

Free Will vs. Determinism: An Existential Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract: The 9/11 attacks on the twin towers in U.S.A, was a kind of inflection point in American history. Many Americans, who had been led by the illusion of American power and global reach and enjoyed a sense of invincibility, were shattered, as they began to sense the precarious nature of their existence. Confronted by a bleak prospect of the world, they felt compelled to put behind them their naïve optimism and simplistic dichotomies with which they had been accustomed to view the world. Post 9/11 traumatic phase, was a period of deep introspection for Americans as they began to confront the tragic nature of their existence. Lacan had once said, "... the philosopher's cognito is at the centre of the mirage that renders modern man so sure of being himself even in his uncertainties about himself" (Ecrits, p.167). Written in an existential vein, Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013), holds a special appeal for the twenty-first century readers, as it dwells on modern man's perplexity in the face of a major personal. Though the backdrop for most of the story is mid twentieth century India and America, the historical context of *The Lowland* is very contemporary as Lahiri engages with some of the dominant ideological discourses of our time.

Keywords: Free will, Determinism, Existentialism, Consciousness, Quietism.

Introduction: As a new school of thought, existentialism emerged in the years following World War II. It stressed on an individual's capacity to act autonomously in accordance with his own desires and interest. The chief proponent of the school, Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) says "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (1948, p.24). This central tenet, "existence precedes essence" aims at resolving one of the oldest dilemmas related to human freedom and determinism. It attempts to understand the human condition in the world by taking into account the subjective states of a human, i.e. anxiety, alienation, and awareness of death. Man is not a prefabricated being; his life should not be understood as predetermined or as unfolding of an essence that persists through time. The Lacanian view posits, if there is any essence it is precisely "the lack of essence" (Chaitin, 196). Lacan, the psychoanalyst would also say, knowledge of the world to a large extent involves knowledge of the conditions of our mind. Sartre concedes, there are certain a priori limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe; his necessity to exist in the world, be at work there, be in the midst of other people, be mortal, etc. However, these "existential aspects" (a term used by Heidegger) are universal and transcendental. They do not prevent men

from determining their existence with reference to them. Sartre says, 'man is rather the openness toward historical possibilities than the realization of a pre-given essential code; his history is the history in the making which is nothing else but self-making' (Zunjic).

Pre-determinism vs. self determinism: The existentialists are led by an amoral view of the world. They view the world dispassionately, even while commenting on the subjective nature of individual experiences. They argue that there is no such thing as 'a good person or a bad person'; what happens, happens, and it may just as well happen to anyone. This view clashes with the widely held notion of poetic justice that "bad things don't happen to good people". Juxtaposed to this, is a second school of thought that believes in pre-determinism. It argues that, choices of action and events in an individual's life can be fairly predicted by means of earlier events; events that are *a priori*, a *necessity* of thought, without which understanding of human life in the world seems impossible. As a writer, Lahiri, appears at the confluence of these two schools. In depicting the trajectories of the characters' lives in *The Lowland*, she juggles with the thought streams of free will and pre-determinism. While the characters, Udayan, Subash, Gauri or Bela are primarily existential, the details furnished by Lahiri of their early childhood and youth foreshadow the kind of individuals they will become later. Early in the text, Bijoli tries to dissuade Subash from marrying Gauri, reminding him that she's "Udayan's wife, she'll never love you" (Lahiri, p.160). She also warns him that Gauri was "too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother" (p.114). These words uttered by an embittered mother at the death of her favorite son, turn out to be all too true. As if preordained, Gauri does indeed abandon both Subash and her daughter, Bela to pursue the intellectual pleasures of an academic career. The problem of "free will" for thinkers has always been closely related to the question of moral responsibility. Philosophers on the problem, from Plato down to Martha Nussbaum, have argued that as humans, we control our will and our actions are determined by ourselves, that we are not *pre-determined* by mere natural causation, fate or any other reason. Sartre endorses this, saying, "...the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders" (Sartre, p. 31). On close consideration, we can trace in *The Lowland* some clear elements of existential thought. One is indeterminacy; Lahiri examines the implicit emotional reactions of people who bear the consciousness that they will eventually die. Heidegger's concept of anxiety can be related to understand the problem of the major characters in the novel. In exercising their free will, they understand that responsibility is the dark side of freedom. The realization that they are completely responsible for their decisions, actions, and beliefs makes them feel overwhelmed by anxiety. As Subash in the story experiences:

Again it was anxiety that kept him up, though not the same anxiety that used to rouse him from sleep after Gauri first left and he was alone with Bela in the house, asleep in the next room. Aware that she was suffering, aware that he was the only person in the world responsible for raising her (Lahiri, p.175).

