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Constitutional Order, Anti-State Insurgency, and Family Responsibility in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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ABSTRACT: Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland (2013) stages, within the intimate space of a Bengali middle-class household and a Rhode Island apartment, the cultural conflict between a constitutional nationalism concerned with civic order and an anti-state Naxalite insurgency that sought radical transformation through violence. Read as a cultural site rather than as a partisan tract, the novel shows how public choices and clandestine acts return home as ethical burdens distributed across kinship, caregiving, and memory. Anchored in the documented chronology of Naxalbari (1967), the CPI(ML) formation (1969), and subsequent counterinsurgency in 1971–72, the analysis traces Lahiri's relocation of ideology into domestic time: the killing of an insurgent organiser, Udayan, is not a climax but the beginning of decades of household repair. The reading emphasizes a constitutional frame, care ethics, and the pedagogic responsibilities of family life, rejecting any romanticization of violent, divisive, anti-constitutional action. While acknowledging critical debates about "under-politicization," the paper demonstrates that Lahiri's restraint clarifies duty, lawful order, and the costs of misled choices for present and future generations.

Keywords: *Naxalbari; Naxalism; constitutional order; Indian nationalism; diaspora; care ethics; trauma; Lahiri*

Introduction: Household Scenes, Public Consequences

The Lowland begins in Tollygunge, where two brothers traverse a marshy stretch between home and street. The "lowland," a flood-prone depression, is both geography and cultural metaphor: an ordinary threshold where the aspirations of a constitutional democracy meet unresolved inequalities and inflammable rhetoric. Subhash, patient and law-abiding, takes a path of graduate study and steady work; Udayan, restless and doctrinaire, chooses anti-state clandestinity. When security forces kill Udayan near the family courtyard during a period of intensified counterinsurgency, the public conflict enters the home irreversibly, and Lahiri devotes the remainder of the narrative to the long afterlife of that act in kinship, caregiving, and memory (Lahiri, 2013).

Reading the novel as a cultural site of conflict between constitutional nationalism and Naxalite extremism avoids two temptations: state-bashing on the one hand and insurgent romanticization on the other. Nationalism here names the constitutional project of institutional life, due process, and civic obligation; Naxalism, by contrast, names an anti-state insurgency that rejected constitutional methods in favor of violent upheaval (Banerjee, 1980, 1984; Appa, 1970). Lahiri's achievement is to transpose these abstractions into domestic events that cannot be argued away: a killing witnessed by family; a child raised under protective discretion; an immigrant household rebuilding routines after rupture. The novel's form shifts attention from the spectacle of street politics to the quiet heroism of lawful care over time.

Historical and Conceptual Frame

The Naxalbari uprising of May 1967 in North Bengal re-articulated older agrarian discontent within a Maoist frame that legitimated violence as a route to justice. The CPI(ML) formed in 1969, consolidating urban student networks and rural nodes, while 1971–72 saw intensified counterinsurgency and policing directed at dismantling clandestine cells and restoring order (Banerjee, 1980, 1984; Appa, 1970). This context is not diagrammed in Lahiri's chapters; it is refracted in households—through whispered errands, small devices, surveilled alleys, and finally the cordoned courtyard. The historical horizon is stable enough to be treated as

background knowledge in the novel; the reader recognizes in implication what historians have documented at length.

For the nationalism side of the conflict, Benedict Anderson's account of nations as imagined communities remains useful as a reminder that the nation is sustained by practices—civic routines, schooling, law—rather than by slogans alone (Anderson, 1983). Partha Chatterjee's analyses of postcolonial national imaginaries help to read the everyday interior ("home," "inner domain") as the place where public projects either take root or fail to translate into stable life (Chatterjee, 1993). A constitutional lens is decisive: democratic order relies on lawful instruments for reform, while anti-state violence stands outside that order regardless of motive.

Scholarship on *The Lowland*: Domesticity, Responsibility, and the Politics of Restraint

A critical strand has described *The Lowland* as "under-political," suggesting that militant history is domesticated into family narrative. Another responds that Lahiri's focus on responsibility, duty, and care clarifies the ethical core of citizenship and the social costs of clandestine violence (see Shah, 2014; Pius, 2014; Shameem, 2021). A second cluster, often feminist and transnational, examines Gauri's arc—from philosophy student to underground courier, widow, and later academic in the United States—asking how autonomy, safety, and obligation interrelate (Wei, 2023; Lahiri-Roy, 2024). A third conversation tracks how the single event of a killing becomes an epoch of ethical work distributed across a household over decades (Pourya Asl, 2018).

Across these debates, a consistent outcome emerges. Lahiri's refusal to glorify violent extremism, coupled with her refusal to caricature all state force as brutality, shifts the question from public spectacle to private consequence: who bears the burden of misled choices, how are children taught to receive painful truths, and what forms of care keep a household within the orbit of lawful order after rupture?

