

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 4 [August 2016]

The Criterion 

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

History Handcuffed: The Personal and the Political in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Nilanjana Sudeshana better known as Jhumpa Lahiri is the Pulitzer Prize winning Indian novelist, noted for her novels dealing with cultural artefacts that destabilize the concept of nationhood. Looking at the dilemma of identity and nostalgia among the migrated Indians she draws around how the assimilated new generation comprehends the personal attachments of their former generation to their native land. *The Lowland* depicts the story of Subhash and Gauri, the first generation immigrants and Bela their daughter who belongs to the group of second generation immigrants. This paper attempts to trace how Jhumpa Lahiri has made a confluence of personal and political elements- the turbulent historical period forming the background as well the backbone of the novel. Lahiri toes the line of her predecessors like E.M. Forster and Salman Rushdie in this case.

The socio-political movements that caught the imagination of the entire nation have been a prime source to inspiration to many Indian novelists. The society torn by political manoeuvres, social disparities, communal frenzy and corruption in bureaucracy gave many issues for the Indian novelists to deal with. Inspired by the exigencies of socio-political history of the country, they stirred the imagination of the people to a new awakening holding up the responsibility of giving artistic articulation to the problems that beset the common people and their joys and sorrows, the crusade against the tyrannies of poverty, illiteracy, caste, sex, suffering and superstitions. Indian novels written with a social purpose can be distinguished into two groups- novels depicting the political, economical and social oppression of individuals with their authors taking a humanitarian stance and the second group centring on the individual's search for identity. Both groups have struck deep roots in the Indian soil, by imaginatively treating the social and political problems and artistically exploring and interpreting India in all its aspects. The horrors of war and brutal political violence were a traumatic experience for many people retrieving the drastic effects of the political upheavals in their personal lives. Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) which belongs to different decades in terms of creation, effectively highlight the political problems. *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri is a recent one to the line of such novels highlighting a political background.

Irving Howe in his *Politics and the Novel* (1957) explains the term political novel that "it is used as convenient shorthand to suggest the kind of novel in which the relation between politics and literature is interesting enough to warrant investigation". (17) Howe points out that a political novel is at its best when the idea it gives out are melted into its movements and become fused with emotions of its characters. In Lahiri's *The Lowland*, the personal and the political are blended together. Siddhartha Deb points out that "The personal is political, the countercultural

upheavals of the 60's claimed, but in Jhumpa Lahiri's recent novel, '*The Lowland*,' which takes its inspiration from an Indian variant of that upheaval, it is the political that is always personal".(NYT, Sep 27)

The Lowland deals with the history of post-independent India giving special emphasis to the history of Bengal and the Naxalbari Movement of the 1960's including several events from the social, cultural and political spheres. The political history provides the framework of the novel. Choosing a period after independence, Lahiri highlights the growing political corruption and social degradation that has begun to corrode the Indian society. The hope for social equality and political freedom in India becomes a mere dream. Numerous characters lucidly sketched and hung upon a family tree helps in recreating and connecting past to the present.

In 1964, The Communist Party of India split into two- CPI maintaining loyalty to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and CPM joining Indian government. On 2 March 1967, the first non-Congress United Front (UF) government was sworn in West Bengal, comprising the CPI, CPM and Bangla Congress, a breakaway group from Congress. It decided to expedite the implementation of land reforms and announced a programme of quick distribution of surplus land among the landless and an end to eviction of sharecroppers. It also called for peasants' initiative and organised force to assist the process of implementation. This raised expectations among the poor but also frightened many middle and small owners that their land would be given to sharecroppers.

The Naxalbari area of Darjeeling district in north Bengal had been organising sharecroppers and tea estate labour, mostly of the Santhal, Oraon and Rajbansi tribal communities. The sharecroppers worked for the landlords under the 'adhiaar' system, in which the landlords provide the raw materials and got a share of the crop. Disputes over shares followed by evictions were commonplace and increased with the coming of the UF government because of the fear that sharecroppers would be given the land.

Charu Majumdar was a major leader of this area but his ideas about agrarian revolution and armed struggle, which were formulated on the basis of the thoughts of the Chinese leader Mao Zedong, were different from the official CPM position. He did not believe that the land reform was possible through legal methods, and argued that this path only deadened the revolutionary urges of the peasants. In order to have any benefit to these peasants both politically and economically, grabbing the land and defending through violent measures was thought essential. Majumdar worked with his comrades like Kanu Sanyal and the tribal leader Jangal Santhal to make the idea practise. They organised a peasants' conference with the aid and full support of the Siliguri subdivision of the CPM in Darjeeling district, sixteen days after the communist government had sworn into power. They demanded an ending for landlords' monopoly on land, land distribution through groups organized and managed by the peasants and an armed resistance to the brutal landlords, the newly formed government and the central government for their policies in favour of the landlords and brutally suppressing any voice of dissent.

