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The Lowland: A Multigenerational Novel

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Abstract

This research article aims at bringing the traumatic experiences felt by the characters in the novel, *The Lowland*. The novel deals with the diasporic themes and mental conflicts in which the characters are caught up. This novel can be interpreted in many ways. Lahiri throws light on various aspects in this work and one such approach is, viewing the novel as a multi-generational novel. *The Lowland* deals with personas from four different generations ranging from Mr.Mitra and his great granddaughter, Meghna. This paper aims at interpreting the novel in a multi-generational approach.

Keywords: *Family saga, multi generational, mental trauma, dexterity.*

1. Introduction

Indian novelists have reserved a special place in English literature with their flamboyant language skills and their literary prowess. They have universal popularity because of their enthralling themes and dexterity in exhibiting those themes in their works. Indianness reflects in their works as they give an Indian shade to all the themes they work on. Indian writers are ruling the literary world literally by shinning as celebrated writers. Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, and Salman Rushdie are all among the top list of writers who have gained prominence. These litterateurs have proved their mettle as far as their writings are concerned. Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian American writer who deals with the felt experiences of the emigrants of the native soil. Almost all her characters replicate her own self as she has undergone all such mental turmoils being an expatriate. As Hamlet expresses "To be or not to be"(33), the expatriates have a dilemmatic feeling whether to withhold the native land's culture or to go forward with the flow of adopting the host land's culture.

Jhumpa Lahiri has penned many novels and short stories. Her oeuvre includes popular works like *The Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, *The Lowland* and many. Her first collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies* explores the problematic lives of all the protagonists of the stories in the collection. Lahiri becomes proud as a peacock when the collection bagged the 2000's Pulitzer prize for fiction. Her next anthology, *Unaccustomed Earth* comprises eight short stories explicates the traumatic experiences of her characters in an unaccustomed earth, that is the host land. Trying to accommodate and acculturate the foreign soil's culture and lifestyle, the personas

are caught up in an emotional conflict. *The Namesake* is considered a grand success as a novel and many adaptations have been made on it. The novel is all about the culture shock which the whole family faces. Culture shock is a feeling of disorientation when people leave their homes to an unfamiliar land for financial benefits. The change of place brings a lot of mental changes and the characters are subjected to unwanted fear and trepidation. *The Lowland* is a novel which juxtaposes both personal and political experiences of the protagonists. This shows the relevance of the author who goes with the flow of dealing with the contemporary political insurgency.

The Lowland deals with a family saga. In this novel, four generations of the Mitra family have been shown. Subash and Udayan are blood brothers who are raised in Tollygunge, Calcutta. Childhood is the period of joy and happiness. Subhash and Udayan are on cloud nine spending their good old days in their native place. They care for each other. But they fall apart when they grow. With that, the tables turned. Subhash decides to continue his studies and heads to Rhode Island. But Udayan, fervent in Naxalite activities, holds back and takes part in the political movement. There is a stark contrast between these two siblings when they grow.

The Lowland is a multi-generational novel. It starts with the Mitra family consisting of Mr. Mitra and Bijoli Mitra- Subash and Udayan's parents' lives and closes with Bela's daughter, Meghna's introduction. Subhash leads a decent life living abroad and pursues his study over there. There he falls head over heels in love with Holly, a single mother fighting with her husband. On the other hand, Udayan turns wild and ferocious involving in Naxalite activities. He is constantly in a life-threatening situation as he takes part in an anti-social movement. Anything can happen at any time for his life. Gauri is the only redeeming figure in his life. She is one of his friends' sister. The only girl representative in Udayan's generation is Gauri and she forms the nucleus of the novel.