Method and Approach

The reading that follows is historically informed close analysis: attending to setting, pacing, focalization, and silence while situating key scenes against the chronology of

Naxalbari and the crackdown. The framework employs care ethics for familial decisions and a constitutional lens for evaluating anti-state action and state response. The interpretive stance is non-partisan regarding party politics but unequivocal that violent, divisive, anti-constitutional acts are not defensible; the emphasis falls on duty, truthful memory, and the educational responsibilities of family life.

The Lowland as Cultural Memory: Ecology, Civility, and Surveillance

Lahiri's floodplain is not scenic background. It is the novel's palimpsest, storing games, shortcuts, clandestine drops, and finally the sightlines of a cordon. Its cyclical flooding mirrors the periodic return of memory; its reeds and undergrowth recall how ordinary environments can be conscripted into concealment as well as surveillance. The "lowland" thus becomes a meditation on civility. Civic order requires infrastructure but also temperate habits; without the latter, grievance turns into license for anti-state action. When later construction overwrites the lowland's contours, the gesture suggests development's tendency to pave over difficult memory. Yet the narrative insists that civic order must incorporate truthful memory—not to romanticize earlier disorder, but to save households by reaffirming that democratic national life takes a no-nonsense approach to violence and that irresponsibility attracts penal consequences consistent with constitutional law.

Brothers and Claims on Duty: Cosmopolitan Patriotism and Anti-State Militancy

Subhash and Udayan offer contrasting orientations toward the nation. Subhash pursues graduate study in oceanography, steady lawful work, and careful kinship. His "nationalism" is not sloganeering but the patient maintenance of relationships and institutions that enable ordinary life. Udayan embraces an anti-state militancy that treats constitutional mechanisms as obstacles to justice and that demands secrecy, instrumentalizing trust at home. Lahiri confers on Udayan no moral glamour. His recruitment of Gauri for courier work, the concealment of risk from family members, and the willingness to involve the household in danger without informed consent reveal an ethic subordinating care to clandestine ends (Lahiri, 2013). The consequences are unambiguous: when the network is targeted by security

forces during a period of intensified counterinsurgency, the family is exposed to fear, humiliation, and bereavement.

The Courtyard as Theater of Sovereignty and Kinship

At the novel's center stands a household scene in which men in uniform surround the home and kill Udayan in the waterlogged courtyard. Lahiri does not sensationalize the sequence; she narrates it through the family's terror and the elemental facts of rain, mud, and proximity. Within the constitutional frame that governs democratic states, counterinsurgency operations in moments of grave urban unrest are justified as means to protect the public and restore order (Appa, 1970; Banerjee, 1984). The novel's ethical difficulty is not whether a state may lawfully counter violent networks; rather, it is how the collateral shattering of a household is to be understood. State and family are interlinked in this scene, and the killing—justified in the context of anti-state operations—must be read together with the ways family complicity, negligence, or ignorance of clandestine activity helped to entangle the domestic space in risk. If shattering is to be grasped responsibly, the chain of enabling acts at home must be acknowledged alongside the lawful coercion that confronts insurgency.

This interpretive emphasis neither exculpates all uses of force nor imputes collective guilt to kin beyond what they knew or intended. It signals that clandestine violence corrodes intimate trust first and that the moral bill, when it arrives, is often paid by those who never chose the fight. In Lahiri's careful choreography of gazes and commands, the courtyard becomes the place where sovereignty is seen and the home is revealed as vulnerable to choices made in its name but against its safety.

Gauri's Trajectory: Autonomy, Safety, and Care Ethics

Gauri's movement—philosophy student to underground courier, then widow, then graduate student and academic in Rhode Island—has prompted polarized readings. A care-ethics lens clarifies the complexity. Exposure to clandestine risk and the trauma of witnessing a killing create a defensible desire for safety, silence, and intellectual work at a distance. At the same time, family life is constituted by obligations freely assumed. Lahiri withholds an explicit verdict, providing enough textual texture—

Gauri's dread, her intellectual vocation, her discomfort with prescribed roles—to allow readers to assess the balance she strikes between autonomy and duty (Wei, 2023; Lahiri-Roy, 2024). Her later refusal of active motherhood can be understood as a guarded response to harm, yet remains open to ethical critique when measured against continuing obligations to Bela within a household committed to repair.

Subhash's Protective Discretion: Prudence, Timing, and the Education of Truth

Subhash's decision to marry the pregnant Gauri and raise Bela in the United States is not collusion with insurgency; it is a stabilizing act aligned with constitutional citizenship—work, caregiving, lawful commitment. For years, he withholds the fact of Bela's paternity. The narrative presents this discretion not as manipulation but as prudence: an ethics of timing and proportion in the disclosure of a painful origin. Children seeking the truth of things in life should not be overwhelmed and distressed as if betrayed; they should be educated to accept, admire, and appreciate sacrifice and love, thereby growing mentally mature. In Lahiri's pages, the rituals of ordinary life—school runs, beach walks, small seasonal celebrations—model the kind of steady intimacy by which citizens and families keep faith after rupture.