Later in the novel, Bela is numbed by the startling disclosure that Subash was not her real father, that she was conceived from her mother's first marriage with Udayan, a man whom Gauri had intensely loved and lost. Reflecting on the past, Bela grapples to make sense of her life. She recalls the angst of her childhood years, unloved and uncared for: "Here was the source of the anxiety that had always been in her, of being unable to bring pleasure to her mother. [...] She had transmitted an unhappiness that was steady, an ambient signal that was fixed. It was transmitted without words. And yet Bela was aware of it, as one is aware of a mountain (Lahiri, p.188). The recurrent theme is loneliness and alienation. Lahiri weaves into her work the Camusian notion of the absurd; that as humans, we are absurd beings loose in a universe devoid of real meaning. All the major characters from Gauri to Bela stumble through a good part of their life unable to comprehend its broader implications, and muse on the irrationality and randomness of the world. In presenting an existential analysis of her characters lives, Lahiri illustrates the absurdity, poignancy, bewilderment, and hope of their experiences in the world. She dwells on their ultimate life concerns; death, the fear of isolation, the burdens or responsibilities that accompany freedom, and life purpose. She examines the four quadrants of their lives; their estrangement from their own selves, alienation from the society around, the society outside and humanity at large. Gauri, the female protagonist of the novel *The Lowland* is a continuum of self discovery. At a tender age she goes to live with her grandparents in Calcutta, away from her parents. Growing up with her brother, Manash, she escapes the conditioning influences of the conservative Bengali culture around her. She has no female role models to emulate, and enjoys complete freedom from her childhood to create a self in accord with her own desires. When Udayan meets Gauri for the first time, he reflects, "A bookish girl heedless of her beauty, unconscious of her effect. She'd been prepared to live her life alone, [...]" (Lahiri, p.338). Gauri, a student of philosophy, falls in love and marries him. Udayan, a student at the Calcutta University, was already entrenched in the Naxalbari revolution. She goes to live with him and her in-laws at Tollygunge. After witnessing Udayan's brutal killing in the hands of the police force, she experiences a kind of rupture in her consciousness. Udayan's death plunges all the members of his family into a kind of existential crisis. Unable to reconcile with the shocking reality, Udayan's parents sink into deep despair. Staying with them, subject to their harsh and unforgiving treatment, Gauri becomes gradually alienated from them. When her brother-in-law, Subash offers to marry her and adopt Udayan's child, developing in her womb, Gauri accepts, glad to get away

from the haunting memoirs of Udayan and Calcutta. She moves to Rhode Island where Subash was pursuing a doctoral programme in Marine Chemistry. In anticipation of an academic career, Gauri begins to attend philosophy classes. When she gives birth to her daughter Bela, she feels the newborn as an enormous encumbrance and a constant reminder of Udayan. As it turns out, Bela develops an affinity to Subash who dotes on her and fulfills every whim and fancy of hers. Gauri eventually opts out of the marriage informing Subash that it was becoming stressful to keep up the pretence any longer. Gauri's search for self, in the latter part of life, takes place to the exclusion of her family. Her daughter, Bela, who had just turned twelve, sinks into a deep trauma, unable to accept her mother's desertion. Living alone in California, Gauri experiences inner torment and guilt over her act of forsaking Bela and continues to be haunted by the memories of Udayan. Going through these emotionally powerful events, she is seen meditating about life and its meaning:

It was not unlike the way her role had changed at so many other points in the past. From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman. With the exception of losing Udayan, she had actively chosen to take these steps. She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life, only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end (Lahiri, p.168).

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche had also considered the role of making free choices, with particular reference to core values and beliefs, how such choices shaped the nature and identity of the chooser. Overcome, by a feeling of existential guilt, Gauri sinks into dark despair and prepares to kill herself. It is only when her daughter reconnects with her and brings her some kind of reconciliation with the memory of her dead husband, Udayan that she is able to form a stable sense of direction in her life.

