi Ganga into a sewer canal. In response to this influx of impoverished refugees, the club's management erected additional boundary walls to keep the locals away, which physically segregated the wealthy elite from the surrounding poverty (Lahiri 6).

The Mitra brothers grew up in this highly stratified society, and although they were not refugees, they experienced insidious trauma through their lower middle-class stature in society, which constantly devalues their presence and restricts their physical movement. Insidious trauma frequently manifests through environments that constantly signal to certain individuals that they are lesser, unwanted, or fundamentally separate. According to Maria Roots, “insidious trauma's effects are cumulative and directed toward a community of people. In effect, it encompasses some very “normative,” yet nevertheless traumatic, experiences of groups of people” (240). The Tolly Club stands as a constant reminder of this exclusion. Lahiri writes, “Until the mid-forties, from behind the wall, their father used to watch horses racing around the track... But after the Second World War, around the time Subhash and Udayan were born, the height of the wall was raised, so that the public could no longer see

in” (4). Udayan and Subhash would dream of entering the premises of the Tolly Club. However, because their identity is different from what is valued by those in power, they are denied entry before they were even born. Lahiri presents the raising of the wall as a metaphor for systemic exclusion. As scholar, Reshmi- Lahiri Roy notes in her article “Intersectional and Youthful Trauma”, the trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel is best understood through a framework that emphasises the crucial role played by context, place, and physical environment. For Lahiri Roy, the raised wall serves as a permanent architectural marker of what Kai Eriksen terms “a persisting condition” of structural subjugation rather than a single, discrete event (5).

The Mitra brother’s sense of identity is further devalued through their unfortunate encounter with a security guard in the Tolly Club. Bismillah, a Muslim caddy at the Tolly Club sold discarded golf balls that are sliced and bent putting irons to the Mitra brothers for a few paise and explained the layout of the Club to them by tracing its outline in the ground. Udayan and Subhash tried to play golf. But unlike football and cricket, golf was not a sport that they could satisfactorily improvise (Lahiri 4). This tempted them to sneak into the Club by scaling the low section of the wall. However, their adventure is abruptly interrupted by a policeman who patrols the surrounding of the Tolly Club. The policeman shone a flashlight in their face, pocketed the sliced golf balls, rested the shaft of the bent putting iron on Subhash’s hand. He demanded to know who gave them the permission to enter the premises of the Club and threatened to tell their parents. Udayan, aware of the humiliation and abuse his parents would face at the hands of the Tolly Club officials, tries to take the blame (10). But Subhash being the older brother took the brunt of the punishment. This incident serves to further delineate the Mitra brother’s marginalised position in society.

Maria Root explains that the frequency of insidious trauma can result in the construction of a reality where certain dimensions of security are not certain, and because of this the individual is often aware of potential threats and destruction. According to Root, this can lead to the activation of survival behaviours, which manifest itself in the form of heightened sensitivity and paranoid like behaviors (242). Similarly, Subhash responds to his experience of insidious trauma by seeking to “minimise his existence”, which eventually drives him to flee Calcutta’s hostile context for academic pursuit in Rhode Island. Subhash internalises his experience of insidious trauma as a persistent anxiety and a physical hypervigilance that makes him cautious and desperate to maintain social order (Lahiri 13,42).

Conversely, Udayan translates this experience into militant revolutionary resistance through multidirectional memory. Coined by cultural theorist Michael Rothberg, multidirectional memory proposes that memories of different historical traumas do not compete with or erase one another, instead they are interactive, cross-cultural, and dynamic; productive and not privative (Multidirectional Memory 16). Rothberg developed multidirectional memory in response to the tendency of collective memory to engage in, what he terms competitive memory/competitive victimhood, where disparate historical traumas would fight for recognition in the public space (17). To explain his point, Rothberg invokes the example of Andre Schwarz-Bart's novel, *A Woman Named Solitude*. In the novel, Schwarz-Bart describes a traveller walking through the ruins of a slave plantation in Guadeloupe. In the final lines of the novel, Schwarz-Bart explicitly bridges the historical trauma of Slavery and the Holocaust, of Central Europe and the West Indies, by writing that the human phantoms rising from the ash-laden Caribbean plantation soil appear "just as phantoms that wander about the humiliated ruins of the Warsaw ghetto are said to rise up before the eyes of the other travellers." Rothberg argues that this is a profound act of multidirectional memory where the globally recognised trauma of the Holocaust is utilised to validate and make visible a forgotten history of slave resistance in the West Indies (150-151).

