

An Analytical Study of the Concept of Known and Unknown in

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Jhumpa Lahiri, one of widely recognized diasporic writers, has highlighted Diaspora in her writings and painted the immigrant psychology and behavior, Indian culture and tradition along with cultural values of the homeland. The issues like immigration, assimilation, identity formation, hybridity, struggle and anxiety, third space are focused in her *Interpreter of Maladies*(1999), the debut collection of short stories ; *The Namesake* (2003), the first novel; *Unaccustomed Earth*(2008), the second collection of short stories and *The Lowland*(2013), the second novel and fourth book. In this paper my endeavor is to find out the concept of known and unknown in relationships, experience, places, feelings in her fourth book and second novel *The Lowland*.

Born in England, the daughter of Bengali Indian parents emigrated from the state of West Bengal and grown up in America, Jhumpa Lahiri is now considered as post-colonial, Indian-American, post-modern writer. Diaspora theory bears many aspects which influence the literature of various languages in the world. It is a vast concept. The writers of these literary works live outside their native land but their works are identified with their native culture and background. Therefore it is very important to examine the characteristics or features of such literature. One of the most important issues of today is Diaspora. When we discuss Robin Cohen, William Safran, Rogers Brubaker to comprehend Diaspora we can get the characteristics of Diaspora like exile experience, alien residents, immigrants, ethnic and racial minorities, homeland orientation and boundary maintenance.

In presentation of her target issues Jhumpa Lahiri is different from many other contemporary writers who have Indian-American experiences. Her second novel *The Lowland* offers us a scope of highlighting the concept of known and unknown which has been asserted by Donald Rumsfeld. He stated:

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the one we don't know we don't know.

The Lowland (2013) of Jhumpa Lahiri deals with the story of Subhash and Udayan, two Mitra brother. They are born only fifteen month apart and are inseparable while growing up. They are opposite in characters. Subhash is more careful and pragmatic. Therefore, he leaves Calcutta for pursuing an academic career on the East Coast of the United State. But his younger brother Udayan is more radical and he joins the Nexalite movement in 1960 out of his sense of equality and justice. Udayan is caught in this communist movement in West Bengal. And finally his tragedy is followed by his death. He is executed by the police in the lowland behind his parental house, Tollygunge, West Bengal, India. Subhash, coming from America marries Udayan's widow Gauri out of a sense of duty and humanity and he goes to Rhode Island taking Gauri with him. Pregnant by Udayan, Gauri gives birth a daughter named Bela there.

In this novel Lahiri goes back to the poverty stricken post-independence India and draws our attention to the determined young and idealist intellectuals like Udayan who raise violence against wealthy land owners and sacrifice themselves to change the existing social and political system. The young men do not know whether they will succeed in their mission or not. But they try there level best for justice and equality for the poor and the oppressed. Udayan, the idealist intellectual may think an oppression free society for future though he does not know the result of their movements against the rulers. In a foreign country Gauri and Subhash have been always haunted by the feelings of nostalgia and guilt. The leave Calcutta

physically and live in America but they live in Calcutta mentally and actually. Throughout the novel we see that these two main characters have known the unknown country with the passage of time. In 1969 Subhash arrives in Rhode Island to pursue a PhD in marine chemistry. In the initial stage Subhash has to give a lot of efforts to understand the difference of American cultures. Despite this conflict between known Calcutta and unknown Rhode Island Subhash sees a plus point of immigration that nobody knows him in the United State , so he can begin freshly. Immediately Subhash gets some known knowns between the two places though these places are beyond comparison. Subhash takes the help of imagination to relate his home land with the unfamiliar places of Rhode Island in his Oceanography campus Subhash feels the Narragansett Bay, a small beach nearby where Subhash enjoys eating his meals alone, Jamestown bridge and Newport bridge leading to island offshore are all unknown places to him. Not only that the experience he gathers from these unknown places are also something new to him. The role of the bridges is both connection and separation. There is an old church on the mainland. Subhash feels “the strange urge to embrace”. One day Subhash desires to enter but the door is locked. So he has nothing to do and he only peers through the windows at the interior. Here, the curiosity to know the unknown, one of human natures is explicit in Subhash.

