

Jhumpa Lahiri's *the Lowland*: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract— *Jhumpa Lahiri's* novel *The Lowland*, traces the fortune of gentle fraternal bonds frayed asunder by cruel political affairs. Lahiri's description of the story events purports to show how the nonappearance of loved ones becomes secretly a presage unforgettable presence within the subliminal mind of the exaggerated characters directing their obvious actions to their own significant ways of life through which they are aggravated on. When their respective paths interweave, Lahiri proves herself to be skillful at depicting the sadness at the central part of the complicated interpersonal relationships that materializes. This report attempts to clutch the import of this work of fiction by situating the author's exclusive presence both in the position millennium Indian English literature as well as in the stuff of the story. Its logical method moves from a detailed study of the twisted plot through a network of characterisation, examination of the multiplex narration principal to a mixture of themes that have modern-day appeal.

Keywords— *Characterization, Description Method, Thematic Scope.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri first made her name with the quiet, meticulously observed stories about Indian immigrants trying to adjust to new lives in the United States. Navigating between the Indian traditions they have inherited and the baffling new world, the characters in the first collection of short stories entitled *The Interpreter of Maladies*, (1999) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, look for love further than the barriers of ethnicity and generations. In her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), Lahiri enriches the themes that made her first collection an international bestseller: the settler experience, the clash of cultures, the conflicts of absorption, and, most expressively, the knotted ties between generations. Here again Lahiri displays her skillful touch for the ideal detail - the fleeting moment, the turn of phrase - that opens whole worlds of emotion. Then the eight stories which appeared in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) take us from Cambridge and

Seattle to India and Thailand, as they explore the secrets at the heart of family life. Here they enter the worlds of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers. *The Lowland* is Lahiri's fourth book. It was elected for the National Book Award in 2013, the Man Booker Prize 2013 and the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction 2014. She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2012.

A Thematic Analysis

The Lowland is alike to the other works that Lahiri has written: beautiful, thin accounts of people lost in new worlds. The reader is always struck by how she writes about the particulars of feeling odd: the bated breath of watching one's children grow up in a world so terribly different from one. As one has learnt to be expecting from any Lahiri story, *The Lowland* revolves about a Bengali settler family in the United States and the Indian sections serve up as a backdrop to the story as it develops. Yet, placing the book in the class of "immigrant fiction" does not sit down well with Lahiri as she affirmed in an interview, —It just so happens that many writers originate from different parts of the world than the ones they end up livelihood in, either by choice or by need or by situation, and therefore, write about those experiences.

The missing of family life back at Tollygunge heightens the loneliness of Subhash as the text narrates; 'For a year and a half, he had not seen his family. Not sat down with them, at the end of the day, to share a meal. In Tollygunge, his family did not have a phone line. He'd sent a telegram to let them know he'd arrived. He was learning to live without hearing their voices, to receive news of them only in writing.' (Lahiri, 50)

Subhash's loneliness intensifies on India's Independence Day as he observes and compares it with his present situation as the text informs; 'The following day was August 15, Indian Independence. A holiday in the country, lights on government buildings, flag hoisting, and parades. An ordinary day here.' (Lahiri, 61)

After the tragic death of his brother, Subhash decides to marry Gauri and bring her in America to save her from the hardships of widowhood. In the passage of time, Subhash's decision to marry Gauri has proved very painful to him as he feels acutely alone in his old age. Though he finds his life partner in Bela's teacher he feels the pangs of loneliness of old age in an alien land as the text reveals; 'But he had lost that confidence, that intrepid sense of direction. He felt only aware now that he was alone, that he was over sixty years old, and that he did not know where he stood.' (Lahiri, 172)

It should also be noted that Subhash, Gauri, and Bela are equally dislocated in Calcutta and Tollygunge, where everybody knows of Udayan and his destiny. In America, nobody knows what happened with Mitra family in Calcutta that could give a necessary space to Subhash and Gauri to start a new life. However, their inner disturbance and secret of Bela's parenthood haunted their lives, and they become psychologically displaced in the diasporic environment.

Gauri is a woman who is not able to forget her past, and that enforces her into a kind of aloofness and alienation not only from the present, but also from her daughter Bela. She cuts her hair according to American style, throws away her saris and attempts to lose herself in the study of philosophy. Ironically, feeling of isolation comforts her as the text depicts; 'Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings.' (Lahiri, 165)

She between the two persons clings to the memory of the Udayan's death and the secret that she hides. The secret makes her unable to adapt in any place as she was a stranger in her in-laws' home, and she is an equally stranger in Subhash's life, though she likes the anonymity that American academia offers her.

Jhumpa Lahiri has also dealt with alienation and isolation of Udayan when he gets injured in the preparation of explosives. He always remains under the threat of police department as the narrator informs;

He had trouble hearing, asking Gauri to repeat herself. There had been damage to one of his eardrums from the explosion. He complained of dizziness, a high-pitched sound that would not go away. He said he could not hear the shortwave when she could hear it perfectly well.