Similarly, Udayan utilises multidirectional memory to articulate and make sense of the insidious trauma he has experienced. For their high school graduation gift, Udayan insisted on getting a shortwave radio. This shortwave radio allows Udayan to frame his immediate environment not as an isolated pocket of suffering, but a crucial struggle in the global theatre of resistance. Through this shortwave radio, the Mitra brothers "searched for any foreign signal. News bulletin from Radio Moscow, Voice of America, Radio Peking, the BBC.... Weather conditions over Central Europe, folk songs from Athens, a speech by Abdel Nasser. Reports in languages they could on guess at..." (20-21). Udayan is exposed to disparate historical moments, such as the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in Vietnam, a military coup in Brazil, and the execution Che Guevara in Bolivia. Rather than viewing these events as disconnected, Udayan utilises multidirectional memory to map the trauma of the marginalised Vietnamese peasant, or the exploited Latin American worker onto the starving sharecroppers of Naxalbari. The shortwave radio provides him with a vocabulary of global revolution to articulate his own political frustrations and the structural violence he sees in Calcutta which eventually led to his radicalisation.

Moreover, Udayan's engagement with multidirectional memory becomes explicit in his contextualisation of local spaces of privilege and oppression. Throughout his childhood, Udayan wanted to scale the walls of the Tolly Club, and to enjoy the luxuries that the Club provided. But after graduating high school, he reflects on the Tolly Club, the place where they were physically and verbally degraded by the security guard as children. Udayan stops viewing it through the lens of personal childhood shame, instead he contextualises it through the global memory of the Cuban Revolution:

But Udayan said that golf was the pastime of the comprador bourgeoisie. He said the Tolly Club was proof that India was still a semicolonial country, behaving as if the British had never left. He pointed out that Che, who had worked as a caddy on a golf course in Argentina, had come to the same conclusion. That after the Cuban revolution getting rid of the golf courses was one of the first things Castro had done (30).

By invoking Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, Udayan uses the memory of Cuban anti-colonial resistance to decode his own trauma. The Tolly Club is no longer just a golf course, but an affront, and a spatial manifestation of the comprador bourgeoisie and a semicolonial lingering. Multidirectional memory allows him to convert an insidious traumatic experience into an actionable, ideological critique by aligning his insidious, localised trauma with the grand narratives of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and global peasant revolts. It allows him to believe that the suffering he witnesses daily in the slums and lowlands of Calcutta is not a permanent, hopeless condition, but a spark that connects his life to a larger, inevitable global fire.

Additionally, Lahiri explores Gauri's insidious trauma through the intersection of political violence, domestic subjugation, and diasporic displacement. While existing scholarship on Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* traces the foundation of Gauri's traumatic experiences from the moment of her husband's (Udayan) death, recent scholars argue that the character of Gauri requires a rigorous critical evaluation which necessitates the integration of feminist trauma hermeneutics and comparative memory studies (Tripathi 1). According to Lahiri-Roy, Gauri's psychological development cannot be isolated from the socio-political history of 1960s Calcutta (3). Gauri is situated at a highly contested intersection of gender, social class, nationality, and ideology. Her involvement with the Naxalite movement, sparked by her relationship with the charismatic revolutionary Udayan Mitra, initially presents itself

as a chance at intellectual autonomy and existential liberation. Yet, as contemporary scholarship on the Naxalite movement demonstrates, the revolutionary space was itself deeply compromised by patriarchal hierarchies and gender discrimination. Gauri's revolutionary marriage to Udayan, while conceptually radical, ultimately exposes her to a dual vulnerability: she is simultaneously marginalised by the traditional expectations of Bengali society and subordinated by the masculine parameters of the political movement (Lahiri-Roy 3).