When disclosure finally arrives, the revelation hurts. Yet the wound is accompanied by a record of protective love that gives the truth a form in which it can be borne. The novel thereby treats discretion as an educational tool—not an evasion of truth, but a pacing of truth for the sake of a child's moral and psychological formation.

Bela's Work of Meaning: Labor, Service, and Decoupling from Violence

Bela's adult life—seasonal labor, community projects, itinerant commitments—retains certain temperamental echoes of Udayan's impatience with conventional success, but it decisively rejects clandestine violence. The ethic is non-accumulative, present-tense, and lawful: a search for meaning through work and service rather than through disruption. To read Bela as inheriting insurgency is to mistake mood for method; Lahiri instead presents a child of a killing who refuses spectacle, seeking repair in small, steady forms.

Form and Tempo: The Slow Time of Repair

Structurally, *The Lowland* concentrates overt political action in its first movement and then expands into the long time of aftermath. The cool surface of the prose, the dispersed geographies (Calcutta/Rhode Island), and the granular attention to ordinary tasks collectively assert a thesis about political consequence: that violent, divisive, anti-constitutional acts send shockwaves that must be absorbed by families and institutions over years, and that restoration depends less on slogans than on lawful routines. The novel thus offers a counter-aesthetics to insurgent drama: instead of catharsis, the reader receives the steady work of keeping faith.

Diaspora as a Second Testing Ground

Relocation to the United States does not dissolve obligations; it relocates them. Immigration status, academic calendars, healthcare systems, and New England winters replace Bengal's monsoons and street politics as the constraints within which duty must be performed. Diaspora becomes a second testing ground for civic practice: employment, parenting, and neighborliness. The household continues its work of repair under different laws and seasons. In this transposition, the novel refuses the glamour of permanent opposition, preferring the adult work of maintenance. Where clandestinity demanded secrecy for risk, diaspora asks for discretion for care.

Counter-Readings Revisited: Domesticity, Law, and the Refusal of India-Bashing

A strand of criticism faults the novel for converting militant history into domestic narrative, implying that ethics without open politics is evasive (see discussions summarized by Shah, 2014; Pourya Asl, 2018). The novel's method, however, is to show how politics becomes domestic fate and how the law's restoration of public order coexists with private sorrow. Nothing in the narrative endorses violent networks; nothing in it caricatures the state as an unqualified monster. Instead, the text displays consequences: misled choices by individuals make their loved ones—now and in future generations—suffer and share the burden. This is not a rhetoric of "India-bashing"; it is an insistence that democratic national life, precisely because it protects freedoms, must discipline the wrong use of freedom when it harms others.

Truthful memory is retained not to valorize disorder but to signal that irresponsibility, once weaponized, attracts penal action consistent with constitutional norms.

Running Synthesis: Duty, Memory, Penalty, and Repair

Across settings and decades, *The Lowland* establishes a continuous moral field. Events become epochs in domestic time; one killing organizes calendars, childhoods, and pensions. The family functions as a micro-polity, distributing the duties and privileges of belonging across spouses and children. Gender mediates the allocation of risk and labor—Gauri's movements reveal how clandestinity often leans on the "innocence" of a woman's visible presence even as it deprioritizes her safety. The novel refuses any defense of violent, anti-state politics: the immediate disruption of public order is followed by slow, unglamorous suffering at home. And the constitutional frame is never absent: lawful force confronts networks that imperil neighbors; households make meaning within that order through work, love, and teaching.

Truthful memory is crucial. Forgetting invites repetition; fetishizing pain invites paralysis. Lahiri's approach is neither. Memory appears as a civic instrument: it integrates facts of loss into a public narrative that confirms the seriousness of democratic life, discourages the fantasy of righteous lawlessness, and calls families to the education of children in truth, gratitude, and love. In this distribution of dignity, care work is neither apolitical nor secondary; it is the decisive test of what any claim to justice actually leaves in its wake.

Conclusion: A Household After Insurgency

By the final chapters, no one is triumphant. The Indian state has acted against anti-state networks; a family has lost a son; a child has grown into a lawful ethic of service; a widow has pursued scholarship at a distance from danger; a brother has practiced durable care. Lahiri's novel restores scale. The nation is not merely an arena for slogans; it is the web of institutions that make households possible. Insurgency is not merely a youth's moral romance; it is a pattern of choices that imperil neighbors and entangle kin. The novel's answer to rupture is not celebration

of force as such, nor a counsel of despair, but the mature recommendation of constitutional order, truthful memory, and the steady education of children in acceptance, admiration, and appreciation of sacrifice and love. Such education nurtures mental maturity and civic steadiness, ensuring that the burdens of one generation's missteps do not become the destiny of the next.

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