

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 3. 2025 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Unveiling Male Silence in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.3.37](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.3.37)



Article information

Article Received:16/06/2025
Article Accepted:24/07/2025
Published online:30/07/2025

Abstract

This paper looks closely at the theme of male silence in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*, focusing on the characters Subhash and Udayan. It explores how their silence is connected to experiences like emotional pain, moving to a new culture, and family responsibilities. Using ideas from studies on masculinity, trauma, and postcolonialism, the paper shows how these men keep their emotions hidden, which leads to problems in their relationships and sense of identity. Lahiri shows that silence is not just the lack of speech, but a powerful and sometimes harmful force created by what society expects from men. Subhash hides his feelings all his life, and Udayan keeps quiet about his political beliefs - both suffer because of this. The paper points out that silence in literature can carry deep meaning, especially in stories about migration and postcolonial life, where what is left unsaid plays a big role in shaping lives and family histories.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*, male silence, masculinity studies, trauma theory, postcolonial literature, emotional suppression, diaspora.

Discussion:

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* is a rich story that follows the lives of a Bengali family over many years and across different countries. The novel looks deeply at how trauma, migration, and historical events affect the family, especially emotionally and mentally. One important but often overlooked theme in the novel is male silence. It shows how men hold back their emotions, hide their pain, and struggle to express their true selves. This research paper focuses on how this silence is shown through the characters of Subhash, who is Gauri's husband and Udayan's older brother, and Udayan, the younger brother who becomes involved in a political movement. By looking at how these two men deal with their feelings, especially after facing loss and the pressures of being male in a patriarchal society. This study uses ideas from masculinity studies, trauma theory, and postcolonial theory to show how the novel questions the silence often expected from men.

In *The Lowland*, silence becomes a powerful way of expressing things, especially for the male characters who are stuck between what they personally want and what society expects from them. Subhash, the older brother, is quiet and reserved from the start. He is very different from his younger brother Udayan, who is bold, talkative, and deeply involved in politics. Subhash always acts carefully and with deliberation. His silence is not just a part of who he is, but it represents something deeper. It shows the pressure of cultural expectations and the emotional weight he carries. Judith Butler's theory of performativity explains that society teaches men to act in certain ways based on gender. In many male-dominated cultures, men are taught to seem strong by not showing their emotions. Subhash does not speak up about his feelings after Udayan's death. He does not express his feelings when he decides to marry Gauri. He is not shy or quiet. It is his way of being a "man" in a society that expects men to stay strong and silent, no matter how much they are suffering inside.

The novel begins with the two brothers growing up in Tollygunge, a suburb of Calcutta. From the start, Lahiri shows how different they are in how they express themselves. Subhash is careful and follows the rules. Udayan is bold and often breaks the rules. They often share a quiet understanding, using gestures instead of words. As they grow older and take different paths, their silence starts to mean different things. Udayan speaks loudly about his political beliefs as a Naxalite, but he becomes quiet at home. His role in the radical movement, which leads to his death, shows how his public voice hides his private silence. He rarely writes to Subhash, and when he does, his letters lack emotion. He marries Gauri in secret, keeping important parts of his life hidden. Even though Udayan seems outspoken, he is also caught in the silence expected of men. He hides his feelings behind strong political beliefs, showing how even a loud revolutionary can be silent in personal matters.

Subhash becomes even more silent after Udayan's death. He comes back from Rhode Island to Calcutta and sees how deeply his parents are grieving. He also notices Gauri, Udayan's widow, quietly suffering. Out of a sense of duty or perhaps guilt, Subhash decides to marry Gauri and take her to America. He plans to raise her unborn child as his own. But Subhash never clearly explains why he does this. He does not talk about love, duty, or his feelings. He keeps his emotions hidden, and this continues throughout his life. He also stays distant from his daughter, Bela. When he finally tells her the truth about her real father, their relationship is already damaged. Subhash's silence is not harmless. It becomes a wall that keeps him away from the people he cares about. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory helps explain this. According to her, silence can be a sign of deep trauma which is a kind of pain that is too hard to put into words. Subhash carries not only the pain of losing his brother but also the heavy burden of everything he never says.

