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Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*: A Family Saga with a Political Perspective

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Abstract :

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, partly set in Calcutta of the 1960's and 70's and partly in Rhode Island of America, tells the story of four generations of Mitra family with a sweeping, addictive plot. The initial development of the story centers around the Naxalite insurgency in West Bengal in late 1960's and 70's which had taken the country by surprise. In this article I have tried to find out, by means of textual analysis, how far the novelist has succeeded in representing the Naxalite movement in her novel vibrantly and aesthetically.

Keywords : Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*, Naxalite movement

"The worlds of the familiar, the exotic, the best of human nature and the most selfish inhabit Jhumpa Lahiri's new novel". That is how Corinna Lothar summarizes the essence of *The Lowland* in *The Washington Times* (Lothar). From the very beginning of her career, right from the publication of *The Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri is often categorized as an immigrant writer though she herself rejected the idea of immigrant fiction. "I don't know what to make of the term," she told *The New York Times*, "Given the history of the United States, all American fiction could be classified as immigrant fiction"

Jhumpa Lahiri may not be eager to promote herself as the exquisite image of an immigrant writer, unmistakably in *The Lowland*, Calcutta of the 70's with its Naxalite movement and the Rhode Island of America have been fused inseparably. Calcutta(or Kolkata), as she reveals, is at the same time absent and vibrantly present in her life. "The impact that the absence of a place can have on a person is an intrinsic part of my existence. I do not know a world without it", said the writer in Jaipur Literature Festival, 2014 (*India Today*). Thus, there is not a single element of surprise that one of the major settings of *The Lowland* is Calcutta of 1970's. The novel in fact casts its net wider and tries to offer a glance to the readers at the Naxalite movements of late 1960's and turbulent 70's which altered and trembled the lives of Bengal in many ways.

The novelist recollects the source of the political plot of the novel on a tragic incident heard by her during one of her many visits to her father's ancestral home in Kolkata. It was the story of two brothers who were suspected of being Naxalites and killed by the police in front of their families. "The story was haunting and it stayed with me for years", said the author in Jaipur Literature Festival (*India Today*). Elsewhere, she almost replicates it: "That was the scene that, when I first heard of it, when it was described to me, was so troubling and so haunted me-and ultimately inspired me to write the book " (Neary).

The Naxal era, in fact, proves to ignite the imagination of the Bengali writers in different periods of writing. The Bengali readers are already familiar with the sorrowful account of Broti, and his mother Sujata Chatterjee(in *Hajar Churashir Maa* or *The Mother of 1084* by Mahasweta Devi) or the life story of Animesh Mitra (in *Kalbela* by Samaresh Majumdar) or in more recent

times, the conflicts of Panchali, Sukanti, Dronacharya and Nirupam (in *Aatta- Natar Surjyo* by Ashok Kumar Mukhopadhyay). The last work even transports the reader from the Naxalite uprising of 1970's to the anti-establishment movement of 2008-10 at Lalgarh, West Midnapur of West Bengal. Nevertheless, for a non-Indian English reader, the background of Naxalite movement is almost a novel experience. Lahiri's novel at least ventures to provide a glimpse of the Naxalite uprising of 60's and 70's. No wonder this type of risky undertaking from the part of an expatriate writer will give rise to a series of hot lively debates.

On the Acknowledgements part of *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri mentions seven books, one journal and one webpage to her understanding of the Naxalite movement. An interview with Cressida Leyshon (to whom the novelist also acknowledges her gratitude) reveals that the author "wanted to understand that history completely and digest it"(Leyshon) before she started to write.

"Periodically I would read them. And I would take notes, and I would put them away. And I felt that I had to keep doing this over a period of many years...The initial phase was a lot of research, but it remained opaque, and then slowly the research, the history, became more clear to me, and the clearer it became, the less I felt that I needed it." (Leyshon)

Although a critical reading of the novel may make one skeptical of these claims as one may wonder whether Lahiri's pre-writing researches were sufficient enough to produce a lively portrayal of the youths like Udayan who were instrumental to the Naxalite movement of that time.

