

Isolation & Guilt in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract: *The Lowland* centres around the life of two siblings, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, in the backdrop of the Naxalite movement in the 1960s in West Bengal. The two brothers part ways as Subhash moves to US for higher studies in oceanography, while, his younger brother, Udayan, gets involved in the Naxalite movement and is killed. Subhash, in his compassion, marries Gauri, his brother's wife, and takes her to Rhode Island, to raise her child. His efforts fail when Gauri doesn't respond to his selfless love. The novel ends open ended with the hope of reconciliation and resolution of the conflict despite the central character live in isolation and guilt. Lahiri proves her calibre in climaxing the narration with Bela's attempt to reach out to her mother through her daughter, Meghna. The story examines the sense of isolation and guilt experienced by the central characters. Attempt has been made to apply psychologist John Lee's styles of love to the various characters in their interpersonal relationships in the novel.

Keywords: diaspora, oceanography, Naxalism, Eros, Ludos, Storge, mania, pragma, agape

1. Introduction: Jhumpa Lahiri has been shortlisted for Man Booker Prize 2013 and US National Book Award 2013 in fiction as she has once again proved her merit as a powerful diasporic writer with the publication of *The Lowland* (2013), revolving around familial relationships and experience of isolation and guilt experienced by the protagonists. The novel is a judicious supplement to her already popular oeuvre of fiction writing, including Pulitzer Prize winner *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Lahiri's plots are well planned in the backdrop of diasporic predicament of characters striving to cope up with problems of familial relationships and interconnectedness between people. The fictionist delves deeply into emotional tangles of her characters and establishes the need for reaching out in renewed emotional communication between them to resolve conflicts and problems of mutual adjustment. Portraying life of the Indian migrants to America, Lahiri has been very poignant in capturing the diasporic spirit of her characters muddled in multiple emotional tangles. However, unlike in her other fictional works, Lahiri deals purely with emotional turmoil and subsequent isolation and guilt experienced by her central character in *The Lowland*. The narrative deals with the theme of uprooting and assimilation with efforts made to establish connectivity among the characters. The story concerns two siblings, Subhash and Udayan Mitra. Due to circumstances in the 1960s, they part ways. Subhash moves to US for higher studies in oceanography and settles there while his younger brother, Udayan, lives by Marxist ideology. He marries Gauri, but is shot dead by police for his involvement in

terrorist activities. Subhash returns to handle the crisis in his family, marries the widow and takes her to USA. Lahiri as she explores familial relationships in *The Lowland*, makes an in-depth study of isolation and guilt experienced by the protagonists. Being essentially autobiographical in her writing, Lahiri includes details from her Bengali community and personal experiences in her fiction steeped in history. Lahiri speaks of the circumstances that led her to her fictional narrative:

I learned of an execution that had taken place in Calcutta in the early 1970s, in the part of the city where my father was raised, where my paternal grandparents had lived and where I had spent a good deal of time as a child: Tollygunge, which is where the book opens. Eventually, I began to hear allusions to an incident in which two brothers who lived very close by, who had become involved in the Naxalite movement, were killed during a raid by the paramilitary. I learned that they had taken refuge in a body of water, to protect themselves and hide from the police, and that they had been pulled out and shot in front of their family members, who had been lined up to witness the event ("Interview with a writer." <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk>).

Naxalite movement had its epicentre in West Bengal in the 1960s as it took its name from a peasant uprising which took place in May 1967 at Naxalbari – situated in the state of West Bengal. It was led by armed Communist revolutionaries, who two years later were to form a party – the CPI (M-L), or the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), ideologically an off shoot of Maoism. Under the leadership of their ideologue, a 49 year old Communist, Charu Mazumdar, they defined the objective of the new movement as 'seizure of power through an agrarian revolution'. The strategy was the elimination of the feudal order in the Indian countryside to free the poor from the clutches of the oppressive landlords and replace the old order with an alternative one that would implement land reforms. The tactics to achieve it was through guerilla warfare by the peasants to eliminate the landlords. Calcutta (now known as Kolkata) in West Bengal, became the center of Naxalite urban violence from the beginning of the 1970s, targeting police personnel and political rivals ("Naxalite movement." <http://www.xtimeline.com>). Lahiri has been acclaimed a prominent diaspora writer and she speaks of the eroding cultural links in diaspora creating problems of identity. Some of the culture goes by the wayside, or the link is never made. I was aware of that myself when I had my kids. I really felt a sense that I was the end of a line, and that it was a very short line. I knew my parents had parents and so on, but to me, the universe was my parents and they were the far end and I was the near end. There were certain intensities to the experience of that first generation and their offspring that don't carry over. I'm very aware of my parents' experience, how I grew up, and now how my children are growing up. There is such a stark difference in those two generations (Bookforum April/May 08). Diasporic existence can mean living in forced or voluntary exile which leads to identity confusion and problems of identification in the backdrop of alienation from old and new cultures (Singh 41). Jhumpa Lahiri's stories focus on relationships and on specific cultural experiences and the difficulties of human existence by which the

