

THE LOWLAND: THE INHERITANCE OF ISOLATION

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ABSTRACT

The Lowland, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014. Jhumpa Lahiri breathlessly recounts the diasporic lives in this wonderful novel. Jhumpa Lahiri in *The Lowland: A Fiction* (2013) is the story of the dead Udayan and his elder brother Subhash who though look alike are of opposing characteristics. Udayan, dynamic and pushing while Subhash withdrawn and diffident have attachment for each. The other which tragically result in unforeseen disharmony in Subhash's family life. In youth the brothers part their ways. Udayan drawn towards reform and revolution becomes active in the Naxal Movement. Subhash on the other hand leaves for America for education much to the chagrin of his brother. The narration is shifted to America to describe the experience and exploits of Subhash. *The Lowland* is a sweeping, ambitious story that examines in intimate detail the intersection of the political and the personal, encompassing nearly 50 years of Indian and American history through the lives of one family.

Key Words: Diaspora, Naxal, Uprising , Alienation, Isolation

Diasporas are communities of people living together in one country who acknowledge that the 'old country' always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. The emphasis is on collectivity and community as is the sense of living in one country but looking across time and space to another. Indian immigrant community could be defined and characterized as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community. Factors that contribute to construct the genealogy of migration are colonialism, British imperialism, the phenomenon of indenture labour, Kangani and Mistry system in the history. However, the existing global market has immense impact on the flow of people across countries for economic upsurge and individual development; though one cannot overlook the factors of displacement, conflict, poverty, social exclusion, civil unrest and others that contribute to the movement across countries. In the process of migration the trajectory of transition, acculturation and the retention of the diasporic community becomes a subject of analysis, wherein Indian diasporic community has often been glanced as a single monolithic community which practices analogous tradition and culture without much distinction.

All Diasporas share and carry a common history of unfinished shifting and settling. When the migrants seek to locate themselves in a new culture, the impact of colonialism and global conflicts of religion, race, culture and nationalism can be felt in the host land and reflected in the writings of the Indian Diaspora. The migrated people try to merge with or adopt the culture, manner and ideology of the Western world/English/American world. But, it is very hard to merge. Assimilation is a hard task. It brings many side effects like, dilemma, nostalgia, longing for homeland, complex, identity crisis, quest for identity, racial prejudice, etc. During this process,

immigrants have to face many odd situations, inhumanity, rejection, and racial discrimination by the host country. Sometimes it creates distortion, depression, reaction, apathy and ruins life also. Kamala Markandaya, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Agha Shahid Ali, Bharti Mukherjee, V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are the prominent writers of Indian Diaspora. Jhumpa Lahiri examines and defines the conditions of the Indian Diaspora in America. In most of her writings she seems to be obsessed with the questions of identity, alienation, and isolation. The psychological dislocation that immigrants often suffer causes even their children to feel a similar sense of alienation. Her writings mostly travel from alienation to isolation.

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In the very beginning of this novel Lahiri introduces 'lowland' where it was located in Tollygunge, a suburb of Calcutta. In the East of the Tolly Club, there was a vast enclave containing two ponds. Past these ponds, there was a lowland stretching over few acres of land. These ponds during monsoon get illusory by water of flood. Even the flood water turns few feet of lowland into a swamp. These ponds were full of hyacinth weeds. Across the lowland there was a field where

Mitra brothers used to go to play football. Subhash and Udayan were two brothers looking almost alike in appearance, height, and voice though born at the difference of right fifteen months. Subhash Mitra was thirteen years old. Though he was older brother yet he never felt anything without Udayan. Their father was a simple clerk working in Indian Railways department, and mother was a seamstress. Both started their formal schooling from a Bengali medium school past the Christian Cemetery.

In fact they were just two facets of the same coin. Once in the name of playing football, Udayan took initiative to enter the Tolly Club. By the help of putting iron and kerosene tin both managed to climb over the fence. A man named Bismillah working as a caddy at the club had told them that on the ground of the club there were so many golf balls scattered over simply. Bismillah used to sell off lost balls. Perhaps this was the source of inspiration for them to cross over the fence. In wake of Partition, in a large number, many Hindus from Dhaka, Rajshahi, and Chittagong came to Tollygunge looking for shelter here and there, many additional walls were erected and some were raised high so that none might intrude the club. Entering the club they saw first ever lush greenery. Though they were apprehensive of being caught, slowly, they mustered courage to walk and look around. They stuffed their pockets with golf balls. On one evening they were caught by the policeman. He beat Subhash badly. Udayan could not bear his brother being beaten by someone. He blurt out not to beat and shielded him.

