Post Modernism in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Lowland*

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The immigrant experience is always fertile ground for fiction, and Jhumpa Lahiri – born in London to Bengali parents and raised in Rhode Island – has built her literary career exploring this territory as it relates to characters of Indian origin in America, with all the attendant questions of identity, loyalty, memory and reinvention. Though she has produced only two collections of stories and, now, two novels, her reputation is firmly established as one of the leading fiction writers of her generation. Her debut collection, The Interpreter of Maladies, won her the Pulitzer Prize, a PEN/ Hemingway award and the *New Yorker* prize for Best First Book. Her second novel, The Lowland, has been shortlisted for 2013 Booker Prize.

The personal and the political, the nuclear family and the national family: versions of these well-worn conflicts shape the novel, framed by the ideologies of Mao and Chi as well as the philosophies of Marx and Marcuse. And while Lahiri makes Udayan's political fervour magnetic, drawing the readers into the impassioned conviction that "War will bring the revolution; revolution will stop the war," she nevertheless fails to convey the desperate scale of poverty in post-independence India, the unmet needs of millions for whom Communism promised liberation and dignity. As a result, the early pages of the novel oscillate between stunning, intimate family scenes and impersonal textbook descriptions of historical change, an awkward collision of the author's Chekhovian and Dickensian impulses.

Jhumpa Lahiri first made her name with quiet, meticulously observed stories about Indian immigrants trying to adjust to new lives in the United States, stories that had the Indian spirit in American life. The assertion of her new novel, "*The Lowland*," in contrast, is startlingly Indian. Udayan, an idealistic student in Calcutta in the 1960s, is drawn into Mao-inspired revolutionary politics. After his violent death (which happens fairly early in the novel), his devoted, dutiful brother, Subhash, marries his pregnant widow, Gauri, and brings her to America in hopes of giving her a new start in a new country. Their marriage, though, will remain haunted by their memories of Udayan and a terrible secret Gauri keeps to herself.

The Lowland is certainly Ms. Lahiri's most ambitious undertaking yet, and it eventually opens out into a moving family story. It is initially baffling, however, by pages and pages of historical exposition, by a schematic plotline and by a disjunction between the author's scrupulous, plain prose, the dark drama, and interesting events her art is gradually revealed. It is only in the second half that Ms.Lahiri's talent for capturing the small emotional details of her characters' daily lives takes over, immersing the readers in their stories and making them less aware of her characters which behave in an unpredictable manner. Though this prophecy has been delivered by a woman embittered by the death of her favourite son, it will turn out to be all too true:

What if the police come to the house? What if you get arrested? What would Ma and Baba think?

There's more to life than what they think**.** Subhash leaves India to pursue a PhD in Rhode Island; Udayan remains in Calcutta, growing increasingly militant until he is captured and executed in front of his parents and his pregnant wife, Gauri. When Subhash returns for Udayan's death ceremony, he marries Gauri in order to protect his brother's legacy, promising her a new beginning in Rhode Island: "If she went with him to America […] it would all cease to matter." Gauri builds a tentative, melancholy life with her new husband, but following the birth of Udayan's baby — a daughter named Bela who grows up believing that Subhash is her father — Gauri abruptly abandons child and spouse to become a professor of philosophy in California.

Gauri will abandon her daughter, Bela — conceived with Udayan and brought up by Subhash as his own beloved child — to pursue her own dreams of studying philosophy and building an academic career. Ms. Lahiri never manages to make this terrible act — handled by Gauri with cruelty and arbitrary highhandedness — plausible, understandable or viscerally felt. Why would Gauri regard motherhood and career as an either/or choice? Why make no effort to stay in touch with Bela or explain her decision to move to California? Why not discuss her need to leave her marriage and her child with her husband?

Because Ms. Lahiri never gives us real insight into Gauri's decision-making or psychology, she comes across not as a flawed and complicated person, but as a blend of a cold, selfish, lady who's fulfilling her mother-in-law's orthodox notions earlier and as a self centered conceited mother who leaves her daughter under the guardian ship of her second husband. The reader often has the sense that Ms. Lahiri is trying to fit her characters into a predetermined narrative design, which can make for diagrammatic and unsatisfying storytelling.

