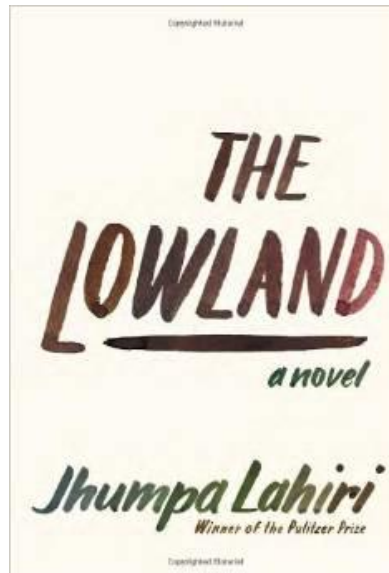


Nostalgia in *The Lowland*

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Focus on Dilemma of Characters

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, in the backdrop of diasporic dilemma of characters, revolves around experiences of isolation, guilt and nostalgia experienced by the central characters. "Portraying life of the Indian migrants to America, Lahiri has been very poignant in capturing the diasporic spirit".¹ *The Lowland* starts with the life of two siblings, Subhash and Udayan Mitra (with stark differences in their characters), exploring themselves in the milieu of the Naxalite movement in the 1960s in West Bengal.

Subhash and Gowri

In the backdrop of the Naxalite movement, Subhash moves to the US for higher studies in oceanography, while Udayan involves himself in the Naxalite movement and is killed. Out of compassion, Subhash marries Gowri who is his brother's wife. He takes her to

Rhode Island along with him in order to raise her child. But his efforts to develop an intimate relationship with her fail due to the feelings of nostalgia in Gauri. The novel ends with the positive idea of reconciliation in the backdrop of the feelings of nostalgia in Subhash and Gauri. Siddhartha Deb writes in *Sunday Book Review* depicting feelings of nostalgia in Subhash:

“Subhash, who has escaped a city he sees as disorganized as well as violent, and who studies oceanography, finds in the beaches of Rhode Island a resemblance to the delta lowlands surrounding Calcutta”.²

The Social Milieu

There is a description (in the first chapter) of the social milieu where Subhash and Udayan used to live and also, the name of the novel came from there:

Once, within this enclave, there were two ponds, oblong, side by side. Behind them was lowland spanning a few acres. After the Monsoon, the ponds would rise so that the embankment build between them could not be seen. The lowland also filled with rain, three or four feet deep, the water remaining for a portion of the year..... So many times Subhash and Udayan had walked across the lowland. It was a shortcut to field on the outskirts of the neighborhood, where they went to play football.³

Different Perspectives between Brothers

Both brothers have different perspectives towards their life and their aims as is clear from the following text:

Since childhood Subhash had been cautious. His mother never had to run after him.

He kept her company, watching as she cooked at the coal stove, or embroidered saris

and blouse pieces commissioned by a ladies' tailor in the neighbourhood. He helped

his father plant the dahlias that he grew in pots in the courtyard.
.....Udayan was disappearing: even in their two –room house, when he was a boy, he hid compulsively, under the bed, behind the doors, in the crate where winter quilts were stored. He played this game without announcing it, spontaneously vanishing sneaking into the back garden, climbing into a tree, forcing their mother, to stop what she was doing, by not answering when she called. As she looked for him, as she humoured him and called his name, Subhash saw the momentary panic in her face, that perhaps she would not find him.⁴

Focus on Naxalite Movement in West Bengal

Lahiri also discusses Naxalite problem in her novel in which Udayan, being a college student, actively participates in the Naxalite movement in the 1960s, an uprising waged to eliminate injustice and poverty. Here, one should also keep in mind that one of the reasons for the proliferation of Naxalite rising was the feeling of nostalgia among the peasants for their own land on which they had become tenants.