Peasants became full-time activists; committees of peasants were organized in the villages which core of armed guards- they occupied land, burnt land records, and declared that all the debts of peasants were cancelled, delivered death sentences on tyrant land owners.

Apparently parallel administration was set up there. Instead of any costly ammunition, bows and spearheads were used as weapons; at some areas guns seized from the landlords were used back. The protests of the poor led to trouble with the police because many of them were trained by the British, and these conflicts escalated into extreme violence. Landlords were murdered. The peasants held the belief that because the CPM was in power, it was acceptable to fight the feudal system on their own, and that the party would back their revolt. On the contrary, the government took an opposite stance. 1,500 policemen were installed in the area. Consequently, the Naxalite movement which started targeting brutal land lords began spreading out. It had great influence upon the youth, especially the students. Armed gangs of Naxalites, mostly with the youth supporters were formed. What transpired in Naxalbari inspired revolutionaries across the country. The agrarian system of India under years of exploitation was calling for change. The revolutionaries were not only aiming the tyrant landlords but even to corrupt bureaucrats. Their fervour impressed the Maoists in China. The word 'Naxalite' itself became a movement of the radicals fighting the Indian government on behalf of the oppressed peasants and working poor of India. On the account of this, they organized a new party, the Communist Part of India (Marxist-Leninist), shortened to CPI (ML). It is into this period of intense conflict between revolutionaries and the government in Bengal that Jhumpa Lahiri sets her novel, *The Lowland*.

Depicted against the background of Naxalbari movement, *The Lowland* tells the story of Mitra family living in Tollygunge. Brothers Subhash and Udayan Mitra were very close as young boys but as adults they had very different paths. Subhash leaves for America's East Coast where he leads the life of an academic, while Udayan becomes increasingly involved with the radical Naxalbari movement at home. Udayan, caught up in the Naxalite revolutions and the Communist movement that took over Calcutta, tries to persuade his cautious, bookish brother that the cause of history outweighs immediate familial obligations. Subhash's resistance sets up the tension that underscores subsequent events in the novel.

Udayan reacted against the existing systems. It was an armed rebellion and he lost his life in that movement. The death of Udayan is the centre of the novel. All the other events of the novel unfold from Udayan's death. The drama comes in the form of political forces at work in both the United States and India. Subhash's dedication to a brother who cared more for political ideals than family is a critical aspect of the novel, but the drama of the death of that brother at the hands of the police gives the novel its crucial cause and effect. Till the end of the novel the details surrounding Udayan's death are withheld, creating a propulsive energy. The striking feature of *The Lowland* is this tension between the political and the personal.

The geography includes a plain known as the lowland, which would be flooded after the monsoon rains and covered with water hyacinths. A first hint of the events to follow is given through an incident happened during the boys' childhood. When younger brother Udayan convinces Subhash to sneak into the Tolly Club, an exclusive country club established by an Englishman, they were caught by a policeman and beats them with a golf club. Such casual show of brutal force was common throughout India during British rule and for a while after independence was achieved, and this excess and corruption has motivated many to reject, in small ways and large, the legitimacy of Indian laws.

The novel is firmly planted within the sensitive but conservative perspective of Subhash. While Subhash stayed in a clear view, Udayan was disappearing. Subhash wondered if his

placid nature was regarded as lack of inventiveness, perhaps even a failing, in his parents' eyes. His parents did not have to worry about him and yet they did not favour for him. It became his mission to obey them, given that it was not possible to surprise or impress them. That was what Udayan did.

Learning more about the Naxalbari from the radio and papers, Udayan blamed the new government. Earlier, both Udayan and Subhash had celebrated its victory which promised to establish a government based on workers and peasants and had pledged to abolish large scale land holdings. But it did not back the rebellion and in the face of dissent the movement was brutally suppressed.

At their colleges, Udayan and Subhash saw banners in support of Naxalbari. the conflict was grooming up. There were reports of banditry and looting, peasants set up parallel administration and the landowners were abducted and killed. Ruthlessly and systematically, the government brought the rebellion to its heels. Udayan and Subhash were disturbed by the news. But Udayan reacted to it as if it is a personal affront, a physical blow.