What turns this novel around and ultimately seizes the reader's imagination is Ms. Lahiri's deeply felt depiction of Subhash's relationship with Bela: his unwavering devotion to this good-hearted little girl; his bafflement as her grief over her mother's abandonment leads her to withdraw from him as well; his slow, painful efforts to rebuild a life for himself in the wake of Gauri's departure is portrayed in a subtle way. Mothers usually care and nurse their little daughters, but yes there are a few mothers who are self centred rather than self effacing. Natural departure may cause less pain when compared to such an act of cruelty. She had left her daughter to the fate of a man who is not her biological father. This father brings her up and tries to rebuild the shattered faith of little Bela. As this happens, the characters in *The Lowland* — with the qualified exception of Gauri — become fully human: driven not by one identifiable trait (like duty, anger or rebellion) but by a full spectrum of feelings, and capable not only of rage and vexation but also of forgiveness and hope. By its end, this novel reminds us of Ms. Lahiri's sheen as a writer, with an exceptional skill of narration, however imperfectly they are employed by her. She tries to portray India sitting in U.S. Out of the horror of Gauri's betrayal; Bela and Subhash develop a tender, convincing bond that is pushed to its utmost limits when Bela, by the novel's end a grown woman pregnant with a child of her own, learns that Udayan was her biological father. Among the novel's concluding reconciliations and remarriages, Lahiri reveals that Gauri has for decades been haunted by her inadvertent complicity in a 1960s political assassination in Calcutta. Gauri's inescapable awareness of "the loss that would

never be replaced" dwarfs the revolutionary accomplishments of the past, suggesting that the private world of the family endures wounds more painful than the public narrative of history can describe.

It is in these later chapters that the cumbersome historical exposition and overarching narrative architecture falls away, and Ms. Lahiri's most shining gifts as a writer come to the fore: her ability to conjure the daily texture of people's lives, her understanding of how their personal and cultural expectations have shaped their choices, her talent for mapping moods and inchoate emotions with pointillist precision. In this light she has contributed a lot to Postmodernist literature.

Postmodern literature is literature characterized by reliance on narrative techniques such as fragmentation, paradox, and the unreliable narrator; and often is (though not exclusively) defined as a style or a trend which emerged in the post–World War II era. Postmodern works are seen as a response against enlightened thinking and modernist approaches to literature. Postmodern literature, like postmodernism as a whole, tends to resist definition or classification as a "movement". Indeed, the convergence of postmodern literature with various modes of critical theory, particularly reader-response and deconstructionist approaches, and the subversions of the implicit contract between author, text and reader by which its works are often characterised, have led to pre-modern fictions such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605,1615) and Laurence Sterne's eighteenth-century satire *Tristram Shandy* being retrospectively considered by some as early examples of postmodern literature.

In *Lowland*, while there is little consensus on the precise characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature, as is often the case with artistic movements, postmodern literature is commonly defined in relation to a precursor. For example, a postmodern literary work tends not to conclude with the neatly tied-up ending as is often found in modernist literature (Woolf, Joyce, Faulkner), but often parodies it. Postmodern authors tend to celebrate chance over craft, and further employ metafiction to undermine the writer's authority. Another characteristic of postmodern literature is the questioning of distinctions between high and low culture through the use of pastiche, the combination of subjects and genres not previously used.

Nevertheless, this novel advances the cause of contemporary American realist fiction, giving us a portrait of an entire nation through its evocation of a single region. At first glance, *The Lowland* would seem to belong to a lineage of canonical 20th-century novels about India. The calm omniscience of its opening line — "East of the Tolly Club, after Deshapran Sashmal Road splits in two, there is a small mosque" — reminds readers of Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), another novel in which geography exerts greater force than culture, history, or politics. As in Forster's novel, and its less well-known successor, Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), the hallowed, exclusive world of the British clubs sways the characters' imaginations: in their youth, Udayan and Subhash sneak into the Tollygunge Club and mar its miraculously tended lawns, and the club comes to symbolize for Udayan everything immoral about class divisions in post-independence India. The moment of independence itself comprises Subhash's earliest memory and links *The Lowland* to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Subhash

remembers burning with fever while "fireworks went off in Delhi, as ministers were sworn in":

It was his first memory, August 1947, though sometimes he wondered if it was only a comforting trick of the mind. For it were a night the entire country claimed to remember and the recollection that was his had always been saturated by his parents' retelling?