Male silence in *The Lowland* is closely connected to the immigrant experience. When Subhash moves to the United States, he feels like an outsider in many ways. He is different because of his race and culture, and he also feels emotionally alone. The difficulty of speaking a new language represents a bigger problem - he struggles to express himself, not just to others, but even to himself. Homi Bhabha, a well-known thinker, says that immigrants often live in a space between two worlds. They are not fully part of either one. Subhash's silence shows this feeling of being stuck in between. It becomes a way for him to survive in a country where he does not fully fit in and cannot clearly express who he is. His silence is like a form of self-isolation. Just as he is far from his home and family, he also hides his emotions. His silence becomes both a sign of pain and a barrier that keeps others away.

Udayan's death is a turning point in the novel. It makes silence a powerful theme for both brothers. He is killed by the police in front of his pregnant wife, Gauri. This moment is not just about his death - it silences his voice, ends his dreams, and cuts off his future. As Lahiri writes:

"He was already dead. The blood soaking through his kurta. His glasses thrown, crooked on the grass." (Lahiri 28)

This brutal act erases him physically but not emotionally. Even after his death, Udayan's presence stays with those he left behind. Subhash, Gauri, and Bela all feel the weight of his absence. His silence becomes like a ghost that stays in their lives. Derrida's idea of *hauntology* explains this well. He writes, "What is no longer, but still somehow is," suggesting that something or someone can remain present even after they are gone. Udayan's silence continues to shape Subhash's life choices, Gauri's emotional retreat, and Bela's search for identity. Subhash's actions are deeply influenced by his loss. He marries Gauri and raises Bela but never speaks openly about his reasons. Lahiri describes Subhash's inner state:

"He had seen his brother's body; he could not unsee it." (Lahiri 49)

His silence becomes a form of survival, a way to carry pain without expressing it. In this way, silence is not just the absence of speech. It is a powerful, invisible force. It is, as Homi Bhabha suggests in his theory of the *Third Space*, a place "in-between the claim of the past and the needs of the present," where identity is constantly being shaped. Udayan's silence becomes that in-between space - a force that continues to influence others, even though he can no longer speak.

Gauri's silence adds to the theme of male silence in *The Lowland*. Even though she is not the main focus here, her choice to leave her daughter and focus on her career shows how communication fails in gendered relationships. When Gauri walks away, Subhash is left to raise Bela alone. He never says much about how this affects him. He hides his pain and does not talk about his anger or sadness. Subhash's silence becomes a way for him to cope. But it also means he pushes his own feelings aside. He sacrifices his own needs just to give Bela a stable life. This kind of silence shows that masculinity here is not about power or control. It is about holding back emotions and suffering quietly. As Lahiri writes,

"He had lived in the shadow of his brother, and now in the absence of his wife, saying nothing, asking for nothing." (Lahiri 202)

This shows how Subhash slowly loses himself in silence. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain this. She writes, "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act...a doing" (*Gender Trouble*, p.25). Subhash performs the role of the quiet, responsible man because society expects him to. His silence is part of how he "does" masculinity. Instead of being dominant, he becomes invisible. His voice lost in the effort to care for others.

Silence is also very important in the relationship between Subhash and Bela. Bela grows up thinking Subhash is her real father. In the beginning, they are close. She trusts him and feels safe with him. But as she gets older, she feels something is missing. There is a quiet tension at home. Subhash never tells her the truth about her real father, Udayan. His silence comes from fear - he is afraid she will stop loving him or feel hurt. When Bela finally finds out the truth, she feels deeply betrayed. It is not just about the secret itself, but about how long he kept it from her. Subhash's silence was meant to protect her, but instead, it damaged their bond. As Lahiri writes,

"She had lived with a version of the truth. It had formed the foundation of her life. And now that foundation was cracked." (Lahiri 291)

This shows how silence, even if done with good intentions, can break trust. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory helps us to understand this kind of silence. She says, "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event." (*Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4). Subash is haunted by Udayan's death and the role he played in raising Bela. His silence is not just a choice, but it is a part of ongoing trauma. It also causes harm, showing that silence can hurt relationships when it hides important truths.