During childhood days, Subhash was by nature mother's company loving boy; unlike him, Udayan used to cheat, irritate, and bluff his mother by playing child-like tricks on her. In their parents' eyes, Subhash was better than Udayan. "In the courtyard of their family's house was

the most enduring legacy of Udayan's transgressions. A trail of his footprints, created the day the dirt surface was paved. A day they'd been instructed to remain indoors until it had set" (TL 11-12). "And so the imperfection became a mark of distinction about their home. Something visitors noticed, the first family anecdote that was told" (TL 12). At the school, they faired outstanding performance. Udayan often put in challenge before his teachers. Udayan was by nature .scientific, impulsive, inquisitive, aggressive, and transformative, daring, fearless whereas Subhash was obedient, considerate, cautious, and practical. Both prepared for entrance examination of Presidency and Jadavpur for graduation. Both got through easily. Udayan went to Presidency to study physics and Subhash to Jadavpur for chemical engineering. Their father remarks that he went nowhere without being stopped and giving congrats. When they were asked for gift, Subhash wished a marble chess set while Udayan demanded for a radio so that he might acquire more information around the world. Later Udayan set a buzzer on the main door; and set the frequency of his radio international.

In 1967, they began to listen about Naxalbari movement on radio. Naxals were demanding ownership rights for sharecroppers. Naxalbari was getting momentum at fast speed in West Bengal. They were staging demonstrations, putting in hoardings, banners, etc., at Presidency College, and Jadavpur in support of Naxalbari. They once broke on a cop and killed with bows and arrows. Consequent upon, eleven people were shot dead by police. Eight of them were women. Udayan blamed the United Front, the party in government led by Ajoy Mukherjee. The United Front government was ironically based on workers and peasants. It had pledged to abolish large-scale landholdings invested in few people. Landowners were being abducted and killed. What did State and Central government? In July the Central Government banned the carrying of bows and

arrows in Naxalbari. 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. (TL 23) Udayan and Subhash both took it altogether as a shock. But Udayan took it as his personal affront. He said, "People are starving, and this is their solution.... They turn victims into criminals. They aim guns at people who can't shoot back" (TL 23).

Udayan justifies Naxalbari for its demand of the abolition of disparate ownership. He even accused India of turning to the United States of America, USSR for solution and support. In fact the Tolly Club was as the marker of inequality. Udayan felt India still in the bondage of the British. Later on Udayan assiduously involved himself opposing government. He made many posters and affixed them somewhere. In fact they were opposing government at the expenses of their lives. Subhash who was practical applied for doctoral award in America. He first consulted and asked Udayan to go there. He also tried him make out that America is a land of opportunities. Udayan denied and told Subhash that you would never come back if went there. Udayan took a job of tutoring. By early 1968, Subhash set for Rhode Island America. He missed too much the company of Udayan. In Rhode Island he initially felt isolation. He identified Tollygunge with Rhode. Here in the University his room-mate was Richard Grifalconi, an admirer of Mahatma Gandhi. He also asked Subhash about Indian politics, poverty, caste-system, etc. Another man named Narsimhan from Madras, India, the professor of economics, married to Kate, an American whom he met there. Narsimhan still knows few words of Bengali. Meanwhile Udayan married his college girl of Philosophy department whom most probably his parents had selected for Subhash.

It was not an arranged marriage. They stayed at one of his professor's residence for some time. Udayan informed Subhash about his marriage with Gauri via an aerogram. He took it a little shocking but moderated. After some time in 1970, he sent a snap of Gauri. Subhash kept it as a proof. Subhash also got entangled with a lady Holly. She was an abandoned lady having a son of nine years named Joshua. In her company, he felt that Holly was suffering from isolation and distance between her and her husband. He even did some adultery with her. He wished to tell all about to Udayan but could not dare.

