

Rereading *The Lowland*: Its Highs and Its Lows

- Pinaki Roy

Abstract: Released internationally in 2013 as Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel and fourth publication, *The Lowland* achieved quick popularity, and led to the author being shortlisted for the 2013 *Man Booker Prize*. In the novel, set in Kolkata (beginning with the turbulent 1970s and continuing well into the 21st century) and Lahiri's own place of settlement, Rhode Island, re-invokes the expatriate litterateur's usual themes: nostalgia, sense of diasporic loss, and ambiguity in identity. However, unlike her previous three publications, a few technical aspects appear to have marred at least some of the effects of the novel, which, otherwise, testifies Lahiri's usual brilliance in characterisation and plot construction. The present essay offers to very briefly reread different appreciable and problematic aspects of *The Lowland*, with special focus on the development of its three principal characters, Subhash Mitra, his slain Naxalite brother Udayan, and their wife, Gauri.

Keywords: Diaspora, Loss, In-between-ness, Kolkata, Rhode Island, Naxalite Revolution, Nostalgia, Imperfectness

In a *New York Times* interview following the publication of her fourth book and second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967) refuses to identify her latest publication, which narrowly missed the 2013 *Man Booker Prize*, as an 'immigrant fiction':

"I do not know what to make of the term 'immigrant fiction'. Writers have always tended to circumstance, and therefore, write about those experiences. [...] From the beginnings of literature, poets and writers have based their narratives on crossing borders, on wandering, on write about the worlds they come from. And it just so happens that many writers originate from different parts of the world than the ones they end up living in, either by choice or by necessity or by exile, on encounters beyond the familiar. The stranger is an archetype in epic poetry, in novels. The tension between alienation and assimilation has always been a basic theme"¹.

Interestingly, Lahiri's denial is identifiably contradictory because the very words she uses to explain the nature of her writings – 'crossing borders', 'wandering', 'exile', 'tension', 'alienation' and 'assimilation', as C. Vijayasree notes, are actually the characteristic features of diasporic literature (Crane and Mohanram 125), which is actually a sophisticated term for 'immigrant fiction', or rather 'fiction by immigrant litterateurs'. Dube, in her 'Preface' to *Indian Diasporic Literature*, adds 'memory' and 'longing for return' to the list of hallmarks of Indian diasporic writings (i), and though it cannot be said that 'longing for return' mark the novels and short-stories of Lahiri, who was born in London, grew up in Kingston (Rhode Island, U.S.A.), is currently settled in Rome with her

Guatemalan-Greek-American journalist husband Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, and two children Octavio (b. 2002) and Noor (b. 2005), and is a member of the U.S. *President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities*, 'memory' certainly permeates the most of the short stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and her novels *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland*. It is probably the 'memory' of her country of origin that led to her marrying Bush according to traditional Bengali customs at *Singhi Palace*, Ballygunge, Kolkata, in January 2001. As Wcislo writes,

"The author arranged a traditional Bengali wedding in the *Singhi Palace* in Kolkata, a place she has never considered 'a foreign city [since she] has been coming [there] since [she] was two years old"².

Has she not? In her September 2013-interview to Gaby Wood of *The Telegraph*, London, Lahiri appears to be rather ambivalent about her nationality, identity, and future plans, and her attitude to her own Indian Bengali origin is a part of her complex cultural definition. Wood writes,

"You could say she is part of the establishment; yet she still feels, she says, a little bit as though she is trespassing – and that complicated cultural tread has given her fiction its world. Raised in London, Boston and Rhode Island by Bengali parents, Lahiri's family were 'foreigners in what felt like a very extreme way. Now I feel I have a guest pass or something, and I can go in and out as I please, of this world, America, which to me was always forbidden – more than that: impenetrable'. [...] 'Now I am a foreigner in a different way', she says [settled in Rome], 'sort of lost, but happily'. The life she has chosen is strictly immersive: Lahiri [...] now does all her writing in Italian and has not read a book in English for a year. [...] The effect that language will have on her writing remains to be seen. [...] Though Lahiri's first language was Bengali, she has never learned to write it. Yet it must have had an effect on her prose. 'Sometimes my mother will read me a story in Bengali', she tells me, 'and the style of those things she reads me is quite plain – startlingly plain, appealingly plain'. She renders the way her own words arise as an aural experience too: 'The language is what I have. I did not hear the sentences any other way'"³.