The trauma of witnessing Udayan's execution by the paramilitary forces in the flooded lowland of Tollygunge marks a massive psychological rupture in Gauri. However, this is followed by the transition to a chronic, insidious trauma within the domestic sphere. After the events of Udayan's death, Gauri is absorbed into the Mitra household, where her identity is systematically devalued by her in-laws. Udayan's mother, Bijoli, subjects Gauri to domestic segregation, banning fish, and forcing her to take her meals in the kitchen and to wear the color-stripped white saris of tradition Hindu widowhood (Lahiri 110). Moreover, through Subhash Gauri learnt that her in-laws plan to sever ties with her after the birth of her child (130). She felt that her only option was to accept Subhash's idea of marrying her and moving to Rhode Island with her. However, in Rhode Island, Gauri is unable to reconcile her role as Bela's mother, Udayan's widow, and Subhash's wife which further exacerbated her experiences of insidious trauma through diasporic alienation.

A critical turning point in Gauri's intellectual and psychological trajectory occurs through her encounters with Professor Otto Weiss at the Rhode Island University. Otto Weiss was a German, Holocaust survivor who had been put in one of the camps as a boy (198). This academic relationship establishes a dialogical space where the productive dynamics of multidirectional memory can occur (Rothberg 3). Gauri entered a graduate seminar on German philosophy where she is the only female student. She submits an ambitious, forty-page essay on Hegel when only ten pages was requested (Lahiri 198). Weiss a senior scholar, calls her into his office, and tells her directly: "You have written close to forty-pages. And yet you have still failed utterly to prove your point... But I am always grateful to have an intellectual in the room" (199). Through their conversations, Gauri realised that unlike the other professors, Weiss had a profound grasp of the Upanishads and their influence on the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Gauri "felt a kinship with this man. She wanted to please him, to salute him somehow" (200). When Weiss inquires about her origins and what brought her

to Rhode Island, Gauri experiences a rare dissolution of her defensive boundaries, confessing: “My first husband was killed... I watched it happen. I married his brother, to get away” (200), marking the only moment when she confessed her conditions to others. Rather than engaging in a competitive memory of suffering, wherein Gauri’s postcolonial trauma might be dismissed as minor or incomparable to the absolute scale of the Holocaust, Weiss responds with a profound, empathetic unsettlement. He simply nods and shares a picture of his own family, consoling Gauri with the restorative observation that “with children the clock is reset. We forget what came before” (200).

This exchange exemplifies the “cross-traumatic affiliation” theorised by Stef Craps and, wherein different historical atrocities are brought into contact in an ethically responsible manner that preserves the historical distance and specificities of each event while facilitating mutual comprehension (Saxena 181). Weiss’ recognition of Gauri’s trauma does not overwrite her experience; instead, he provides her with the precise intellectual tools needed to process her psychic fragmentation. He lends Gauri his personal, annotated copies of Theodor Adorno, J.M.E. McTaggart, and issues of the New German Critique (Lahiri 201). Under Weiss’ mentorship, Gauri’s academic specialisation focuses on German Idealism, the philosophy of the Frankfurt School, which is eventually reflected in her dissertation, “The Epistemology of Expectation in Schopenhauer” (Lahiri 283). By translating her unutterable, insidious trauma into the highly structured, rigorous vocabulary of Western philosophy, Gauri constructs a “screen” to safely explore her own catastrophic past without directly naming it (Rothberg 14). The memory of the Holocaust, mediated through Weiss and Critical Theory, does not displace or marginalise Gauri’s postcolonial suffering, instead it provides the essential platform and the language of articulation that enables her psychological survival.

Conclusion:

The Lowland (2013) functions as a profound text of the decolonial turn within trauma theory by shifting the critical focus away from sudden, event-based catastrophes toward the slow, cumulative reality of insidious trauma. By intersecting insidious trauma with Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory, the study reveals how characters like Udayan and Gauri navigate their systemic marginalisation and psychological fragmentation. Rather than viewing local postcolonial suffering in isolation or engaging in competitive victimhood, the characters establish dialogical links with global historical movements and atrocities, such as the Holocaust and the Cuban Revolution. Ultimately, this theoretical synthesis proves that

globally recognised historical traumas can provide the vital vocabulary and cross-cultural platform needed to articulate marginalised histories of oppression.

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