In the autumn of 1971, Subhash came to know that Udayan was killed in a police operation against Naxalbari. The letter also requested to return soon. Subhash returned to his home. After funeral rites and rituals, Subhash talked to Gauri everything in detail. Subhash also saw Gauri who was barely twenty-three at the time of Udayan's death, vermilion washed clean from her hair, the iron bangles removed from her wrist, too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother. The house was altogether lost in mourning and seclusion though it was the time of Durgo Pujo (Goddess Durga Festival). Subhash came to know that Gauri was pregnant for one or two months. She also told him that a day before his murder, he did not want a family before his elder brother had a baby. Anyhow Subhash brings round her and parents. Finally, he landed in along with Gauri. Gauri was grateful to him but she was not at peace. From now on she was being haunted by Udayan. She says as 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. 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 from every other part of the earth. After request, Gauri decided to go to United States with Subhash.

She'd just flown across. As the plane was landing in Boston, she had momentarily feared that their child would dissolve and abandon her. She'd feared that it would perceive, somehow, that the wrong father was waiting to receive them. That it would protest and stop forming. (TL 124)

Gauri gradually adjusted with the new environment and began to attend the lectures of philosophy professors at the institute where Subhash was completing his doctoral programme. As far as Subhash's decision getting married with Gauri again soon after Udayan's death it was taken by all in-laws unchaste. Perhaps she married Subhash to remain in touch with the memories of Udayan. However, she knew that "it was useless, just as it was useless to save a single earring when the other half of the pair was lost" (TL 127-28). She terribly recalls her brother Manash who was at the airport bidding bye. She recalls her belongings at Udayan's house: "She left Tollygunge, where she had never felt welcome, where she had gone only for Udayan. The furniture that belonged to her, the teak bedroom set, would stand unused in the small square room with strong morning light, the room where they had unwittingly made their child" (TL 128).

Gauri continued using her Indian clothes and ways of life. Subhash helped her lot feel happy and comfortable. He time to time took her for medical check-up. They even decided a name for the baby to be borne. They were at mind's level imagining of a female baby. The name Subhash suggested was Bela. He also told her that her child was his responsibility. Although they formally live a married life, Subhash often feels guilty of inheriting younger brother's wife. He never dared approach her amorously. In due course, Gauri bore a female baby whom they named Bela. Few days later, Subhash wished his carnal desires fulfilled. She in some way accepted. She

was in fact indifferent altogether towards Subhash. It was her mechanical relation. No trace of emotion for him. Slowly time passed, she began learning language. She was admitted to a school bearing her identity card Subhash Mitra and Gauri Mitra close by. Subhash has a dream of his own baby with Gauri which never fulfilled. He wanted a family comprised of Bela, Gauri, and a baby of his own. But Gauri's terrible indifference gradually turned bitter. Subhash did not wish to tease her anyway.

No doubt, their relation was not based on emotion. It was "a connection at once false and true" (TL 156). Meanwhile, Gauri got a chance for doctoral programme in Boston. Subhash did not oppose her anyway. Few months later, on one evening, Subhash's father went to bed tying mosquito net to nails. In the morning, Deepa supporting Bijoli (Subhash's mother) turned up with tea but found the man in bed passed away. The death of Subhash's father made Bijoli a widow. This way or that he was cremated. After his death, Bijoli soon lost her balance of mind. She turned into a beggar often went to the lowland where Udayan was shot dead. There, she used to talk to herself. Three months later to Subhash's father died, a letter from Subhash came to Tollygunge mentioning his coming to Calcutta to deliver few lectures along with Udayan's child named Bela. Gauri was not in condition to accompany him for some necessary work. Deepa simply stored the information.

Subhash along with Bela arrived at the start of monsoon season. Bijoli offered Bela few precious gifts. She also taught her few tips for eating *daal* (cereal), rice, and lentils. Bela learnt from her making braids, wearing mirrored bangles so on so forth. After a week, Subhash began to

stay outside in the name of few lectures to be delivered in nearby universities. Deepa took Bela to market for shopping and moreover for a walk. She even wanted to stay for more time and walk around the club. Time was over. It was not possible to stay any longer. Finally, they returned to Rhode Island finding Gauri missing. Bela found a letter which was telling about Gauri's leaving for California where she was hired to teach students of a college. About her address she just mentioned that you can reach on the care of university.