Existential consciousness of death: Despite Lahiri's amoral presentation of her characters' lives, the readers in following their lives, cannot help pondering over the deontological question of moral considerability? They are compelled to reflect; what obligations do we, as humans, as rational agents, have towards our fellow humans? Lahiri's characters, particularly the women, i.e., Gauri and Bela, appear to be overwhelmed by the immense responsibility of their choices in life. Faced with the apparent meaninglessness and unfairness of the world, they sink into despair. At any point in time, anything can happen to anyone; a tragic event could plummet someone into a direct confrontation with the absurd as Gauri realizes when Udayan is shot dead. His death plunges her into an existential crisis. Faced with a devastating awareness of the meaninglessness of life, she endeavours in a Sisyphean way to persevere, against the society, herself, her family, conscious that time is always at her heels, ready to swallow her up. The consciousness of death haunts other characters as well. Grieving over his friend's death, Subash muses: It was like this now since the news of

Richard's death; a disproportionate awareness of being alive (Lahiri, p.250). As there are many deaths in the novel, the reflections of death are frequent. Towards the end of the novel, Subash now married to Elise Silva at a ripe age, is still pensive. He is aware of the lingering presence of death.

The next day when they step out of the house they encounter a group bidding an unknown villager farewell, mourners in dark clothing spreading down the sloping street. For a moment it is as if they, too, are part of the funeral. There is no sense of its boundaries, where it begins or ends, whom it grieves. Then they pass, respectfully, out of its shadow (Lahiri, p.229).

Lahiri like Heidegger in *Being and Time* suggests a significant correlation between *death* and *time* as well as between *time* and *anxiety in the revelation of our temporal Being* as humans. Heidegger raises the question of time as the possible horizon for any understanding of *Being*. Time is not just a linear, forward succession of points. As Gauri reflects:

Her strongest image was always of time, both past and future; it was an immediate horizon, at once orienting and containing her. Across the limitless band of years, the brief tenancy of her own life was superimposed. To the right was the recent past: the year she'd met Udayan, and before that, all the years she'd lived without knowing him. [...] To the left was the future, the place where her death, unknown but certain, was an end point. In less than nine months a baby would come. [...] This formed a grave in her mind's eye (Lahiri, p.110-111).

For Gauri also, space and time are not things that she perceives outside herself, but part of how she perceives and thinks of things: "She had been born with a map of time in her mind. [...] Months were arrayed as if along an orbit in space. Each concept existed in its own topography, three-dimensional, physical" (Lahiri, p.110).

Modern age and the fragmented self: When Subash first meets Gauri, he presents her with a copy of Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*. The mention of Marcuse's book, *One Dimensional Man* is significant here. Lahiri like Marcuse seems to suggest that modern man, despite having made technical innovations and gaining wide knowledge of the world, has not attained the basic wisdom of self knowledge and contentment. This has led to the emergence of fragmented and alienated individuals like Gauri. Despite her scholarly endeavours, philosophy has not prepared Gauri for the kind of existence she would have to face as a mother or a wife. Struck by the absurdity of it all, driven by a nihilistic despair, she rejects life by affirmatively choosing death, an attempt that is thwarted by her own inner voice. When she realizes that she is at odds with her time and society, she makes an honest attempt to amend by reaching out to her daughter whom she had forsaken. In the open ending of the novel, there is a modicum of reconciliation between Gauri and Bela.

Diasporic consciousness is essentially existential: At another level, Lahiri, a zealous observer of the multicultural American society depicts with great poignancy the trials and tribulations of the immigrant

communities as they struggle to assimilate into the culture of their adopted land. The diasporic consciousness of her characters is essentially existential. Familiar sights at Rhode land, evoke nostalgia in Subash.

Blending into the grass was a heron, close enough for Subhash to see the amber bead of its eye, its slate-colored body tinted with the late afternoon light. Its neck was settled into an S, the sharp length of the bill like the brass letter opener his parents had given him when he left India.[...] The egrets in Tollygunge, stirring the muddy water as they hunted, were scrawnier (Lahiri, p.45).