Udayan's silence near the end of his life is harder to understand. Because of his political work with the Naxalite movement, he must keep many things secret. He does not share his thoughts or fears with Gauri. In their final days together, he becomes distant. He knows his actions have put them in danger, but he does not explain anything to her. Gauri is left to face the consequences alone after he is

killed. This kind of silence is not brave or noble. It is lonely. Udayan chooses his political ideals over his personal relationships. As Lahiri writes,

"He did not tell her what he was doing. He kept her in the dark" (Lahiri 40)

His silence shows a kind of idealism that becomes harmful. He puts his cause before his wife, and this causes pain. His silence is both something he thinks is necessary and also a mistake. He cannot find a balance between his beliefs and his duties at home. This can be connected to Judith Butler's idea that personal identity is shaped by social roles. She writes, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted." (*Gender Trouble*, p. 25). Udayan performs a role as a revolutionary, and this performance takes over his personal life. He stops being a partner to Gauri and becomes only a political figure. His silence shows how trying to live out an ideal can sometimes mean failing the people closest to us.

Masculinity studies by R.W. Connell and Michael Kimmel help us understand the male silence in *The Lowland*. Connell talks about "hegemonic masculinity", where men are expected to be emotionally strong, in control, and rational. Subash fits this model very closely. People around him see his quiet nature as strength. But Lahiri shows that his silence is not healthy - it slowly damages his relationships. He holds in his grief and never shares his true feelings. Michael Kimmel adds that traditional often keeps men from expressing emotions. This makes them feel alone and disconnected from others. Subhash's life shows this clearly. He suffers in silence after Udayan's death, raises Bela quietly without ever telling her the full truth, and hides his needs to protect others. As Lahiri writes,

"He had sacrificed his own happiness, maintaining peace at the cost of his own voice" (Lahiri 218)

His silence is not his strength, but it is a burden. He follows society's expectations of manhood but longs for deeper connection.

In *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri does not show that speaking always leads to healing. Subhash stays silent for most of his life. When he finally speaks, it is very late. But these few moments still matter. In old age, he tells Bela the truth about her real father. He does not do this to take control. Instead, he is letting go of the weight he has carried for years. His silence, which once protected him, has now become too heavy. This small act of speaking shows a quiet change in him. It shows that healing starts when we dare to speak the truth, even if it is hard. As Lahiri writes,

"He told her what he had never dared to say. Not to anyone. Not even to himself." (Lahiri 296)

This moment is not dramatic, but it is important. It shows that breaking silence takes courage. Sara Ahmed's theory of emotion helps us understand this shift. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she argues that emotions are "sticky" - they attach themselves to bodies and histories, sometimes without being spoken (Ahmed 11). Subhash carries unspoken emotions that weigh him down over time. By finally speaking, he begins to unstick himself from the emotional burden of the past. His silence breaks not with loudness, but with honesty.

In *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri carefully shows how male silence works. This silence comes from cultural traditions, personal pain, and the struggles of living in a new country. Subash and Udayan are very different from each other, but both struggles to speak openly during emotional moments. Their silence is not just personal - it is shaped by society, by what is expected of men, and by the time and place they live in. This paper used ideas from masculinity studies, trauma theory, and postcolonial thinking to show that silence in the novel is more than just the absence of words. It is a way of living that hides pain and truth. Lahiri makes us notice not only the words the characters speak, but also what they do not say. These silent spaces between words, in relationships, and across generations often hold the deepest truths about being a man, about loss, and about identity.

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