Her socio-cultural and linguistic ambivalences notwithstanding, Lahiri's representation of 'memory', which has had been one of the defining and appreciable features of her gradually-expanding oeuvre, is identifiably one of the weaknesses of *The Lowland*. She begins her novel with a quotation from the Italian Jewish litterateur Giorgio Bassani's "Saluto a Roma", a poem from the collection *Alba ai Vetri* ("The Dawn of the Glass") (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1963, pp. 33-34) – 'Let me return to my home town entombed/ In grass as in a warm and high sea' (*The Lowland* vii), and, as Villacorta writes,

"While, in her previous work, Lahiri has certainly celebrated America as a place where a person can reinvent him- or herself, *The Lowland* demonstrates that people can never truly put their pasts behind them, even if they move thousands of miles away. In fact, the book seems to suggest that the way to be freed from the past isn't to run away from it, but to return to it, as indicated in the novel's

epigraph: 'Let me return to my home town entombed / In grass as in a warm and high sea' (from Giorgio Bassani's 'Saluto a Roma'). Inevitably, home is not the same place it used to be, and perhaps it is for that very reason that the characters left in the first place. But when they let themselves return – or perhaps they cannot help but return – the past releases its grip, and they can finally live in the present. They can at last embrace the people in their lives and make a new home"⁴.

Even as Lahiri cites Bassani in her epigraph, her presentation of the past has been perceptively problematised. In India, Lahiri's country of origin, Bassano (1916–2000), who fought against the Italian Fascists in 1942–43 as a member of the *Resistance* and later edited *Paragone*, is a relatively unknown poet, with the availability of his poetry-collections and novels (in original and in translation) considerably limited. Naturally, people from the subcontinent would find it problematic to conceive their sense of 'home' and 'pastness' by referring to "Greetings to Rome". Association with the West, which lent the diasporic flavour to Lahiri's previous publications, has led to her failure in properly offering an impassioned portrayal of the Naxalite movement, an important section of Bengal's history, in *The Lowland*. As Wood writes,

"The first seed of *The Lowland* was planted 16 years ago (in 1997), when Lahiri heard a story about a true event. Very close to her grandparents' home in Tollygunge, Kolkata, two brothers who were followers of the Naxalite movement were killed in front of their parents. 'I had close family members who were very politically active', Lahiri explains. 'Most of my family are C.P.I. (M) – the Naxalite party was an extreme splinter off of that. There would be party meetings in my grandparents' house in Calcutta. I would witness that life in that city, and people who believed as they did. It felt both outside of me and within me, somehow'. Her intention was not, she says, to write a parable about contemporary extremism – but she knows others are bound to 'read into it what they will'. When I wonder whether, in retrospect, she thinks one movement might shed light on others, she replies: 'I think every revolution begins or is attempted for a reason, and it is often a means to what is perceived as a better end. So depending on who you are, yes, I think all revolutionary movements have something in common but they're entirely specific to their time and place as well'"⁵.