The political perspective of the story centers around the two brothers- Subhash and Udayan Mitra and Gauri, the wife of Udayan first and then of Subhash. And though Subhash, older by fifteen months, had no sense of himself without Udayan, the author carefully and diligently portrays the differences between the two:

"He (Udayan) was blind to self-constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors. But Subhash strove to minimize his existence, as other animals merged with bark or blades of grass." (Lahiri 11)

Lahiri gives a vivid description of a self made shortwave radio of Udayan as he wanted more news of the world. The radio here serves the role of a window to the external vast world to a typical Bengali youth grown up with "plates of streaming rice and dal and matchstick potatoes." (Lahiri 17)

In the first few pages of the novel, the novelist carefully delineates the political scenario by way of authorial narrative to prepare the reader for the final catastrophe in Udayan's life and vividly presents the shattered hopes of youths like Udayan about the establishment of a government of workers and peasants to abolish large scale land holdings which were promised at the time of formation of the left wing coalition government after an ending of nearly two decades of Congress leadership:

"The United Front hadn't backed the rebellion. Instead, in the face of dissent, Jyoti Basu, the home minister, had called in the police. And now Ajay Mukherjee had blood on his hands...The same week, authorized by the West Bengal cabinet, five hundred officers and men raided the region. They searched the mud huts of the poorest villagers. They captured unarmed

insurgents, killing them if they refused to surrender. Ruthlessly, systematically, they brought the rebellion to its heels." (Lahiri 22)

Although, both brothers were shocked by the news, to Udayan to whom even the golf typified comprador bourgeoisie, it was like a personal and physical blow. The Cuban Revolution, Vietnam War and near the home, the Naxalbari uprising- all shook Udayan's mind terribly and ultimately he became involved in the Naxalite movement led by Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal. Mao Zedong provided ideological leadership for the movement which advocated the overthrowing of the government and upper classes by force and the uprising became violent. The author, however, does not hide her attitudes towards these revolutionaries and goes on to describe their tactics and murky practices in details:

" They intimidated voters, hoping to disrupt the elections. They fired pipe guns on the streets. They hid bombs in public places, so that people were afraid to sit in a cinema hall, or stand in line at a bank.

Then the targets turned specific. Unarmed traffic constables at busy intersections. Wealthy businessmen, certain educators, Members of the rival party, the CPI(M).

The killings were sadistic, gruesome, intended to shock..." (Lahiri 87)

And to encounter the insurgents, government had renewed an old law which "had been created by the British to counter independence, to cut off its legs"(Lahiri 88). The sarcastic note is clearly discernible here.

Meanwhile, Udayan developed a romantic relationship with a college girl Gauri and married her with the consent of none of the families. But Subhash, unperturbed by those political events, went to United States for further study and thus serves as the counterfoil of Udayan. "I thought it would be much more interesting for the story to set up a contrast between these two brothers, to have one involved politically and one to be aloof, because I think it creates an inherent tension between the brothers," the author says. "And I wanted to show how the movement could seduce one while leave another indifferent."(Neary)

Just when the readers are going to be prepared to delve deep into the Naxalite politics, its ideology, impact or the success and failure, the catastrophe of Udayan's life comes to them in the form of a telegram to Subhash: "Udayan killed. Come back if you can." Ultimately, we have been informed through the narration of Gauri that Udayan had been shot and executed by the paramilitary in front of his family members. The author presents the scene with much reticence in alliterative line:

"There was the clean sound of the shots, followed by the sound of crows, coarsely calling, scattering." (Lahiri 105)

The incident leaves Subhash as well as the readers in a state of bewilderment as to what misdeed on the part of Udayan would be the cause of such catastrophe until almost at the end of the novel we come to know about the execution of an unarmed policeman by Udayan and his comrades and though he was not directly associated with the murder, he played an important role in it. Here the description is gruesome which at once takes away the sympathy of the readers:

"He had dipped his hand in the fresh blood of that enemy, writing the party's initials on the wall as the blood leaked down his wrists, into the crook of his arm, before he ran from the scene." (Lahiri 338)

