

A Postcolonial Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. (Frantz Fanon 28)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) captures a Nation and its history in a moment of decolonization which is in Fanon's words "always a violent phenomenon" (27) and engages its readers with the portrayal of these "new men". Violence and displacement appear as the two central tropes employed by Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel *The Lowland*. Violence is not merely in the moment of history and in the actual event itself but the repercussion is acted out as future takes its shape being born out of that moment. The novel moves back and forth in time and space, dealing with almost four generations, crossing continents and reflecting multiple points of view, giving enough space and liberty to the reader to form his own opinion regarding characters and events and thus giving it an epical dimension. At her evocative best Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully portrays the relationship and camaraderie between two brothers Subhash and Udayan who initially seemed inseparable leading their lives in each other's company wading through their joys and sorrows, standing like a shield for each other. Life begins to take a new turn as the two embark upon their College life when Subhash is admitted to Jadavpur University while Udayan joins Presidency. As the initial excitement and celebrations die out the two seem to enter different spaces of life as not only their routes change but also their schedules, their Professors, friends, dreams and aspirations.

The times when Subhash and Udayan were growing up were times of great change and Udayan was more than eager to be a part of that change, to usher in a new dawn for himself and his people. Placing the characters against the changing international political backdrop when India itself was placed at the crossroads; both culturally and politically; facing the traumas of a new Nation, Jhumpa Lahiri writes:

It was 1964. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorized America to use military force against North Vietnam. There was a military coup in Brazil.

In Calcutta Charulata was released in cinema halls. Another wave of riots between Muslims and Hindus killed over one hundred people after a relic was stolen from a mosque in Srinagar. Among the communists in India there was dissent over the border war with China two years before. A Breakaway group, sympathetic to China, called itself the Communist Party of India, Marxist: the CPI(M).

Congress was still running the central government in Delhi. After Nehru died of a heart attack that spring his daughter, Indira, entered the cabinet. Within two years, she would become the Prime Minister. (Jhumpa Lahiri 17)

Udayan's imagination, his heart and soul is enflamed by the Naxalbari Movement at this crucial phase of growing up and fills him with a desire to do something worthwhile; to make a difference in the World that he inhabits:

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It had begun in college, in Gauri's neighborhood, on the campus just down the street from the flat where she lived. There was always talk during labs, during meals at the canteen, about the country and all that was wrong with it. The stagnant economy, the deterioration of living standards. The latest rice shortage, pushing tens of thousands to the verge of starvation. The travesty of Independence, half of India still in chains. Only it was Indians chaining themselves now. (Jhumpa Lahiri 335)

Decolonization and Independence comes with its own price and as Fanon writes that "The young independent nation evolves during the first years in an atmosphere of the battlefield" (75) and how independence gets "transformed into the curse of Independence" (77). In the novel we find how Udayan is sucked into violence as he is drawn towards Naxalite movement:

In 1967, in the papers and on All India Radio, they started hearing about Naxalbari. It was a place they'd never heard of before.

It was one of a string of villages in the Darjeeling District, a narrow corridor at the northern tip of West Bengal. Tucked into the foothills of the Himalayas, nearly four hundred miles from Calcutta, closer to Tibet than to Tollygunge. (Lahiri 20)

The whole of Bengal was burning against the killings of the innocent peasants and the injustice done to them by removing them from their lands. The agitations were on "the streets on college campuses" (22) and Udayan is shocked and agitated to know about the violent means by which the revolution has been suppressed. Violence breeds violence as Udayan dedicates his life to the cause of Naxalbari and vows to avenge the deaths of poor farmers. Several lives get affected by the kind of life that Udayan chooses for himself and is succumbed to equally violent death that is acted out twice in the novel. His gruesome and tragic death leads to the disintegration and falling apart of the whole family, particularly it leads to the alienation and displacement of his wife Gauri. Gauri is subjected to double tragedy, as she not only loses her husband but the society also snatches from her the right to lead a normal life of a young woman. Lahiri writes "The vermilion was washed clean from her hair, the iron bangle removed from her wrist. The absence of these ornaments marked her as a widow. She was twenty-three years old." (Lahiri 109)

Udayan's involvement in the Naxalite movement and his violent death pave way for another sort of rebellion in his widowed wife Gauri. Gauri is dislocated, displaced and drifted away as she marries Udayan's elder brother Subhash and finds herself leading a ferociously unanchored independent life in America leaving her husband Subhash and her daughter Bela to manage their lives all by themselves which eventually they succeed in doing.

Gauri's uninhibited life in America is a product of the moment that once was and being unable to dissociate herself from the memories of that past violence of which unwittingly she was a part of and thus in the present finds herself constantly running away from it and always bearing the guilt of her crime:

No one connected her to it. Still no one knew what she'd done.

She was the sole accuser, the sole guardian of her guilt. Protected by Udayan, overlooked by the investigator, taken away by Subhash. Sentenced in the very act of being forgotten, punished by the means of her release. (Jhumpa Lahiri 320)

Gauri's journey to America as she tries to run away from her traumatic past and present symbolizes her journey towards rebellion and defiance of established behavior and roles expected from her to play. Her first act of defiance is her cutting off her long hairs and slipping herself into a western attire then be wrapped in an Indian saree. Gauri's behavior and the kind of bohemian life that she chooses for herself serves as the most apt example of what Macaulay calls "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay's 'Minute' 1835: 49). Gauri mimics the western culture in order to annihilate her own identity and leads a fleshly existence to stifle her finer emotions.