Lahiri's grand parents might have been in left-wing politics, but the author herself, in spite of her intermittent visits to Tollygunge because of her mother's insistence on her 'acquainting with her own heritage and culture', both experienced the turbulent Bengal politics of 1967–74 (when she was an infant) and learned about her family members' supposedly-precarious situation as leftists second-hand. Even the instance of the police encounter, which she weaves into *The Lowland* as one of the more important incidents – the 1971 state-shooting of the young Naxalite leader Udayan Mitra (b. 1945) at Tollygunge (*The Lowland*, 102–05) – was learned by her when she was already thirty years old. This issue of time and space – she being an American resident right from her kindergarten-days until her doctoral research – has identifiably led to the loosening of her historical sense of Bengal so that her

descriptions of progression of Naxalite movement – beginning with the peasants' uprising at Khemchi and Bengajote in northern Bengal in May 1967 (*ibid.* 20-21), and including the gradual spreading of the Naxalite ideals among the Kolkata pupils (*ibid.* 23-24), the foundation of the *Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)* (that is, C.P.I.(M.L.)) (*ibid.* 32-33), and the perceptible perversions of assassinations undertaken by the Naxalites (*ibid.* 87-88), appear to have been collated from different eye-witness accounts, newspaper reports, and historical essays from the days of Naxalite revolution in Bengal (1967-74). In her 2013 interview with Lepucki, Lahiri elucidates on her sources of information:

“I knew about the Naxalite movement from an early age. I was aware of its consequences when I visited Kolkata as a child, and I was aware that some of my family members had been involved in the movement. When the idea for the book first came to me I began to read more about it, and to learn about what had inspired it. I also spoke to various people who had lived through that time in Kolkata, or knew about the movement”⁶,

In the 'Acknowledgement' at the end of the novel (*The Lowland* 343), the novelist mentions the books that contributed to her 'lot of research' of the 'initial phase'⁷: Marcus F. Franda's "India's Third Communist Party" (in *Asian Survey* 9.11, November 1969), Biplab Dasgupta's *The Naxalite Movement* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1974), Sumanta Bandyopadhyay's *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (London: Zed Books, 1984), Rabindra Roy's *The Naxalites and their Ideology* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), Prakash Singh's *The Naxalite Movement in India* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 1995), Ranjit Kumar Gupta's *The Crimson Agenda: Maoist Protest and Terror* (New Delhi: Wordsmiths, 2004), Ashok Kumar Mukhopadhyay-edited *The Naxalites through the Eyes of the Police: Select Notifications from the Kolkata Police Gazette, 1967-75* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2006), and Arun Mukhopadhyay's *Maoist 'Spring Thunder': The Naxalite Movement (1967-72)* (Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 2007), and names, among the individuals to whom she is indebted, 'Gautam Bhadra, Mihir Chakraborty, Robin Desser, Amitava Gangopadhyay, Avijit Gangopadhyay, Dan Kaufman, Aniruddha Lahiri, Cressida Leyshon, Subrata Mozumder, Rudrangshu Mukhopadhyay, Eric Simonoff, Arunava Sinha, and Charles Wilson'. One might as well have added to her lists of works consulted Ranjit Guha-Neogi's *Myself in White and Black* (Kolkata: M.L. Dey and Company, 1997), Azizul Hoque's *Naxalbari: Thirty Years Before and After* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1999), and Judith Vidal-Hall's *Naxalites* (in *Index on Censorship* 35.4, 2006).

Importantly, Lahiri's detached but strict dependence on historical records has probably resulted in the uninvolved tone of her narration in *The Lowland*, and even the sections on Indian partition – for example, in the second and third chapters of the novel (*The Lowland* 5, 17) – is markedly different from her efficient mixing of the themes of alienation and partition-related sentiments in one of her early short-stories, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" (*The Interpreter* 23-42). While Amitav Ghosh, in his 1988-novel *The Shadow Lines*, describes rather passionately how the 27 December 1963-incident of the disappearance