Thus the political plot of the novel is skillfully woven centering round these two assassinations- one by the Naxalites and other by the establishment power. Readers are almost made to believe that Udayan's death is the novelistic indictment for the "crimes" that he and his comrades had done by executing the unarmed policeman from the belief that "they were symbols of brutality, trained by foreigners" and that "each annihilation would spread the revolution. Each would be a forward step".(Lahiri 337)

With the death of Udayan, the political turbulence almost disappears from the novel. The main characters are transported to United States and show no collective responsibility towards society. They seem to have been much preoccupied with their personal aims and motives. Except some stray references to the politics, to the civil rights movement and the antiwar demonstrations, to organic farming and an Obama sticker, the vast middle of the novel is replete with the personal lives of Subhash, Gauri and Bela until the readers come to the last part where, after a period of almost forty years, Gauri is again interested in Udayan and the politics of West Bengal by means of internet and journals. Here the readers are informed about the death of Naxalite leader Kanu Sanyal and the latest uprising of Naxalite activities in various parts of India and Nepal and that "the failure remains an example, the embers managing to ignite another generation"(Lahiri 275)

Lahiri's treatment of the character Gauri seems to be another interesting facet of the novel's political plot. While all the major characters here seem to be rather static, the novelist takes pain to develop the character of Gauri as the novel progresses. Thus the meek and insignificant girl of the first part who, after the tragic death of Udayan, draws our attention and sympathy becomes increasingly opaque when she moves to Rhode Island. She even emotionally detaches herself from her second husband, Subhash and her twelve years old daughter, Bela and abandons them in the name of her career. This development of her character puts the reader in an apathetic state towards her and we wonder why this character is excluded from the author's sympathy until towards the end of the novel we are informed of Gauri's role, though quite unintentional, in the murder of Nirmal Dey, the policeman as her observations and reports had made it possible for Udayan and his comrades to decide the appropriate day and time to attack. Thus, she too was the partner of that "crime" and though she avoids a similar fate like that of Udayan, the author does not let her go unpunished for her deed.

In a novel like *The Lowland* where politics plays a crucial role, it is expected from the author to portray the political events mainly through the eyes of the characters and by means of their activities. However, in this novel, Naxalite movement is presented mainly through the use of authorial voice. The author simply goes on to describe the political events sometimes in a dispassionate manner and sometimes with her attitudes covertly woven. Sometimes the elements of irony do not evade the attention of a careful reader. Thus, just after the release of Kanu Sanyal from the jail which according to him "had been made possible by the law of history", the leader loftily declared:

"By the year 2000, that is only thirty-one years away from now, the people of the whole world will be liberated from all kinds of exploitation of man by man and will celebrate the worldwide victory of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Tse-tung's thought." (Lahiri 33)

And yet in 2010, when he had committed suicide, his vision seems to be nowhere around reality.

Frequently, we do find authorial intrusions during the development of the plot:

"Udayan had given his life to a movement that had been misguided, that had caused only damage, that had already been dismantled. The only thing he'd altered was what their family had been" (Lahiri 115)

Regarding the final catastrophe of Udayan, the ultimate realization of the novelist is :

"But only the policeman's blood had prepared him. That blood had not belonged only to the police officer, it had become a part of Udayan also. So that he'd felt his own life begin to ebb, irrevocably, as the policeman lay dying in the alley. Since then he'd waited for his own blood to spill" (Lahiri 339)

Again the novelist is sarcastical enough when the party opposed Gauri's second marriage and considered it "unchaste" in order to honor Udayan's memory and yet after a long gap of forty years, Gauri finds no trace of Udayan's participation in the movement, nor there any mention of his deeds."His contribution had not been noted, his punishment was standard for the time"(Lahiri 277)

Udayan and his comrades are "basically kids", Lahiri says: "I mean, they're college students. And so one can see how a certain ideology can be very attractive, and appear to be the solution, and appear to be the key to solving an enormous problem in a country and a society." (Neary)

Thus Naxalite movement and the politics of the time are primarily depicted through a series of authorial narration rather than through the lively activities, dialogues and thought processes of the characters. A part of criticism of the novel frequently points out that here it is the author, not the characters who really sums up the essence of Naxalism and that Naxalism is rarely embedded in the experiences of the characters. The Naxalite movement is rather presented in a slipshod manner. There is the mention of political lives of Udayan and some of his comrades. But little is provided about their activities and experiences in this regard. Rather, the novelist is much preoccupied with narrating the main political events of that time just like a non-fictional journal. Only the events are described but not enough psychological explanations offered. We are informed that Udayan had been drawn to the Naxalite movement. But what experiences had transformed his so-called middle class bourgeois insensitivity to the plight of the rural peasants remains unknown to us. Nor is the cause properly explained through his actions or dialogues.