Much later in the novel, Bela is seen reflecting on her own cultural identity as a second generation diaspora. In the course of her community work, she stumbles across a group of Bangladeshi workmen and experiences a strange affinity with them. “They speak in the language Bela's parents had used with one another. [...]. A language she stopped hearing after her mother left” (Lahiri, p.256). She begins to watch them with interest wondering whether she will be able to remain connected to her own roots. The angst of a modern individual amidst the transitoriness of life and times is best depicted in the character of Gauri. Viewed from the diasporic perspective, Gauri does not in the typical sense experience any cultural dissonance in the new land. Lahiri depicts the failure of Gauri in her lack of development as an American cultural citizen. Despite her superficial change of appearance, she fails in her assimilative adjustment to US mores or cultural citizenship. Teaching philosophy at a small college in California, Gauri is aware of being perceived as an exotic person, lending colour and diversity to the purported multicultural academic community. She refuses to engage or negotiate the complexities of difference in the new cultural spaces that had potential for opening up a dialogue between familiar and foreign meanings, relations, and identities. She attempts to camouflage her identity, feigning widowhood to her neighbours and a married woman to her male colleagues. But the pretense does not give her any relief. Instead it augments her existential predicament: “She avoided situations where she might be introduced to someone,[...]. She turned down dinner invitations, offers to have lunch. She kept to herself at conferences, always retiring to her room, not caring if people found her unfriendly. [...] (Lahiri, pp.236-237) Gauri maintains a sort of diasporic ontological and epistemological existence that surpasses 'all-home-returning projects' and pleas for pure identity. Alone in her exile, she staggers through life without any sense of self, struggling with an inner crisis of chaos, rage and alienation. She mistakenly thinks that she can lead the rest of her life without love or friendship. In a sense, by insulating herself, Gauri seeks a double amenity from the ontological constraint of 'culture' as she considers it as 'freedom from identity itself' besides the constraint of national borders. Nevertheless, there are moments when she also experiences an inchoate yearning for the place she left behind. Nostalgia for Gauri, however, brings with it, guilt and suffering. In her solitary moments she would wonder, “What had

Subhash told Bela, to keep her away? Nothing, probably. It was the just punishment for her crime. She understood now what it meant to walk away from her child. It had been her own act of killing. A connection she had severed, resulting in a death that applied only to the two of them” (Lahiri, p.169).

No Excuse for Quietism: While Gauri is shown to be disinterested in the fate of others, Udayan, the man she loved could never be so. Sartre speaks of a theory of social action in which the individual actor, his social group, and the field of his practical action are interconnected (Hayim 1980: XII). Udayan, delineated in a true Sartrean fashion, is a clear example of this kind of individual. With his radical views, he endeavours for social change in the impoverished countryside of North Bengal. His ultimate goal is humanism. As a rebel, he justifies his radicalism. He feels that he cannot afford to think of his individual moral purity when exigencies of political conflict require him to submerge his personal interests in favor of the common good. Pointing to Udayan's endeavours, Lahiri it appears is trying to reconcile the view of individual praxis with a teleological view of history, making out a case for individuals who extend beyond themselves and commit to a cause for the larger humanity. Udayan feels that one cannot remain an outsider and a rebel at the same time.

One day, visiting a clinic, he confronted the corpse of a young woman. She was around Gauri's age, already the mother of numerous children. It was unclear, from her appearance, why she'd died [...] Trying to obtain cheap rice for her family, they were told, she had been trampled in a stampede [...] He imagined the other people pushing behind her, determined enough to knock her down. People she might have known from her village, might have called neighbors and friends. Here was more proof that the system was failing, that such poverty was a crime (Lahiri, 336)

Faced with the sordidness of the lives of those around him, Udayan does not turn away in apathy. His craving for social justice and for freedom gets the better of his despair. He takes part in the resistance and works for social revolution. He is uncompromising in his support for those oppressed around him and channelizes his inner reserves of strength for their upliftment. He feels, in a la-Camus style, there is no excuse for quietism. There can be no withdrawal from the world of action irrespective of whether individual struggle has an end or not, man has to have some reason for living so long as he chooses to live; as Bela comes to understand. For one who has any spark of humanity left in her, it is simply not possible. While Gauri emerges as a highly narcissistic individual, the rest of the characters, Udayan, Bela, Richard or Elise are all shown to lead a self-transcendent style of living. They embrace the world by accepting human responsibility and by extending their social selves to take care of other human beings, their community, and their environment. While Udayan and Richard, are individuals engaged in a struggle against the

establishment, for asserting their or others' freedom, characters like Bela and Subash, avoid competitive struggle, to instead seek solidarity with others. Bela finds meaning in extending her social self and making a positive contribution to the lives of others. Like Udayan, Richard is also engaged in various projects that involve the well being of fellow human beings in the less privileged parts of the world.