of Muhammad's hair from the *Hazratbal Shrine* in Srinagar led to ethnic rioting in Khulna, Dacca, Narayangunge, Rajshahi, and Sylhet (248-50), Lahiri simply writes, "Another wave of riots between Muslims and Hindus killed over one hundred people after a relic was stolen from a mosque in Srinagar" (*The Lowland* 17). Even her description of a Kolkata-dwelling Muslim milkman being killed by marauding communalists (*ibid.* 56) is so much different from the tension-laced atmospheres of inter-religious strife evoked by Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* or Bapsi Sidhwa in *Ice-Candy Man* (1991). Her description of the photograph in which Udayan Mitra and his elder brother Subhash Mitra (later, a U.S.-based doctoral researcher and the second husband of his brother's widow, the 1948-born Gauri Mitra) stand together is somewhat restrained and less emotionally-charged (*ibid.* 91) than Ghosh's description of the unnamed narrator's reactions on watching the photograph of Maya Dutta Chaudhuri, her husband, and their European acquaintances, in *The Shadow Lines* (69-70). Lahiri attempts to offer a precise history of Tollygunge in the third chapter of *The Lowland*, with special reference to the building of the *Tolly Club* (12-14), but her tone identifiably remains more of a researcher in local history than of a novelist. One might imagine that publications like Samik Bandyopadhyay and Narendra Kumar Nayak's *Calcutta Two-hundred Years: A Tollygunge Club Perspective* (Kolkata: The Club, 1981), Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004), and Krishna Dutta's *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2003) might have aided Lahiri's researching into the Partition-period Kolkata-milieu and formulation of the history of Tollygunge and of Kolkata itself. In order to stress on the importance of the turbulent era when the early and more important incidents of her novel take place, Lahiri brings in the contexts of the American phase of the Vietnam War (1965-75), including the *Mỹ Lai Massacre* of 16 March 1968, and the *Indo-Pakistani War* (3 – 16 December 1971), centering on the issue of the *Liberation of Bangladesh* (*The Lowland* 35, 41, 96).

The fact notwithstanding that on the cover-jackets of Lahiri's publications – beginning with that of *The Interpreter of Maladies* and concluding with *The Lowland* – the (printed) name of the author has progressively outsized the (printed) name(s) of her publications, the plot of her 2013 publication, which short-listed her for the 2013 *Man Booker Prize* (which she ultimately lost to the 1985-born New Zealander, Eleanor Catton) and long-listed her for the 2013 *National Book Award for Fiction*, is enticing, feministic (her writings usually contain independent and resilient women – for example, 'Shoba' of "A Temporary Matter", 'Moushumi Mazoomdar' of *The Namesake*, or 'Ruma' of "Unaccustomed Earth"), and quite effortlessly matches the Kolkata of the 1960s and 1970s, with the the-then Rhode Island. In her interview with Leyshon, Lahiri thus explains why she has explicitly referred to Rhode Island (she grew up at Kingston, where her father, Amar Lahiri, resided as a University of Rhode Island-librarian) in *The Lowland*, other than the

recurrent city of her books (Kolkata):

“When I think of the case of Rhode Island, it is interesting [...] because I feel as though I have written about Rhode Island in a kind of disguised way previously. I have overtly set some of my books and stories in Massachusetts, which is a place I also know and I have lived in, but I never really referred to Rhode Island specifically, I believe, until this book. And I do not know why. Maybe I felt awkward about naming the place where I grew up – feeling, I do not know, strange about it in some way. [...] [T]his is the first novel where I really felt that I wanted to write about Rhode Island. I wrote a piece some years ago for [...] *State by State*, [...] edited by Sean Wilsey and Matt Weiland. I think it was at a point where I was just beginning to get into the writing of *The Lowland*. Having written that essay, having confronted for the first time this fact of my life – that I had been raised in Rhode Island, a place I never really knew, an experience I never fully came to terms with in some ways – helped me [...]”⁸.