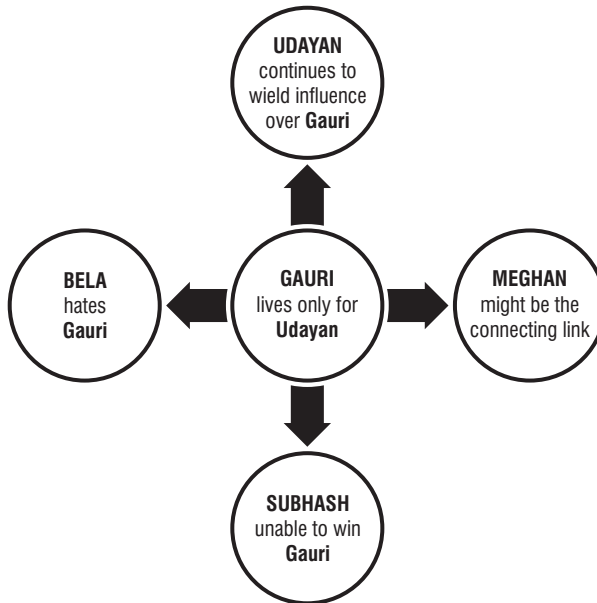
characters yearn backward and forward in time (41-2). Lahiri's own experiences make her come out forcefully in the stories. Lahiri also exposes their distinctly individualized identity and writes not about 'a specific cultural experience' but about 'human beings and the difficulties of existence,' probing the 'midscape of characters' and 'human predicament' with the unique play on memory (Das 14-15).

2. Styles of Love: Attempt has been made to apply psychologist John Lee's styles of love to the various characters in their interpersonal relationships in *The Lowland*. According to Lee, styles of love can be compared to the colour wheel. Just as there are three primary colours, there are three primary styles of love, viz., “Eros,” “Ludos,” and “Storge.” As primary colours can be combined to create complementary colours, the three primary styles of love could also be combined to create different secondary love styles as shown below (qtd. in Wagner).

Three Primary Styles	Love Relationships
1. Eros – Loving an ideal person	- Gauri's love for Udayan - Bela's love for Subhash
2. Ludos – Love as a game	- Gauri's love for Subhash - Bela's love for Gauri
3. Storge – Love as friendship	- Meghan's love for Gauri - Mutual love of Subhash and Holly
Three Secondary Styles	Love Relationships
1. Mania (Eros + Ludos) – Obsessive love	Gauri's love for Udayan
2. Pragma (Ludos + Storge) – Realistic and practical love	- Mutual love of Bela and Drew - Mutual love of Subhash and Elsie
3. Agape (Eros + Storge) – Selfless love	- Mutual love of the siblings Subhash & Udayan - Subhash's love for Gauri

Gauri's love for Udayan is “Eros” as she continues to love him even after death as her ideal husband, making her unable to be reconciled with her marriage to Subhash. Gauri's love for Subhash remains in the “Ludos,” rendering it merely love expressed as a game for survival and she decides to leave him for good. When Bela realises that Gauri never loved her, her affection for her mother turns out to be mere “Ludos,” ending in hatred for her. However, as the narrative concludes, Bela attempts to reach out to her mother through Meghna. Subhash's love for Gauri is selfless love (“agape”), however, he finds no response from Gauri. He continues to endure her for the sake of Bela. Mutual love of the siblings, Subhash and Udayan is very deep rooted selfless love. Though the love between the central characters is the focus of this discourse, other minor characters come into relationship with Subhash, Gauri, and Bela viz., Holly, Elsie, Lorna, and Drew. These are brought in to show, how, when familial relationships crumble due to isolation and frustration, other peripheral relationships/affairs develop, giving emotional fulfilment to characters.