Udayan was involved in the Naxalite Movement without his parents' knowledge. The radical students including Udayan, inspired by the Naxalbari movement, boycotted the exams. They wanted India's education system to be changed. Dissatisfied by the official reports, he found secret broadcastings from the stations in Darjeeling and in Siliguri and broadcasts from Radio Pecking. Soon he succeeded in transporting Mao's distorted voice, interrupted by bursts of static, addressing the people of China, to Tollygunge. During night, Udayan used to went out secretly for painting slogans like "China's Chairman is our Chairman! Down with Elections! Our path is the path of Naxalbari!" and "Long live Naxalbari!"

After the studies Udayan found a teaching job in a technical high school. Subhash decided to apply for Ph.D. in the United States. Meanwhile Udayan fell in love with Gauri But one day, he went away abruptly. Even Gauri was not aware of to where he is going:

Their partings were abrupt, the attention he paid her suddenly coming to an end because there was somewhere he had to go. Some meeting, some study session, he never fully explained. He never looked back at her but always paused in a spot where she was sure to see him, raising his hand before cupping it to light a cigarette, and then she watched his long legs carrying him away from her, across campus, or across the wide and busy street.(59)

Udayan wanted to understand India in full extant, to learn the circumstances of its people. He travelled through the villages realizing the pathetic condition of the peasants. He met the tenant farmers living in desperation, people who resorted to eating what they fed their animals, children who ate one meal a day, and those who killed their families before ending their own lives. Their subsistence was contingent on arrangements with landowners, money lenders, on people who took advantage of them and on forces beyond their control. He saw how the system coerced them, how it humiliated them, how it had stripped their dignity away. Udayan and his friends were told that there was an alternative, that is, the revolution. In the beginning the

revolution was mainly been a matter of opinion. But gradually they believed that a solution was at hand.

Udayan began living two lives by occupying two dimensions, obeying two sets of laws. In one world he was married to Gauri, living with his parents, coming and going so not as to arouse suspicion, teaching his students, guiding them through simple experiments at school. But in the world of party it had also been expected for him to help to kill a policeman. They were considered as symbols of brutality, trained by foreigners. It was thought that each annihilation would spread the revolution; each would be a forward step.

Udayan used Gauri very cleverly for his secret purposes. She was not fully aware of the effect of what she was doing. She had been linked into a chain, but she could not see. It was like performing in a brief play with fellow actors who never identified themselves, simple lines and actions that were scripted controlled them. Getting an idea about the daily routine of the police man from Gauri, Udayan killed the police man. Later Udayan was arrested from the lowland for his crime and the police shot him.

The situating of the deeply personal within the political is what that differentiate *The Lowland* from its predecessor, *The Namesake*. The plot of *The Lowland* is driven not only by subtle observations but also by drama. The drama comes in the form of political forces at work in both the United States and in India. Subhash's dedication to his brother who cared more for political ideals than family is a critical aspect of the novel, but the drama of the death of that brother at the hands of the police gives the novel its crucial cause and effect. All of the events of the novel unfold from Udayan's death. The details surrounding Udayan's death are withheld till the end to create a propulsive energy.

Even though Gauri had to marry Subhash, she is cold and withdrawn in response to Subhash's kindness. Gauri is firmly rooted in the moment of Udayan's death and her role in the killing of the policeman. She remembers: "How, at the height of the crackdown, the bodies of party members were left in streams, in fields close to Tollygunge. They were left by the police, to shock people, to revolt them; to make clear that the party would not survive." (169) The moment, the horror of the attempted revolution, is always with her. After several pieces of exposition about Bengali history, the novel manages to ground the personal within the political, to show how even faraway political events can transform and devastate lives. The revolution serves only as a catalyst for the more sedate American story that follows- the life of Subhash and Gauri at the United States and the cultural assimilation that follows, adds up to the tension between the political and the personal. The novel consistently demonstrates that the moment may be all and the knitting together of our relationships through both personal and political actions is crucial to the stories of our lives.