He worried that he might not be able to hear the buzzer, if it rang, or the approach of a military jeep. He complained of feeling alone even though they were together. Feeling isolated in the most basic way. (Lahiri, 78)

Udayan's death is the result of his being involved in the killing of a police officer called Nirmal Dey, though Udayan was not the one to use the knife, he was the one, among those who plotted the murder. Gauri becomes a part of the plan when she spies on Dey and keeps a track of his daily timetable. In her blind belief and love, Gauri either never comprehends the consequences of her actions or ignores the doubt that makes her question Udayan's intentions, in asking her to spy.

After their arrival in America, Subhash again showed his maturity. Knowing that it will take Gauri time to accept him as a husband, Subhash keeps patience with her and tries to give her space to not make her feel cornered or pressurized to allow her active participant in the relationship.

Lahiri says the book is based on a disastrous incident she first heard about in India, during one of her numerous visits while she was rising up. Two young brothers, who had become concerned in a aggressive political movement, were executed nearby her grandparents' home in Calcutta. The young men's family unit was forced to observe as they were killed."That was the scene that, when I first heard of it, when it was described to me, was so worrying and so troubled me — and eventually inspired me to write the book," Lahiri says. (Neary)

The Lowland has been deliberate as a story about two brothers, but it might easily be the story of philosophy, and how it shapes the family. The explanations of the world the boys were born into are vivid without catering to our thirst for the exotic. The characters here are average class people, living in a quiet section, listening carefully on thick textbooks and transistor radios, on niggling into the club for foreigners right outside their doors. As the boys grow older and their wellbeing take different paths, changing the lives of everyone around them.

The novel starts with the depiction of lowland itself, lowland that was to be a colossal place for the Mitras in the future. The starting lines reads like the way one would direct a new passenger to reach the place: "East of the Tolly association, after Deshapram Sashmal splits in two, there is a small mosque. A turn leads to a quite commune. A burrow of narrow lanes and modest middle-class homes. Once within the commune, there were two ponds, oblong, side by side. Behind them was the lowland on both sides of a few acres." (3) Geography is luck in *The Lowland*. Her title refers to a marshy stretch of land between two ponds in a Calcutta neighborhood where two very close brothers grow up and where one of them is murdered. In heavy rain season, the marsh floods and the ponds combine; in summer, that water evaporates. The

reader doesn't need any decoder ring to figure out that the two ponds symbolize the two brothers — at times separate; at other times always together. But there is still more meaning lurking in this rich scenery.

The traits of the lowland given deft matter-of-fact strokes have a effective impact on the characters of the novel. Lahiri's storyteller goes on to tell us: "Certain creatures laid eggs that were able to endure the dry season. Others survived by covering themselves in mud, simulating death, waiting for the return of rain." (3) In the suburban streets of Calcutta where the two brothers wandered before sunset and in the hyacinth-strewn ponds where they played for hours on end, the lowland was their playing field. *The Lowland* is somewhat of a exit for Lahiri, whose other work frequently explores the struggles of Indian settler families. *The Lowland*, as an alternative, opens in Calcutta in the 1950s and '60s, and keeps returning there even as the main story moves ahead in time.

The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri is a story published in 2013. The story starts in part one with Subhash and Udayan, brothers raised in Tollygunge, Calcutta. Their hobbies comprise fixing radios and learning Morse Code. They're very close and beware for one another. As they get older and go away for university, what they know and imagine about the world changes. Subhash goes to Rhode Island in the United States to concentrate on his graduate studies. There, he learns about the outcomes of the Naxalite Movement—bloodshed. Yet media focus on is on the Vietnam War. Udayan joins the Naxalite Movement and wedlock with a woman named Gauri.

In part two, readers learn that Gauri and Udayan introduced through Gauri's brother—and initially, Gauri didn't worry one way or the other for Udayan. But they grow up close over discussing philosophy, and Udayan proves his approaches are serious when he waits exterior of a cinema theater for Gauri. In Rhode Island, Subhash face to face with Holly and her son Joshua. Holly is alienated from her husband, Keith. One night, when Joshua is with Keith, Holly and Subhash sleep jointly. In spite of this, Holly and Keith end up back mutually. At the end of this part of the story, Subhash receives a correspondence from home informing him that Udayan was killed.

When Subhash back to Calcutta in part three, he finds that Gauri is alive with his parents. They don't treat her satisfactorily and she's loaded with Udayan's child. Subhash's parents would like to take the child when it's born and cast Gauri out. Subhash would not find out from his parents what happened to Udayan, but Gauri ultimately tells him: The police were after Udayan, and exposed to kill his and Subhash's parents, as well as Gauri, if he didn't

surrender. Udayan surrendered, at which point he was executed. To protect Gauri, Subhash requests her to marry him and return to Rhode Island with him.