Gauri, an individual, wife to Udayan, a widow and a mother, plays an inevitable role in the novel. Jhumpa Lahiri has taken meticulous care in portraying the predicament of Indian women when they take up different roles as a daughter, sister, wife and a mother. So far, Gauri led a normal life and when she meets Udayan for the first time, they are like apples and oranges. But, gradually they start liking each other and get married. Her life went in an apple pie order till Udayan was shot dead by the Bengal police. "She watched his arms flapping, his body leaping forward, seizing up before falling to the ground. There was the clean sound of the shots, followed by the sound of crows, coarsely calling, scattering" (105). Widowhood and the cold treatment given by Udayan's parents make Gauri cry within herself. Subhash comes as a redeemer. Knowing the state of Gauri, he offers his hand to pregnant Gauri. Subhash knows how it hurts to be a young widow. Gauri, with no other option left in hand, accepts his proposal unwillingly in order to escape widowhood. She considers this opportunity a ray of hope. "He hesitated, then entered. It was dim, until Gauri pushed open the shutters of the two windows, admitting a stark white glow. A square of sunlight fell onto the bed, a calm bright patch containing the vertical shadows of the window bars" (TL 97). Gauri is very staunch and rigid in entertaining same feelings for Udayan, even though he is dead. She doesn't give any space to Subhash. The situational pressure and the only option given are very vividly expressed by Lahiri through her characterisation. This is better explained by Lois Tyson while scrutinizing this concept in his "Post Colonial Criticism", *Critical Theory Today* says,

Double consciousness and unhomeliness are the two features of postcolonial diasporas. 'Double consciousness' or unstable sense of the self is the result of forced migration colonialism frequently caused. In the diaspora this feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither, rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement with in which one lives referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as unhomeliness. To be "unhomed" is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself; Your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee so to speak. (421)

Relocating to another place is not an easy task. Physical journey as well as mental journey to a far away land creates a killing effect in an individual. Margaret Atwood in her poem, "Journey to the Interior" analyses both these journeys,

A compass is useless; also
 trying to take directions
 from the movements of the sun,
 which are erratic;
 and words here are as pointless
 as calling in a vacant wilderness.
 Whatever I do I must
 keep my head. I know
 it is easier for me to lose my way
 forever here, than in other landscapes.(Atwood)

Subhash respects Gauri's feelings and gives her some time to get accustomed to the new land. Gauri, very much interested in philosophy, continues her study. She delivers a girl baby, Bela. Bela resembles her father, Udayan. Though Subhash is not her biological father, he takes care of Bela really well. Gauri, unable to fulfill the marital relationship, avoids Subhash. Subhash plays his role very perfectly as a father to Bela in Gauri's absence. Gauri evades the situation by concentrating on her studies. Subhash and Gauri desire to disclose Bela's parentage to her but both resist. Gauri sees Udayan through Bela.

She felt as if she contained a ghost, as Udayan was. The child was a version of him, in that it was both present and absent. Both within her and remote. She regarded it with a sort of disbelief, just as she still did not really believe that Udayan was gone, missing now not only from Calcutta but every other part of the earth she'd just flown across. (122)

When Bela is seven years old, Gauri doesn't want to shoulder her responsibilities and flee for California. Though adapted to the new world, Gauri writes a note in Bengali which denotes her liking and belonging to Bengal.

My address is uncertain, but you can reach me care of the university. I will not ask anything else of you; the money they offer will be enough. You are no doubt furious with me. I will understand if you do not wish to communicate. I hope that in time my absence will make things easier, not harder, for you and for Bela. I think it will. Good luck, Subhash, and good-bye. In exchange for all you have done for me, I leave Bela to you. (208)

2. Conclusion

Bela, after reaching her adolescence, has become mentally unsound. She develops interests in club activities and leads a nomadic life. Bela, unguided by parents, gets pregnant and delivers a girl baby, Meghna. Lack of proper family setup and parental guidance can mislead young people as in the case of Bela. Bela gets to know that Udayan is her real father. Gauri, in her late years, develops a lesbian relationship. Bela and Gauri are at loggerheads because Bela thinks Gauri is not a proper mother figure. There are lots of relationship gaps depicted in this novel. Mother- daughter, Mother in law and daughter in law, daughter-father relationships are explicated in this novel. Lahiri brings the multigenerational problems and its intricacies through the novel, *The Lowland*.

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