Richard Grifalconi, a Quaker from Wisconsin is a PhD student in sociology, with him Subhash shares a house. Subhash thinks his brother Udayan far away from his homeland when Richard strongly opposes the Vietnam War. In the second year of his PhD, Subhash learns how to drive from Richard who moves to Chicago. After Richard’s leaving Subhash inhabits the house alone. And his life begins to gather a lot of known and unknown experiences. With the passage of time Subhash becomes fascinated by an American woman named Holly older by almost ten years. Holly has a son and she is separated but not divorced from her husband who now stays with another woman. Despite the age and cultural differences Subhash indulged in

a relationship with Holly during weekends, when her son is staying with his father. In this relationship Subhash becomes acquainted with new sexual experiences and feelings. After a certain period of time Holly breaks up the relationship with him and tries to get back her husband. Infatuated Subhas is now eager to return home. When the tragic news of Udayan's death reaches him Subhash comes back home with a lot of known and unknown feelings and experiences.

Nobody knows what will happen tomorrow. We always pass our present to arrive at the better future. But sometimes future is full of uncertainties. Udayan becomes friend with Manash, a Nexalite and falls in love with his sister Gauri, a student of philosophy. She is attracted by Udayan's ideas. Udayan gets more and more involved in Nexalite activities. By 1970, the Nexalites become extremists. They are doing underground operation but they do not know the result of their great job for the sake of ordinary people of the existing society. Udayan and Gauri get married in secret. His parents become hurt and outraged when they have learned the fact. Gauri's love for her husband compels her to help him plan the murder of a police officer. When Gauri is pregnant for five months she comes across the policeman's widow and their boy. It is Gauri's irony that she becomes a widow like the policeman's wife. Her husband Udayan is also executed and she is about to become a mother, too. At twenty three she is in a similar situation and she is totally helpless.

The entire novel *The Lowland* (2013) is pervaded with the concept of known and unknown. The concept of known unknown is something relative. Known unknowns mean risks somebody is aware of. Known unknowns are perceived but slightly understood. They come from that kind of phenomena. On the contrary, unknown unknowns are beyond the expectation as there does not exist no prior experience. Unknown unknowns are risks which come from situation and never happen. In the novel, the characters and their relationships unfold and explain the concept of known and unknown. Today's known relationship will be unknown

tomorrow. The experiences, feelings, thoughts, places all change with the passage of time. After Udayan's execution in the lowland Subhash comes back to Calcutta for the first time in three years. He sees the clamorous streets packed with people just like before. Upon reaching Tollugunge, Subhash feels the taste of his past days when he is "assaulted by the sour, septic smell of his neighborhood of his childhood". His homeland Calcutta the "city with nothing, with everything" is unchanged. But the small house where he has grown up in "had been replaced by something impressive, ungainly." He notices Udayan's footprints visible in the concrete but his feelings are not the same. Subhash feels everything in this house of the Mitra family is changed after Udayan's death. It becomes the routing of everyday for his mother that she, at the same time, goes to the memorial stone built up by Udayan's comrades after his execution. Subhash realizes that the known relationships, feelings, experiences are being changed gradually.

SlavajZizek, a psychoanalytic philosopher refers that there is another concept of known and unknown. That is the unknown known which somebody intentionally refuses to acknowledge that he knows. The relationship between Subhash and Gauri, after their marriage is strange, full of confusion and conflict. Out of a sense of duty, Subhas takes the responsibility of Udayan's widow Gauri and her baby. After his return to America with Gauri, Subhash becomes "the wrong father". Subhash is her brother-in-law as well as husband. They do not share any love at present. Subhas resembles Udayan. So, Subhash's outward appearance becomes known and unknown to Gauri: "The same height, a similar build." In the United States Gauri, during first months, spends most of her time in bedroom and seldom goes out of the house. She likes the privacy and freedom on the peaceful American campus. Subhas independently performs his morning routine without her. She observes the contrast between Subhas and Udayan. Udayan "had wanted a revolution but at home he'd expected to be served". Here, in the United States the concept of known and unknown to Gauri is gradually being

changed. Later Gauri begins to explore the campus, starts going to library, attends philosophy lectures twice a week.