Gauri gives green signal in part four of *The Lowland*. In Rhode Island, she sits in on value classes. When she gives birth to her baby, she chooses the name Bela. When she's healed from childbirth, she and Subhash have sexual intercourse for the first time, but both are unhappy. Subhash is a kind parent. After four years, Subhash encounters Holly and Keith, but they only swap brief greetings. Subhash wants Gauri to have next baby, so Bela will have a sibling, but Gauri is unsure. When Gauri decides to go to graduate school, Subhash tactics to look after Bela. In her education period, Gauri meets Professor Otto Weiss, who presses Gauri to go for her PhD; she does so. Gauri and Subhash have the same opinion to one day tell Bela about her real father, Udayan. Subhash and Gauri's connection suffers when Subhash learns that Gauri has been neglecting Bela.

Subhash's father dies, so he and Bela journey to Calcutta in part five, where Subhash's mother, Bijoli, nearly reveals that Udayan is Bela's father. Bela asks about Udayan, so Subhash tells her that Udayan is her uncle who is no more. When they return to Rhode Island, they learn that Gauri has left them and left to California; she needs Subhash to raise Bela alone. Bela grows up, goes to college, and then goes all over the United States to advocate for the surroundings.

In part six, the story returns to Gauri. She's taking classes in California and becomes notable in her field. When a UCLA graduate student named Lorna asks for her help with her thesis, the two begin a dreamy relationship that lasts for years. Now in his sixth decade, Subhash begins a connection with Elise, one of Bela's teachers. Bela visits them from time to time. In her thirties, Bela tells Subhash that she's loaded but doesn't know who the father is—and she doesn't want to know. Subhash gets angry and tells Bela that Udayan is actually her father. She gets distress and walks out. After they've chilled down, Bela forgives Subhash and they live jointly in Rhode Island. Bela names her daughter Meghna.

In part seven, Subhash requests Gauri for a divorce and she agrees. Bela becomes busy to a man named Drew. When Gauri comes to meet, Bela tells Meghna that Gauri is her great aunt, not her grandmother. Bela can't excuse Gauri. Gauri returns to Calcutta, where she slips into misery and almost kills herself. Instead, she returns back to California to find a correspondence from Bela. Meghna asks about Gauri, and Bela promises to tell her the fact about

Gauri someday. The letter ends with a proposal that perhaps the three of them can try gathering again.

In the final part of the novel, Subhash marries Elise and reflects on Udayan. Udayan's last day is depicted in this part, and the reader learns that Udayan was complicit in murder. He feels sorry for such an act, and his final thinking was that if he met Gauri sooner, possibly his life would have gone in a different direction.

A theme in Lahiri's writing is the balance between East and West, usually following stories of immigrant families from India who struggle with dual identities, love, loss and friendship. *The Lowland* follows the story of two brothers, and how their lives take two vastly different roads, but somehow continue to be intertwined, despite the distance of time and country.

Lahiri divides the book into sections where she writes from dissimilar characters perspectives, keeping the pace of the book interesting and weaving time back and forth, overlapping and giving insights into each character.

One of the things I loved most about this book was how *real* it was. The word authenticity is overused these days, but Lahiri really creates a picture about who her characters are, their faults on display, making them all the more real and relatable. At times the novel is somber, making you root for the characters, wanting everything to turn out all right. The novel focuses on the characters, but Lahiri carefully weaves in historic, cultural and political context that helps shape the time in which the characters lived.

Lahiri creates moments where despite having vast differences from the characters (in this case the young woman she's writing about is a young Indian woman, and I Nordic Minnesotan), you can still relate to what they are experiencing. Take this excerpt for example, a young woman is falling in love with an Indian man. She describes that moment where you still see yourself as you were before falling in love, yet still being changed by the new person in your life.

"Without him she was reminded of herself again. A person most at ease with her books, spending afternoons filling her notebooks in the cool high-ceilinged reading room of Presidency's library. But this was a person she was beginning to question after meeting Udayan, with his unsteady fingers, was firmly pushing aside, wiping clean. So that she began to observe herself more

obviously, as a thin film of dirt was wiped from a sheet of glass."

As I was reading the novel, I was captured by a description of the courting of this young couple. So touched by the passage, I read it out loud to my beau. As unexpected and welcomed surprised, Lahiri ends the book looping back to that same simple passage. (I'll spare you the moment I'm referring to as not to spoil the book.) This simply illustrates how each moment in the book has been carefully thought out by Lahiri.

"They walked along the beach, on firm sand ribbed by the tide. He swam with her in the cold water, tasting its salt in his mouth. It seemed to enter his bloodstream, into every cell, purifying him, leaving sand in his hair. On his back he floated weightless, his arms spread, the world silenced. Only the sea's low-pitched hum, and the sun glowing like hot coals behind his eyes."

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