But unlike Rushdie's Saleem Sinai, that ebullient narrator of a nation's chaotic parentage, Lahiri shuns postmodern games that reorder history's hierarchies. *The Lowland* defining project is not to tell a story about India or about Indians: rather, the novel pinpoints America as a crucible for the elemental impermanence that marks our humanity.

Impermanence imprints itself on every aspect of Lahiri's America. To be American, whether native-born or immigrant, has to experience unceasing alternations of intimacy and isolation, neither state sustainable in itself. *The Lowland* demonstrates these alternations with astonishing precision, moving far beyond the terrain of immigrant displacement to map patterns of unity and separation in the smallest moments of daily life. Thus, university students tell time by a metal clock, its "giant hour and minute hands joining and separating throughout the day." American families prove their closeness by vacationing far from home. Gauri lives "together yet separately" in an apartment with Subhash, feeling her unborn baby "nestled inside her, providing company but also letting her be." A Rhode Island wedding ceremony that inaugurates a second marriage suggests "two people trading in one spouse for another, dividing in two, their connections to others at once severed and doubled, like cells." The footprints that create a map of a walk on coastal sands are "immediately vanishing, washed clean by the encroaching tide," while a ship on the Atlantic Ocean "cleaved a foaming trail that vanished even as it was being formed." Subhash, returning in old age to the house he rented as a graduate student, finds that a preservation society has restored it to its 19th-century appearance.

The effect was disquieting. He felt his presence on earth being denied, even as he stood there. He was forbidden access; the past refused to admit him. It only reminded him that this arbitrary place, where he'd landed and made his life, was not his [?…] among its people, its trees, its particular geography he had studied and grown to love, he was still a visitor. The worst form of visitor: one who had refused to leave. Here Lahiri's usual Diasporic element raises. Everyone in America is a visitor, Lahiri reminds us, and to hope for the safe transmission of identity and experience across time, whether in individual or collective memory, is to inevitably confront one's outsider status. Postmodernism includes this immigrant trait also.

This novel aspires, and occasionally struggles, to meet the formal and tonal demands of epic tragedy. Ironically, the few weaknesses of *The Lowland* are intimately connected to Lahiri's hallmark strengths: unstinting attention to detail and quiet, controlled prose. In her short story collections *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri's sustained evenness works to great dramatic effect; in a novel as long as *The Lowland*, however, understatement leaves the reader craving an exclamation point, a jagged sentence, patches of raw dialogue. (Touches of humor, which would have lightened the book's somber mood, never surface in Lahiri's literary worlds; it is hard

to name another writer whose work excises the comedic so completely.) *The Lowland* is the most thematically violent of Lahiri's works, encompassing terrorism, self-harm, and emotional abuse, but it lacks the tonal variety needed to devastate the reader. Climactic moments at the novel's end fall flat; Gauri's lifelong secret is unveiled too late and with too much restraint. And indeed, this secret itself produces a problematic structural inconsistency: haunted by guilt for destroying a family in Calcutta, why does Gauri destroy her own family? The late-breaking plot twist stymies, rather than fosters, our understanding of Gauri and the choices that this pivotal character makes as widow and wife, parent and professional. In these respects, Lahiri falls short of the perfection she has achieved elsewhere; ultimately, the too-carefully developed strands of *The Lowland*' plot do not cohere into the consistent narrative whole.

At the end of *The Lowland*, Subhash marries a character named Elise Silva, a Rhode Island native of Portuguese descent, and they honeymoon in Ireland. Lahiri does not reassure us with universalizing pronouncements about aging or love; the marriage is "a shared conclusion to lives separately built, separately lived," and the honeymoon begins with the spectacle of a local funeral: "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, or whom it grieves." Reminded of their own deaths in the earliest days of their wedded union, Subhash and Elise inhabit the psychology that Lahiri has painstakingly delineated as the defining trait of Americanness: an intricate, dynamic balance between flux and constancy, permanence and transience. *The Lowland* orchestrates this balance with a tragic lyricism, honouring the millennia-old landmass that became the United States just 200 years ago, and telling its myriad stories of insiders and outsiders.

Works Cited

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