The novel *The Lowland* is a burning deed of feminism. Gauri is now independent. She can do whatever she likes. She wants herself to be looked like the other girls on the campus, “like a woman Udayan had never seen”. So she cuts her hair short without talking Subhash and tears all her saris, and begins to wear slacks and sweater. In Rhode Island Gauri gets the taste of freedom and she violently delimit herself from Indian Bengali appearance. Gauri gives birth to child named Bela. But she never really becomes a mother. She is totally an unknown mother to her baby. She lives in and thinks of a time before Bela was conceived, before her biological father was killed. She does not care her baby or she gives no importance to the baby. Gradually she grows professionally in the United States and travels the world for various conferences. She is very conscious of her career. She is a woman who becomes a transnational citizen through immigration but she is not transnational on her personal level psychologically. Gauri shifts to California and dedicates herself to teaching and research when her daughter is twelve. This is not a known behavior of an Indian mother but it is a self-imposed punishment for an Indian mother. She runs away from her daughter and does not contact her for over two decades. Gauri has wanted to escape the loop of times by abandoning her child and she changes herself from known to unknown mother to Bela. The causes of her being unknown mother may be explained that Gauri “had been born with a map of time in her mind.” Actually, her timeline only walks with past and future by sub-siding the present.

Known and unknown father Subhash suggests the name “Bela” for Gauri’s daughter and she agrees. Subhash’s name is registered on the birth certificate as father. This is a falsehood but nobody will question in America. The name “Bela” bears known Indian heritage because the word “Bela” means an Indian flower, a span of time and a portion of day in Bengali. Her complexion is another connection to the known Indian connection. As Bela grows she

becomes familiar with known and unknown experiences. In 1976 America celebrates its bicentennial and Subhash feels his 7th year here. Subhash realizes his relation with Bela is “At once false and true”. Bela extremely loves Subhash as her father. She is ignorant of the reality that Subhash is “an uncle and imposter”. Gauri’s detachment from both Subhash and her girl Bela destroys the common relationship like mother- daughter. It is a deep psychological shock to Bela. Gauri always keeps her engaged in studies. She rarely smiles or kisses Bela as a known mother. Gauri is unable to loves Subhash or Bela with whole heartedly. Gauri is Bela’s mother but she behaves “as if Bela were a relative’s child and not her own”. Feminist Gauri always takes decision by herself. She never shows any sympathy to her daughter. Longing for 15 minutes alone she leaves her six year old girl unsupervised at the time of Bela’s vacation and she starts sneaking out of the house. The only women in the class of German philosophy she spends every evening away from her family and gets kinship with her profession Otto Weiss whose family had perished. Gauri shares the story of her life to the professor: “My first husband was killed. I watched it happened. I married his brother to get away” her negligence on parental duties always changes her roles of life. She becomes known to unknown. She fails at being a good mother. She does not take the responsibility of Bela as a mother which is most desirable to a child but she is doing PhD neglecting her present relationships.

At the age of Bela’s 12 years Subhash, the dearest father takes her to Calcutta. To Subhash the known Tollygunje is changed and being changed. Bela gathers a lot of unknown experiences from Calcutta. She is left with her grandmother and Deepa, a servant when Subhash goes for delivering several lectures at the University of Calcutta. Bela differentiates the life style between Tyllygunje and Rhode Island. With Subhash she visit the zoo, goes out shopping its at Chinese restaurant. Bela observes the heavy traffic, noise, the pollution in Calcutta. Inside the Tollygunje Golf Club her 12th birthday is celebrated. She gets the experience of the swimming in pool and riding a pony. Subhash mentioned his brother Udayan

and their enjoyments in their childhood. To Bela he lies that Udayan had died of infection. After six weeks in India Bela returns to Rhode Island to start a life of unknown experiences without her mother. The landscape is unchanged but the house is empty. Subhash finds a letter which informs that Gauri has moved to California to teach at a college. Bela is eager to get back her mother but she feels that her mother is just a ghost in her room. Bela's known world is shattered by this unknown and inevitable storm like experience. Gauri always likes remain to unknown from the world. She desires to start freshly in a place where nobody knows her. In spite of that she moves around independently choosing of teaching profession in Santa Cruz and San Francisco before settling a college town in Southern California. She maintains a good relationship with her colleagues and students. Gauri has passed brief affairs with different men and even a woman. She still carries the shawl given by Subhash during her journeys. Gauri plays various roles in life. But step by step she becomes lonely in her controversial life with full of known and unknown relationships.