The Naxalite movement gained a strong presence among the radical sections of the youth in Calcutta. Students left school to join naxalites. Such was the sway of the movement that the naxalites took over Jadavpur University and used the machine shop facilities in its campus to make pipe guns in order to attack the police. Presidency College, Kolkata became the centre of the the Naxalite movement. The Naxalites found supporters among students even in Delhi's prestigious St. Stephen's College. The main reason of unity of all sections of the Naxalite group and its success as a movement was the making the farmers as tenants on their lands by wealthy landlords and money lenders. The government authority didn't pay attention to the miseries of this section. The involvement of Udayan in the Naxalite movment dominates the first half of the novel.

Aftershocks of the Naxalite Movement on the Family

The second half depicts the aftershocks of it on the family. In the next phase of the novel, Subhash leaves India in order to study in America while Udayan marries and dedicates himself for the cause of the naxalite movement. Life changes for Subhash and Udayan's wife, Gauri, as Udayan has been killed by the police. Gauri is pregnant with Udayan's child. Subhash proposes marriage to her and she makes a practical decision to accompany him in America.

Nostalgia and Anger Leading to No Peace: Citizens of Their Birth Place

Nostalgia in Gauri is depicted through anger for her dead husband as the novel moves back and forth in time. "Anger was always amounted to her love for Udayan. Anger at him for dying, when he might have lived, for bringing her happiness, and then taking it away, for trusting her, only to betray her, for believing in sacrifice, only to be so selfish in the end".⁵

The feelings of anger act as precursors for the development of feelings of nostalgia in Gauri in America, never allowing her to fully integrate herself not only in conjugal relationship but also in the new cultural milieu. As a result of her feelings of nostalgia, Gauri is never at peace and abandons Subhash and her daughter Bela in false hope of gaining her spiritual peace. Gauri is found to be a neglectful mother and an emotionally distant wife due to feelings of nostalgia. Later on Gauri realizes the damage she has caused to her daughter by not bringing her up according to Indian culture and value system. "She understood now what it meant to walk away from her child. It had been her own act of killing. ... It was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed".⁶ Subhash also never forgets the tragedy and the reason for the death of his brother resulting in nostalgia in his life, because his brother's

wife and daughter were also with him in America. Apart from it, the treatment of the Indians in America leads to nostalgia in their lives. One can see through the text clearly about such situations:

“Impractically, she’d remained a citizen of her birthplace. She was still a green-card holder, renewing her Indian passport when it expired. But she had never returned to India. It meant standing in separate lines when she travelled, it meant extra questions these days, fingerprints when she re-entered the United States from abroad. But she was always welcomed back, ushered through”.⁷

Mistaken Identities

Likewise, there is one more situation in which she is to be picked up by a driver for a lecture. But, when the driver reaches there, he misunderstands Gauri to be a servant and instead asks her to inform the owner of the house that he has reached the place to take her. Such situations do help in the feelings of nostalgia for their homes in the Diaspora.

“Her appearance and accent caused people to continue to ask her where she came from, and some to form certain assumptions. Once, invited to give a talk in San Diego, she’d been picked up by a driver the university had sent, so that she would be spared the effort of driving herself. She had greeted him at the door when he rang the bell. But the driver had not realized, when she told him good morning, that she was his passenger. He had mistaken her for the person paid to open another person’s door. Tell her, whenever she’s ready, he’d said”.⁸

Ever Present Nostalgia

Further, Gauri’s nostalgia in the USA was expressed in number of ways one of which is as mentioned below:

“She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end”.⁹

The following text depicts the feelings of nostalgia in Subhash when he was studying in America:

“Here, each day, he remembered how he’d felt those evenings he and Udayan had snuck into the Tolly Club”.¹⁰

A Classic of Nostalgia and Love

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* is a classic in itself depicting nostalgia and feelings of love for their own country among the immigrants. Even strong and positive efforts for assimilation in a foreign land among the first generation immigrants cannot eradicate feelings of nostalgia for their homeland.

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