Homi Bhabha writes:

In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat, I would add, comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself'. And that form of resemblance is the most terrifying thing to behold.... (Homi K. Bhabha 128-129)

The Lowland provides a glimpse into the lives of diasporic people who are trying to grapple with their complex identities and the displacements they have suffered in their lives – both physical/geographical and emotional. Vijay Mishra opines that "diasporas also have a reactionary streak in them; it is a streak that connects with the idea of the homeland or desh....". Subhash tries to replant himself by marrying Elise and leading a life of happiness and contentment towards the fag end of his existence in a bid to embrace life and the opportunities which were still knocking at his door. Gauri shows all signs of fragmented identity; she emerges with two distinctly different personalities. The Gauri that we encounter as Udayan's wife is representative of Indian culture and ethos and the one who gets married to Subhash and lands up in Rhode Island is reduced to a mimic man or rather a mimic woman who wants to keep the ghosts of the past at bay by embracing the materialism of west. Gauri having surrendered herself to unfettered western way of life shows signs of ambivalence as well when she still retains an Indian passport having lived a lifetime in America. As Bhabha points out:

...the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (Homi K. Bhabha 122)

According to Gauri's mangled logic it is disloyalty to Udayan's memory to give up her Indian citizenship whereas reality is that she has lived a kind of life in which she has not shown any sincerity even in the most purest of relationships that of mother and daughter. Abandoning of Bela and Subhash by Gauri is her own way of avenging the loss of Udayan but nevertheless she also realizes that she has tethered her life to binaries:

She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted on brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone at the end. (Jhumpa Lahiri 240)

Gauri is devastated by Bela's outburst and her hatred and anger against her for not being there by her side, for leaving her by choice. Gauri returns back to Calcutta to look back at things, to gather her life once again after looking into the mirror of reality that her daughter had directed towards her. Salman Rushdie in his essay "The Indian Writer in England" writes:

Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge----- which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of the mind. (Salman Rushdie 83)

Subhash and Gauri are also exiles fighting their own demons of the past, haunted by memory, filled with guilt but also enchanted and overwhelmed by the promises of a new land. The charm and reassurance of living in a place like America is that here one is free to lead a life of absolute independence, to pursue one's own dreams. For Subhash it acts as a world which can give shape to his dreams; to excel in his researches and to work in best of environments. The initial separation between Subhash and Udayan occurs when Subhash leaves Tollygunge and arrives in America at Rhode Island to pursue his Ph.D. in oceanography. Their world is shattered with the death of Udayan and on coming back to India Subhash is drawn by the plight of Gauri who is now the widow of Udayan and a young expectant mother. Subhash could think of nothing else but to marry Gauri and to take her to America in order to save her from the situation that she is in where she is harassed by his parents and the police as well. America symbolizes a world of escape and a world of immense possibilities to both Gauri and Subhash. But their way of escaping from the past and embracing the future is totally different from each other and thus on the one hand Subhash is finally able to find perfect bliss with his marriage to Elise while Gauri moves towards annihilation and ruin in her bid to escape from her past.

After four decades Gauri revisits India to reclaim her past and nearly finds herself planning her own suicide in order to reach out to Udayan to be finally with him forever but sadly realizes that any such reunion is not possible—even if she embraces death:

She leaned forward. She saw the spot where she would fall. She recalled the thrill of meeting him, of being adored by him. The moment of losing him. The fury of learning how he'd implicated her. The ache of bringing Bela into the world, after he was gone.

She opened her eyes. He was not there. (Lahiri 323)

Towards the end of the novel Gauri seems to have come to terms with the reality and recognizes the fact that certain losses are final as that of Udayan and there is no way to retrieve those losses. As Gauri realizes that Udayan is no more a part of her life and accepts the finality of his death, Lahiri also translates the tragic death of Udayan into reality and paints the scene of his death in words:

For a fraction of a second he heard the explosion tearing through his lungs. A sound like gushing water or a torrent of wind. A sound that belonged to the fixed forces of the world, that then took him out of the world. The silence was pure now. Nothing interfered. (Lahiri 339)

Udayan and his memories are etched in the past and past cannot translate itself into present. She also realizes that she can no longer hold her claim on Subhash and Bela as she herself deserted them once never to look back. Bela although looks for that space in the future "when Meghna is older, when she and I are both ready, we can try to meet again." (Lahiri 325)

Being a diasporic writer herself Jhumpa Lahiri effectively voices the trauma of displacement and fragmentation, her works portray the difficulty of preserving ones sanity in circumstances where life slips out of your hands and the individual lands up in a vacuum from where there is no returning back. As is the case with any diasporic writer Jhumpa Lahiri's work also remains divided between two cultures – one of the homeland that once was and the other of the adopted country. This tension between the two worlds so to say is what gives vibrancy and life to her writings where some like Subhash are able to find a purposeful way to lead their lives and others like Gauri remain fragmented and alienated even when they adopt western ways of life in order to get assimilated. The failure lies in the violence and its memory from which some escape and some get annihilated. Although Jhumpa Lahiri takes the Naxalite movement as its backdrop but her concern is not the movement itself but the outcome of violence which comes along with a newly independent state.

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