To give a realistic feeling to her novel, Lahiri admittedlyly:

“started driving to the campus where [...] [Subhash Mitra] would have studied, where he had studied. [...] [She] would drive out there, [and she] [...] would pretend [...] [she were] him. [...] [She] would walk along the little beach. [...] [She] would look at what he would see. Part of getting to know his character was, on [...] [her] visits to Rhode Island, thinking about what his day-to-day life would have been like. The church, for example, near the beach, really struck [...] [her], and [...] [she] thought, Well, this is something he would see”⁹.

Lahiri offers a rather complex and poignant storyline in her 2013-publication named after a stretch of grass-covered marshy and mossy land in front of the Mitras' Tollygunge-house – the same stretch where *Kolkata Police* personnel shoot Udayan Mitra dead after briefly arresting him (*The Lowland* 104-05). The depressing atmosphere of the 'lowland', much like that of the 'Egdon Heath' in Thomas Hardy's *Wessex* novels, actually seems to envelope the lives of both Subhash Mitra and Gauri Mitra, even after they marry each other and immigrate to the United States of America. The influence of the 'lowland' indirectly permeates the lives of Udayan and Gauri's child Bela and of Bela's daughter, Meghna. At the end of the novel – in *Section VIII* – Subhash Mitra and Gauri Mitra, both considerably aged, unite with each other at the Beara Peninsula, south-western Ireland, after trying to live a loveless life apart in the West apart from one another, but even in their senility they have failed to forget the memory of Udayan Mitra being annihilated on the lowland (*ibid.* 333-40). By the end of the novel, the 'lowland' assumes a universal connotation: it indicates the depressions, nostalgias, and anxieties lurking in individuals' lives, especially in those of the Indians who are settled in the West. In eight sections of her book, each divided into an average of four to five chapters, Lahiri traces the growth and times of Subhash and Gauri Mitra, with Gauri's slain first husband, Udayan Mitra, remaining a spectral presence in both the individuals' memories throughout the novel. In Lahiri's second novel, Udayan Mitra's first experience with state-brutalities occurs when, as young boys, he and his

eluder brother Subhash trespass into the precincts of the *Tolly Club* and are accosted and later beaten by a policeman (*ibid.* 8-9). Later, the two brothers, who have had tasted the practical aspects of science by practising Morse-Code-signalling, get admitted to Jadavpur University and Presidency College – the two centres of intellectual life in Kolkata – to study, respectively, chemical engineering and physics (*ibid.* 15-16). However, while Subhash Mitra goes on to tamely complete his engineering course, Udayan Mitra get involved into ultra-leftist politics, blaming Bengal's United Front government for the umpiring of the Naxalites, and reading revolutionary works like Vladimir Lenin's pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) (*ibid.* 234-25). Both the brothers complete their postgraduation-level studies, with Subhash watching and guarding his brother as he painted Naxalite posters on Kolkata street-side-walls (*ibid.* 29). Leaving his younger brother amidst political manoeuvrings, Subhash Mitra, at a certain point in his career, goes to Rhode Island, U.S.A., to pursue a Ph.D., and there he receives a letter from Udayan announcing his marriage to 'Gauri' from 'North Kolkata', who 'is finishing a degree in philosophy at Presidency College' (*ibid.* 46-47). Subhash Mitra, on the other hand, gets physically involved with a married American woman, Holly, from Matunuck, South Kingstown, who, at thirty-five, is eight years senior to him (*ibid.* 68-74), and is obliged to return to India when a letter informing Udayan Mitra's death reaches him (*ibid.* 83). When he finds Gauri Mitra neglected at her in-law's family and pregnant with Udayan's child, Subhash Mitra marries her and takes her along with him to the U.S.A., where she gives birth to Bela (*ibid.* 124-35), in a brief scene reminiscent of Ashima Ganguli's delivering Nikhil Ganguli at a Cambridge-Massachusetts hospital (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 22-23). Inclined to independence as she is and uninvolved in physical proximities to her second husband, Gauri Mitra, soon after the birth of Bela Mitra whom she does not especially love, changes her own appearance and dressing-style, tries to complete her philosophy studies up to the doctoral level at an American university, and leaves her second husband and her child as they return to Providence, U.S.A., from a tour to India where Bela first meets her widowed paternal-grandmother, Bijolee Mitra (Lahiri, *The Lowland* 141-211). To Megan O' Grady of *Vogue*, the Rome-settled Lahiri admits that such instances of her characters finding self-emancipation in places 'where no one knows them' are her literary specialities:

"I find it really liberating to be in a place where I am a foreigner in every way. I have lived with this all my life – this divide, this bifurcation. And in Italy I do not feel it. There is none of that tension, only the expectation I place on myself to speak the language well. I find it relaxing. Something drops away, and I observe"¹⁰.

Gauri Mitra's 'liberation' is incomplete. As her daughter matures far away from her, the California-settled Mitra briefly engages herself in a lesbian relationship with a University of California-student Lorna (Lahiri, *The Lowland* 237-40). Subhash Mitra, on the other hand, gets involved with his colleague Richard's widow, Elsie (*ibid.* 253-54). Meanwhile, Bela Mitra, who completes her studies in the U.S.A. and

sustains herself doing various kinds of jobs, informs her guardian, Subhash Mitra, of her decision to enjoy single-motherhood (*ibid.* 263-64), following which he first tells her about Udayan Mitra being her biological father (*ibid.* 267). Towards the conclusion of *The Lowland*, Lahiri offers a poignant and pathetic picture of the mother-daughter relationship – between Gauri Mitra and Bela Mitra – when latter rejects the overtures of her mother who visits her daughter's house for a 'reconciliation' after finding her own 'independent life' appalling (*ibid.* 308-13), though one of Bela Mitra's letter announces that she would 'try meeting' her mother 'again' when her daughter 'Meghna is older, and she and [...] [Bela] are both ready' (*ibid.* 324-25). Importantly, Gauri Mitra, in spite of her keenness for 'liberation', miserably fails to forget her past: she is forced to visit Kolkata and her in-laws' house at Tollygunge at the end of the story (*ibid.* 316-20) – something which Ashima Ganguli of *The Namesake* would have perceptively preferred after Nikhil Ganguli's marriage to Moushumi Mazoomdar, and which Mira Nair, the director of the 2006-film version of the novel actually shows.

Writing about the chief concerns of Lahiri's oeuvre, A.S. Kaushik observes, "The prominent feature of diasporic literature lies in its continued projection of the writer's motherland and its culture" (Agarwal 90). In *The Lowland* too, even in the sections which are set in Rhode Island and California, Lahiri perceptively projects her own Indian Bengali culture and beliefs and judges the characters' actions vis-à-vis these values. If Kaushik encounters in different stories of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* characters 'forever concerned with India and what is happening there' (*ibid.* 95), the protagonists of *The Lowland* – especially Subhash Mitra and Gauri Mitra – cannot detach themselves, even as they become U.S. citizens, from what is continuing on in India in general and Bengal in particular. Moreover, in spite of their residing in the U.S.A. and later, in the U.K., both Subhash and Gauri, who live uneasy lives – Subhas with his colleague's wife – they fail to assume the West to be their natural habitats. One might recall here how in "Unaccustomed Earth", Ruma's father succinctly expresses this feeling to his daughter: "It's a good place, Ruma. But this is your home, not mine" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 52). It appears that Lahiri does not actually want to project the U.S.A. as her Indian characters' comfortable 'homeland' in *The Lowland*. All the three protagonists – Subhash Mitra, Udayan Mitra, and Bela Mitra – belong to Kolkata of the 1960s and 1970s, which, at that period, was dead set against the imperialistic and capitalistic Westerners. Udayan had made Bela believe in his philosophy that prosperous Indians and policemen "are symbols of brutality, trained by foreigners. They are not Indians, they do not belong to India" (Lahiri, *The Lowland* 337). Curiously though, Udayan Mitra swears by the ideas of the Naxalite leaders Charu Majumdar (1918-72) and Kanu Sanyal (1932-2010), who, in turn, were actually led by the ideals of (the German) Karl Marx (1818-83), (the Russian) Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), (the Chinese) Mao Zedong (1893-1976), and (the Argentinean) Ernesto 'Che' Guevara (1928-67), all of them foreigners. In contrast to his philosophical adherence, Udayan Mitra, while concealing himself in a hyacinth-covered pond in order to avoid arrest and execution, recalls