Gauri's departure not only baffled but also broken them emotionally badly. He received such a deep emotional injury that never to be recovered. Gauri so far looks a bloody opportunist, heartless, and ultra modern for no reasons. She in this way adapted American pattern of life. She by nature was not family loving lady. She had saved and shaped the life of Subhash if she would have decided seriously. To her life was not more than a game to be played fair or foul. She left even her daughter Bela on the ground that she was old enough to forget her. Subhash loves Bela not her. These were her foolish excuses. Bela and Subhash anyhow live together. Gradually the emotional rift between them widened. "Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings" (TL 237). So was the case with Gauri too. Only Lorna broke her (Gauri's student) silence. Gauri in California settled with least remorse.

Here in California, Gauri recalls her haunting past relation with Udayan. "Without that there would be nothing to haunt her.No grief" (TL 231). She takes California her home. Ironically she still carries her green card that proves her Indian citizenship. She could not overcome her Indianness altogether:And yet she remained, in spite of her Western clothes, her Western academic

interests, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and against the backdrop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had wed. (TL 236)Gauri admits that Subhash “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” (TL 242).After many years gap, Richard Grifalconi met Subhash who was broken at heart. He told Subhash that he had founded a centre for non-violent studies at a university in the Midwest. He even visited the birthplace of Gandhiji that is Gujarat. He also promised that he would also visit during next visit Calcutta. He had thought that he (Subhash) would have returned to India.They exchanged each other’s phone numbers. Subhash also told Richard that Gauri now became a nomad. Thus Bela under Subhash’s eyes grew. One day he came to know Richard passed away and like him he would leave everything except one thing as a secret which he wants to reveal otherwise it would remain a secret. This secret was that Bela was daughter of Udayan not his. It was as if a heavy load was put on his heart. Bela yet adores him as her father. Bela later on confirmed that the unhappiness engulfed her parents’ life. Dr. Grant had once told Bela that she would miss her mother ever.

Subhash began thinking about his property to be handed over or sold off. He was the master of two abandoned homes, one in Tollygunge where he had not returned since his mother’s death; another in Rhode Island in which Gauri had left him.Home in Tollygunge still bears names of Subhash Mitra and Gauri Mitra. It was managed by their relative and the rent was deposited into a bank account. Bela later on conceived with someone about whom she did not intend to tell. Subhash thought it another version of Gauri. In due course she bore a female baby whom she

named Meghna. In this way “the past is there, appended to the present” (TL 275). Subhash on Internet searched Gauri’s address and sent a letter asking for few signatures. Gauri thought that he was asking for divorce. Actually he was planning to sell off his Tollygunge home which still bore Subhash and Gauri. Meghna so far turned four began her school. Subhash in the morning used to drop her to the school. In the evening, Bela used to bring her home. She even told whoever asked about her mother that she was dead. Later on Bela also left Subhash for supporting poor people. To the conclusion, it can be said that Jhumpha Lahiri’s *The Lowland* is a narration of the inheritance of alienation. Alienation is focal point in the development of her themes. She breathlessly recounted three generation’s alienating history. In fact she directed alienation into her character’s veins. Alienation runs along with their blood circulation. Subhash Mitra is more sinned than sinning. His parents were obliged to live emotionally fractured life. He did whatever was for the happiness of Gauri. If Gauri had given him support emotionally, most probably Subhash could have moderated the emotional jerks. Gauri appears sheer selfish and opportunist. She tried hard to shun all her Indian ethnicity but failed largely. On the other hand, she remained dedicated to her deceased husband long back at least at emotional level. Bela is just victim to her parents’ unhappiness and estrangement. In fact both are badly paralyzed by their Indianness and Americanness.

Vijay Mishra’s hypothesis that ‘all diasporics are unhappy’ seems correct. Her all characters are emotionally broken. It seems that alienation is part and parcel of their lives. It circulates into their veins constantly. Jhumpha Lahiri being a successful writer has produced yet another novel of

diasporic material. Jhumpa Lahiri made alienation-isolation as necessary condition of diasporic lives.

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