Jhumpa Lahiri explores the multidimensional anxieties of immigrant life and brings together a perfect blending of the personal and the political. As a migrant writer, Lahiri deals with multi-cultural society partly from inside and partly from outside. Being herself an immigrant, she strived for her native identity and simultaneously endeavoured to evolve a new identity in an adopted American cultural landscape. The immigrant characters in *The Lowland* also face this clash of culture, the immigrant's cultural dislocation and displacement. The sense of belonging

to a particular place and culture, and at the same time being an outsider creates an inner tension in the characters. Lahiri portrays a world which rests on geographical and cultural dislocation. *The Lowland* depicts the interaction between the host culture and the native culture. Lahiri inserts struggles, anxieties and biases under a microscope so as to better chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behaviours. The poignant treatment of the immigrant experience is a rich, stimulating fusion of authentic emotion, ironic observation and revealing details. The casual beauty of Lahiri's writing keep the pages turning.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri points out culture and its importance in an immigrant life with a humanistic outlook foregrounding the merits of native culture and the mysteries of acquired culture. The first generation immigrants have cultural disruption and a double consciousness, but the second generation is a more conflicted lot, and has a cultural eruption in false consciousness. They also face identity crisis; possessing a sense of anxiety and loss of identity inherited from their parents. In order to become more familiar with American culture, most of them keep on maintaining a distance with their family.

Lahiri brings to fore many of the issues that Indians face in the promising land of opportunities. The narrative of the immigrant experiences revolves around the difficulties faced by Subhash, Gauri and Bela in a different country-the clash of cultures, the generation gap, identity problems, nostalgia, alienation etc. The main theme of the novel is the cultural conflict and the cultural assimilation of the characters. As Subhash and Gauri start their lives in America, the American culture starts to dominate their ethnic culture and assimilate with the host society's culture. This lived culture can be compared to Raymond Williams' idea of 'eminent cultures' from his *Marxism and Literature* (1977), where he opines that such cultures are alternative or oppositional to 'residual' cultures that encompass "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship[which] are constantly being created"(123). Stuart Hall most effectively sums up this point in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*: "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference". (235) Cultural dichotomy and the resultant cultural assimilation are finely portrayed in *The Lowland*. At the beginning, Subhash shows some cultural encounter 'in-between' spaces and finally settles in global milieus of the United States. Gauri is never concerned about her 'home' culture and totally assimilates with California's cosmopolitan cultures. This assimilation is an escape from her past. Gauri becomes a self sufficient woman under the shade of American culture. The second generation diaspora in *The Lowland*, Bela, chooses a life full of freedom in the United States.

The perfect blending of the 'personal and the political' is another striking feature of *The Lowland*. The personal and political dexterously set beside one another. Political history does not over power personal history. The novel describes the violent political upheavals and political disturbances of a particular period focussing on a particular place. The reason for the change in the character of Gauri is the death of Udayan. It is as if in order to survive those fateful days in Kolkata that Gauri's heart had become forever numb, even when she reached the United States. Neither her new partner nor her child could make her relieved. Udayan's death always remained as a hole in her vision. Space shielded her more effectively than time: the great distance between America and a village in Bengal- as if she had to span her eyes and think

beyond an ocean and continents to see. It had caused those moments to recede, to turn less and less visible, then invisible.

The Naxalbari movement that dominated her life in India did not receive even a brief mention in American news reports. The routine occurrences of violent protests and subsequent police repression have vanished. She is safe with her studies, yet she yearns for a sense of freedom” as a beggar devours food” (175. The immense joy that she feels in brief moments of escape makes it clear that the thing she desires most is complete freedom from the past by engaging herself in different activities.

The first half of the novel oscillates between stunning, intimate family scenes and impersonal textbook descriptions of historical change. The personal and the political, the nuclear family and the national family, the east and the west: versions of these well-worn conflicts shape the novel, framed by the ideologies of Mao and Che. At first glance, *The Lowland* would seem to belong to the lineage of canonical 20th-century novels about India. The geographical feature of the land depicted in the novel has much influence than the historical or political aspects. The lowland gets submerged during the monsoons and emerges again when the rain abates showing also two distinct ponds side by side separated by an embankment; the two ponds represent the two cultures which often become inseparable. After the death of Subhash's father, his mother becomes senile and starts cleaning the detritus of the two ponds. The uncovered waste is symbolic of her family's dashed ambition and hopes of living in a joint family with their sons and families; the modern imperishable plastic refuse uncovered reminds of the negligence by her sons.

The Lowland shows how history is just the same mistakes made by different generations and the belief time creates that change is possible. Gauri ponders over the question, "What caused certain moments to swell up like hours, certain years to boil down to a number of days?" (151) Even though the characters appear to be free, what happens to them remains fated. *The Lowland* offers new visions creating a palpable dread of what is to come. It encompasses the turbulent political events and the resultant change in social patterns of life and family relationships. The genius of this novel is in how, after several pieces of exposition about Bengali history, it manages to ground the personal within the political, to show how even far away political events can change and annihilate lives.

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