Immigration offers freedom and establishment professionally. But, by getting much opportunity Gauri never gets peace in mind. Her searching for her daughter Bela and dead Udayan on the internet proves that she is very unhappy. She regrets her daughter does not exist in the virtual world. Not getting love and affection from her mother Bela starts neglecting on academic life-style and rebels against her parents. She does not want to stay at home and connect with her father. Bela and her choices of life are becoming unknown to Subhash. She goes to Western Massachusetts to work on a farm weeding and harvesting, cleaning animal pens. Bela's activities and jobs on farms across the country are something different from the jobs of average women of the society. She plants, trees maintains beehives raises, animal etc. In Brooklyn she hears Bengali words from some workers of Bangladesh. She reminds the words of her mother which she stops hearing after her mother's moving away. After a long period of time Bela get a known feeling in an unknown place. Bela is idealistic and rebellious

like her real father Udayan. Subhash feels Udayan's present in Bela when Bela shown arguments or opposes consumerism and scolds Subhash for buying fruit and vegetables from supermarkets. Subhash realizes the same feelings shared by his brother like long ago in their adulthood. Bela's individual time is nothing to her and her life has been devoted to the collective good. She does not pursue higher education but takes up firming to support and anti-capitalist life style. We see an 'individualistic kind of feminism' in Gauri which is more powerful than that of Bela. Gauri is independent and free from the responsibility of a mother or a sincere wife. She abandons everything and absorbs in a bright career for herself. On the other hand Bela is independent and feminist but she asks for the help of Subhash with raising her baby when she becomes pregnant. Bela keeps Subhash unknown about the identity of her baby's father. Subhash discloses the truth to Bela about her real father. Now Bela's known father becomes unknown and unknown known. Bela gives birth to a daughter and names her daughter Meghna, a river of West Bengal, India following the known tradition of Bengali culture.

Relationship is most important thing of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. There are so many conflict, complication, detachments, sufferings, new involvements in relationships. At 70, Subhash engages in a new relationship with Elise Silva, Bela's American history teacher and finally marries her. The cold relationship between her parents prevents Bela to be engaged in a romantic relationship of her own. But she gets involved in a close relationship with Druw, a farmer when her daughter is 4 years old. After getting a letter from Subhash asking Gauri for a divorce Gauri comes back to Boston to sign the divorce papers. She encounters with Bela and her daughter Meghna at home when Subhash away with Elise. Gauri tries to communicate with Meghna but Bela angrily interrupts the conversation. Bela throws her words to Gauri "like bullets". She strongly expresses her hatred to Gauri. The known mother is now an unknown mother who only deserves hatred and hatred for her irresponsibility as a mother. Gauri comes

back to Calcutta for the first time in 40 years. The only true relationship she admires is the relationship with her real husband Udayan. She knows nothing about the present relationships and she just leaves in the past. But the lowland is changed with the passage of time. She realizes what is what. She feels pangs of conscience for what she has done. She considers committing suicide. She always suffers from a psychological conflict. Several months later Bela writes a letter to Gauri expressing the possibility of future relationship with her granddaughter Meghna. Finally, the door is slightly open for a reconciliation of relationship among mother, daughter and granddaughter. However, Jhumpa Lahiri ends her novel with a flashback to India which reveals Udayan's activities.

To conclude this article, we must keep in mind that a research on literature is nothing but a close reading of texts. So, the issues based on the concept of known and unknown in *The Lowland* which are discussed through textual references are made argumentative, meaningful and significant.

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