that he himself has never had “been to another country. Never been to China or to Cuba” (*ibid.* 334). This awareness actually problematises even his own identity. On the other hand, the instance of Sanyal's suicide, whose details Gauri Mitra watches on internet (*ibid.* 281-82), might have indicated a failure of ultra-leftist movement in Bengal, but the Westerners are not quite successful either. All throughout her 2013 novel, Lahiri presents the U.S.A. as a country which is besotted with different social problems, those which plague India too, though different in kind and impact. Probably, in order to suggest the 'incompleteness' of both the countries, Lahiri depicts that in India and the U.S.A. daughters are attended upon by adopted and not biological fathers – Bela Mitra by Subhash Mitra and Meghna Mitra by the American, Drew (*ibid.* 299). In their analysis of Lahiri's principal themes, Floyd Cheung and Lavina Dhingra write that a sense of 'loss' overwhelms Lahiri's writings, and this they explain as 'racial melancholia' (Dhingra and Cheung 27-28). Lahiri's sense of 'loss' of her connection with her roots become perceptible in her focussing on the Indian protagonists more than the American people characters, while her conscious portrayal in *The Lowland* of the imperfectness of both the Indians and the Americans suitably illustrates this 'racial melancholia', mostly rising from Lahiri's sense of *in-between-ness* as an Indian growing up in the U.S.A. If Lahiri's detached historical depiction of Kolkata and its social revolutions is one of the symbolic 'lows' of *The Lowland*, her masterly demonstration of 'racial melancholia' is one of its symbolic 'highs'. Kathy-Ann Tan comments, “Lahiri sees the condition of being caught between two cultures as decisively liberating and productive, as it allows the writer to step outside herself more easily than writing” (Stilz 231), but in *The Lowland* this cultural 'in-between-ness' seems to have problematised then existence of especially the Indians like Bela Mitra and Meghna, who are born in the U.S.A. to Indian parents and are reared up in the country. The 'conflict' between “national identity and spatial (geographical) boundaries” being “difficult and awkward”, as Tan observes, (*ibid.* 232), *The Lowland* examines this in an aggravated way.

There are several other perspectives which could be applied while reading *The Lowland*. With its independent and “compelling without being pretty” (Lahiri, *The Lowland* 46) heroine, Gauri Mitra, and her equally strong-minded daughter, Bela Mitra, one could detect as feministic bent in the 2013 publication, and involuntarily compare it with Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Arakhsanya* (1916), which also focuses on the exalted philosophical stances of a dark-complexioned girl. Lahiri's unpalatable presentation of the several problems of Western life adds a postcolonial aspect to her novel. Another of the 'highs' of her 2013-publication is her efficient development of the characters of Udayan Mitra, his resilient wife Gauri, and the deep relationship that these two ultra-leftist rebels share in between themselves. Her deep attachment to the slain Naxalite leader does not allow Gauri Mitra to enjoy physical proximity with her second husband, Subhash, and Lahiri's description of their post-delivery lovemaking, during which Subhash Mitra is obliged to practice *coitus interruptus* (*ibid.* 147-48), is both poignant and thought-provoking. Wong and Hasan assess that Lahiri's

“characters, themes, and plots deal with universal human experiences” (5), and this is not an exception in *The Lowland*: its characters, themes, and plot may indicate any foreign-settled individual who are feeling nostalgic about their homeland.

Notes :

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