3. Experience of Isolation and Guilt :



Lahiri begins her narration in the historical setting of Naxalite movement where, after the brutal killing of Udayan, Subhash returns from USA to solve the familial problems. In spite of sharp opposition from his family, he decided to marry Gauri, who was carrying his brother's child, saying, "You can't separate them. For Udayan's sake, accept her... He thought her becoming a mother, only to lose control of the child. He thought of the child being raised in a joyless house. The only way to prevent it was to take Gauri away" (Lahiri 114-15). He decided to marry her and take her with him to Rhode Island and to protect his brother's child. He was confident that Gauri would love him in course of time. Lahiri probes into his stream of consciousness: "He had tried to deny the attraction he felt for Gauri. But it was like the light of the fireflies that swam up to the house at night, random points that surrounded him, that glowed and then receded without a trail" (116). After Gauri found her secure space in USA, she began to neglect Bela and took keen interest in her pursuit of higher studies and research, to the utter shock of her husband. She began to develop her independent way of doing things as she liked, showing no concern for her family. Her studies in the University became her only concern, and eventually, Bela and Subhash felt rejected. Bela's reaction is shown when she failed to report at the school bus stop to fetch her after class: "I don't like you, Bela cried out, shaking herself free. I'll never like you, for the rest of my life (170). When Subhash found no response from her, he stopped speaking to her for several days after which he burst out his fury, "My mother was right. You don't deserve to be a parent. The

privilege was wasted on you” (175). That was the breaking point in their conjugal relationship as he never thought of having a second child from her. He refrained from formal divorce only for the sake of Bela. When Gauri got absorbed in her PhD dissertation, Bela was told that it was a report writing. It made the little girl feel disappointed since she thought it to be a secret experiment she was conducting while Bela slept. Gauri compared her work like raising a baby, which meant she had no time for Bela. After Subhash bought a cabinet for Gauri's manuscripts, Bela dreamed that their house was destroyed in a devastating fire in which everything was charred except the manuscripts in the cabinet. An important turning point in the story is the shocking discovery made, when Bela and her father returned from a visit to their village, Tollygunge. Since Gauri had stayed back in their house at Rhode Island, completing her dissertation, they had expected her present at home to welcome them when they returned. To their utter surprise the house and its surrounding had a total abandoned look and when they opened the house, Bela found on the table a message in Bengali:

I have not made this decision in haste. If anything, I have been thinking about it for too many years. You tried your best. I tried, too, but not as well. We tried to believe we would be companions to one another. Around Bela I am only reminded of all the ways I've failed her. In a way I wish she were young enough simply to forget me. Now she will come to hate me (211).

She left them for good as she got a teaching job in California. She asked Subhash to explain about Bela's father at an appropriate time. Owning up her responsibility for her failure to be a mother to Bela, she acknowledged his role as an ideal father. She wrote her apology: “...You are no doubt furious with me... I hope that in time my absence will make things easier, not harder, for you and Bela... In exchange for all you have done for me, I leave Bela to you” (212). Since the letter was written in Bengali, Bela couldn't read it, but she understood the content and felt that her mother never loved her. Experiencing isolation, Bela put her arms around her father to console him. In their isolated life, Subhash had thought of eventual separation when Bela would come of age. Though Subhash experienced freedom from a loveless marriage, his fathering Bela got a jolt when he observed her seeking her own space establishing her identity. “She was establishing her existence apart from him. This was the real shock. He thought he would be the one to protect her, to reassure her. But he felt cast aside, indicted along with Gauri. He was afraid to exert his authority, his confidence as a father shaken now that he was alone” (214). He began to be enveloped in fear and anxiety as he felt that his fatherhood was crumbling. “He had his daughter; alone he maintained the knowledge that she was not his. The reduced elements of his life sat uneasily, one beside the other. It was neither victory nor defeat” (214). Bela moved out to Gauri's study, delinking from her father. Her eventual retreating from him with indifference and marked silence, made him feel more and more disconnected from her. In their isolated life, they sought the assistance of a counsellor, but solution was far from reaching. In her

life of isolation, Bela began to involve herself in social service, collecting discarded food and contributing it to shelters. "She began driving to local restaurants, collecting discarded food and contributing it to shelters. In summer she got a job that kept her out of doors, watering plants at a nursery or assisting at children's camp" (219). In her experience of isolation, these were the fulfilling experiences for her. On completing her majoring in environmental science, she decided never to follow the footsteps of her parents who were immersed in their University research; instead decided to join Peace Corps. Commenting on their isolated life, Lahiri writes: "On either side of the enormous country they lived apart, Bela roaming between them. They had not bothered to obtain a divorce. Gauri had not asked for one, and Subhash had not cared" (222). They stayed married, but lived in isolation from each other. He couldn't understand why she never contacted Bela, and wondered why she was so cold and obstinate. On the other side of the story, Gauri, lived in isolation and confusion too having lost her identity in relationships: "From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman... She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative version of herself...only to be alone in the end" (240). To compensate for her emotional trauma, she sought the company of Lorna, and was driven in "her to desire a woman's body" (238).