Again, when Udayan "had gone to the countryside to further indoctrinate himself", "he'd been instructed to move from place to place, to walk fifteen miles each day before sundown. He met tenant farmers living in desperation. People who resorted to eating what they fed their animals. Children who ate one meal a day"(Lahiri 335). Here the narrative goes on to describe

rural poverty almost as a sociological phenomenon without exploring the real causes behind it or portraying lively pictures of everyday deprivation, injustice and humiliation of the poor rural masses though if employed, these techniques would have properly contextualized further activities of Udayan.

The novelist tries to reproduce the spirit of the youths of Naxalite period by means of simple narration only. The load of direct information is sometimes too heavy here. Though, in facing the similar problem of providing historical facts about Naxalite movement, another documentary novel in Bengali on the same subject, *Aatta-Natar Surjya* shows more skilful artistic accomplishment. There are the descriptions of Udayan's student life. The romantic involvement of Udayan and Gauri has also appeared in due course. But sadly we find no remarkable dialogue or situation to typify the era itself. All these episodes appear to be flimsy and superficial. Bengali readers have already experienced the conflicts, mental agony and the dreams of the youths of Calcutta to change the society in *Kalbela*. The Calcutta of 60's and 70's is exuberantly reconstituted in the Bengali novel with its different remarkable places. College Street area with Calcutta University campus, Presidency College and Coffee House almost emerges as another character in *Kalbela*. But Lahiri's novel disappoints us in this respect. Lahiri only vaguely names some of the places favourite to the youths of that time. "Because she went to Presidency, and Calcutta University was just next door, she searched for him on the quadrangle, and among the book-stalls, at the tables of the Coffee House if she went there with a group of friends" (Lahiri 52). This rather seems to be a dull and monotonous narration without any vibrant details of the places either through actions or through dialogues. Again, in the first part of the novel, the affair of Udayan and Gauri on the background of Naxalite movement pales into insignificance when it is compared with that of Animesh Mitra and Madhabilata Mukherjee, who is the "another name of revolution" (Majumdar). The sorrowful mother Bijoli is unimpressive and is nothing like her fictional counterpart Sujata (in *Hajar Churashir Maa*), the strong woman who fought against the odds. Lahiri may feel she has "put everything in this story that needed to be there" (Neary). But a Bengali reader will realize that it is not unjustified to conclude Jhumpa Lahiri is more at home in her depictions of the lives at Rhode Island than the lives in Calcutta.

Perhaps, Lahiri cannot be altogether held liable for her portrayal of the movement in such a superficial and opaque manner. It is really a difficult feat on the part of an expatriate writer to penetrate the souls of the youths of Calcutta of 1970's and the Naxalite movement. To accomplish this, a great deal of hard work and research for years are required and just some visits to Kolkata will not amply meet the requirements of this Herculean task. The work demands to be a part and parcel of the city at least for a time being. Undoubtedly, this kind of diligent and meticulous research was beyond the reach of the author simply for the geographical barrier. Thus the novel hardly appears to be a representative fictional counterpart of the Naxalite movement which is supposed to be intrinsic and instrumental to the plot. Rather the novel seems to be a masterpiece accomplishment in depicting Bengali expatriate experience in America. However, Jhumpa Lahiri may be thanked for enkindling the interest of the international elite readers to the Naxalite movement in India that was self defeating in its tactics, its lack of coordination, its unrealistic ideology. Whether this multigenerational story will pass the touchstones of time as one of the forerunners of a faithful study in English of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal or whether that position will be held to another one, lies on the hands of posterity.

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