Extending beyond Oneself: Lahiri's conception of existentialism, as it emerges from *The Lowland* is nothing but one's search for and adherence to meaning, purpose, and commitments that reflect values lying outside the self. Holding out Gauri's life, Lahiri, like Levinas (1985) suggests that, even though an individual may feel threatened by the weight of others' freedom, s/he still needs interaction and relationship with others to affirm his or her own existence. The individual needs the 'the other' for self-definition, and for the confirmation of his/her own existence (*Ethics and Infinity*, p.97); failing which, one is subjected to a deep existential despair. Gauri's life is most instructive in this respect. Both, Subash and Bela undergo personal upheaval when Gauri abandons them. The experience despite being profoundly difficult, also acts as a catalyst for learning, change and development. After a period of acute loneliness and watching over with anxiety Bela's transition through that traumatic phase, Subash reorients himself to life and seeks happiness once again by building new relationships with old friends and the community around. Long sessions with the therapist, help Bela to pull herself through the trauma. These sessions open her eyes to the tenuous nature of the human condition. She begins to understand that the existential angst, she was going through, was an inevitable corollary to human existence. Spurred by the new understanding, she embraces the world by taking up positive action. Lahiri shows how finally the bond of filial love gives a meaning and sense of purpose to Bela. It is ordinary human love that sustains life and helps her to assimilate and accept. In fact the quest of modern individual to know the self is incomplete without a sign of love. In this respect, Subash proves to be second time lucky in finding love with Elise and renewing his relationship with Bela. The relationship finally endows his life and identity with completeness and security. Bela, opts for an alternate lifestyle, a marked contrast to her mother's way of life. She does so without much radicalism appearing to be downright uninterested in material success. She chooses to lead a nonintellectual, nonurban life preferring to belong to a nonprofessional class. Bela is the only one, of all the characters, who makes sense of her existence amidst all the misfortunes. In the process of attaining adulthood, Bela reaches what Levinson (1978) echoing Jung would call as individuation (Levinson, p.32). Bela attains a clearer sense of who she is and what she wants. Overcoming the crisis, of being abandoned by her mother and the shock of discovering that Subash is not her real father, with great resilience, drawing on all her inner resources, Bela forges her selfhood. Thus, she

attains real autonomy. With individuated relationships, she feels more genuinely connected to the human and natural world. Unlike Gauri, who copes with her personal crisis by withdrawing into a cocoon, Bela seeks meaning by engaging with the world. She takes responsibility for her own personal construction of meaning. She becomes capable of mutual relationships, without being limited to a “selfish” concern or her own gratification. Thus, Bela's post-traumatic growth is remarkable in that she develops an altered self-concept, with a greater acceptance of others' vulnerabilities. On this aspect, Lahiri echoes existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, who had spoken of the power of suffering to improve human character.

Conclusion: Though Lahiri's canvas is much wider in *The Lowland*, it is clearly in the postmodernist vein, a micro narrative. It is about human relationships; the relationships which exist within the family, parallel to the relationships which exist outside. It is these significant inter-linkages that provide a wider meaning and relevance to her work. Gauri, Subash and Bela, all appear to be grappling with the world and meaning of life. Questions such as “Who am I?”, “What is life?”, “What is death?” assume great significance to them. Finally, the existentialist in Lahiri, addressing a multicultural society, against the post 9/11 milieu appears to suggest, it is true we know nothing about our future, except that one day, each of us will die. Nevertheless, as humans we can choose to live ethically. As men and women we can make the choice of ourselves involved in distinguishing the good from the evil by preserving a grain of our nonviolent heritage. This, Lahiri illustrates can only be achieved through face-to-face interactions and cross-human conversations. As a second generation American-Indian, she believes that the American society with its multicultural ethos is capable of intertwining selfhood and otherhood, by positively responding to the other cultures and transforming itself anew. The promise of America, after all, is not just about material gain; it is also about a spiritual sense of reinvention, of bettering and changing the self.

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