In her loneliness and isolation, Gauri mused: "What had Subhash told Bela, to keep her away? Nothing, probably. It was the just punishment for her crime. She understood now what it meant to walk away from her child. It had been her own act of killing. A connection she had severed, resulting in a death that applied only to the two of them. It was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed" (242). Her introspection led to her feeling of extreme guilt. As a matter of fact her sense of guilt made her never ever reach out to Bela and Subhash. The deep sense of guilt makes her experience self-hatred. She had never written to Bela. Never dared reach out, to reassure her. What reassurance was her's to give? What she'd done could never be undone. Her silence, her absence, seemed decent in comparison. As for Subhash, he had done nothing wrong. He had let her go, never bothering her, never blaming her, at least to her face. She hoped he'd found some happiness. He deserved it, not she (242). Lahiri forwards the narration to when Bela is almost thirty four. She had lived fifteen years on her own away from family, in isolation. She ponders: "She wishes Rhode Island, which she'd loved as a child, wouldn't remind her of her mother, who'd hated it. When Bela's there, she's aware that she is unwanted, that her mother is never coming back for her" (259). Bela decides to return to her father and reveal that she was pregnant and wanted to raise her child alone as she had been neglected and abandoned by her mother. He was her model and inspiration in taking such a decision. Subhash became benumbed and felt that life had come full circle. "The coincidence coursed through him, numbing, bewildering. A pregnant woman, a fatherless child. Arriving Rhode Island, needing him. It was a re-enactment of Bela's origins. A version of what had brought Gauri to him, years ago" (264). Subhash, on his part, finally reveals

himself to be her stepfather. Though she refused to believe, Bela didn't revolt. Though she walks away from his life for some time, returns to live once again with him, happily raising her daughter Meghan. Lahiri brings the story to its climax bringing Gauri to Rhode Island to sign the documents of formal divorce. She bumped into Bela instead of Subhash as she arrived at his home. Unexpectedly, her meeting Bela aggravates the situation and fails to connect them after years of separation. Bela remains aggressive as she drives her mother out, heaping insults on her life of betrayal.

How dare you, Bela said... How dare you set foot in this house.

No one had ever looked at her with such hatred.

Why have you come her?

...I came to give your father the papers. Also -... I wanted to ask him about you. To find you. He said he was open to our meeting.

And you've taken advantage of it. The way you took advantage of him from the beginning.

It was wrong of me, Bela. I came to say-

Get out...I can't stand the sight of you...

I'm sorry, Bela. I won't bother you again..

I know why you left us... I've known for years about Udayan...

Nothing will ever excuse it. You are not my mother. You're nothing.

...You're as dead to me as he is. The only difference is that you left me by choice. She was right; there was nothing to clarify, nothing more to convey (312-13).

Her sense of isolation and guilt drives Bela to write a note to her mother. Lahiri brings out the sequence which is typical of her narrative style to bridge the brokenness to establish connectedness through Meghna:

Meghna asks about you. Maybe she senses something. I don't know. It's too soon to tell her the story now. But one day I'll explain to her who you are, and what you did. My daughter will know the truth about you. Nothing more, nothing less. If, then, she still wants to know you, and to have a relationship with you, I'm willing to facilitate that. This is about her, not about me. You've already taught me not to need you, and I don't need to know more about Udayan. But maybe, when Meghna is older, when she and I are both ready, we can try to meet again (324-25).

4. Conclusion: In *The Lowland*, Lahiri fused both history and life experiences, to bring out a superb fiction steeped in isolation and guilt of her protagonists, reaching out for reconciliation through familial connectedness. When his brother, Udayan is killed in the backdrop of Naxalite movement, Subhash shows his magnanimity and compassion in marrying Gauri, as a family obligation. He is defeated in his plans, when, Gauri becomes indifferent to his affection, neglecting Bela her daughter and walks away from his life. As the central characters live in isolation and guilt, Lahiri brings the fictional narrative to an open ended conclusion, bringing to connect the familial ties. Lahiri has been successful in her psychological analysis of her characters, delving deep into the trauma experienced by each character, making them live in isolation and guilt. Her contribution as a diaspora writer has been unique in the sense that while probing the dynamics of culture and diaspora in the context of

characters from the Bengali community, she has successfully given them a universal appeal – making them represent the predicament of everyman in every age, irrespective of culture and ethnicity. With her simple, engrossing and straightforward narration, the fictionist explores very powerfully familial ties and emotional relationships. Her intricate dialogues with detailed observation renders the story powerful and appealing. The novelist is able to let the readers enter into the interior of the characters and has successfully touched the hearts of her readers with the losses and uncertainties faced by the characters. The Story revolves around minute observation of life with great suspense page after page. Once again, Jhumpa Lahiri has proven her utmost literary skill and calibre as an absorbing story teller.

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