



The Lowland: How the Political becomes Personal

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Abstract

Nation, culture and society are the pillars which shape identity of a person. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* weaves in historical, cultural, and political context into the lives of the characters and investigates the lasting impact of loss of lives due to political violence on families during an insurgency. Udayan, the main protagonist in this novel, was so blinded in the quest to change the society that he destroys not only his life but also wrecks the life of his family members. The paper will try to explore the situations which compelled Udayan, to join the movement and the consequences of his involvement. The main crux of this paper is to explore how politics moulded the identity and beliefs of Udayan, his perspectives and dreams, drifting him away from his family, leading to his untimely death and changing the life of his family members using Karl Marx's 'Theory of Social Change' according to which due to the continued exploitation of a capitalist regime, the working classes eventually become aware and rebel against capitalism and that class consciousness was fundamental to social change.

Keywords: *Naxalism, Personal ties, Revolt, Fraternal bond, Feudal laws*

Full Text

The Lowland is a novel written by an Indian American novelist Jhumpa Lahiri which was published in 2013. Set in both India and America, *The Lowland* seeks to explore the downsides of idealistic love that can last long past death. The first half of the novel talks about the involvement of the protagonist Udayan in the Naxalite Movement, while the second part depicts the aftershocks that the family had to face because of Udayan's death.

From their childhood, Subhash and Udayan had always been together backing each other when they were in trouble, they could not imagine their lives without each other. "You're the other side of me, Subhash. It's without you that I'm nothing. Don't go" (Lahiri 30). In spite of their differences in the outlook towards life they shared a very special bond. They went to the same school, played together and were inseparable. They were admitted to the city's best college; Subhash majored in chemical engineering while Udayan majored in physics. However their happiness was short lived. Things took a turn when Udayan heard about the spread of the Naxalbari unrest on the radio. After listening to this, he was so engulfed by the movement that for him family became an obligation. He started living a discrete life which created a rift between him and Subhash. Subhash had no interest in the politics of that time yet just to be there for his brother he went with him to meet his friends. The talk which Udayan and his friends had about how the CPI (M) was misusing its power and the need for a new political party which would stand by the poor did not inspire him as much as it did Udayan. "Though Subhash was also present, though he sat beside Udayan, he felt invisible. He wasn't convinced that an imported ideology could solve India's problems. Though a spark had been lit a year ago, he didn't think a revolution would necessarily follow". (Lahiri 28)

This ideological difference created a drift between the two brothers. Udayan felt that the violent actions taken by the sharecroppers was justified because for years they had been suppressed by the rich landlords and the government did not do anything to improve their situation. Subhash, on the other hand felt that violence would not result in any change and that the movement did not have any future. Udayan started keeping secrets from Subhash not telling him about how he was secretly working for Naxalite Movement as he felt that he would not understand him.

Hearing the news about the inhuman actions taken by the state government to put an end to the peasants protest made Udayan question the very essence of democracy. The political turmoil which took place in Calcutta in 1960's made him join the revolution. Naxalism was at its peak during the 1960's and was successful in grabbing the attention of the educated youth. According to Udayan "War will bring the revolution; revolution will stop the war" (Lahiri 38). This was what most

of the youth felt about the Naxalite movement. They felt that the war between the state and them would bring about a positive change in the country. It also depicts how popular the revolution was for the youth. Udayan like many other youth of that time was fascinated and drawn by the ideology of Naxalism and wanted to make India into an equalitarian society. One of the reason why the educated youth joined the Naxalite movement was because their anger and angst was given a vent through this uprising. For the first time in West Bengal, the youngsters succeeded in penetrating into the inner core of a movement. Earlier every political party had just used them as puppets- for raising slogans, gathering crowd and cheering during political rally. Udayan felt that the injustices that the peasants had to endure from the rich landlords were inhumane and against the notion of democracy. They were made to work for long hours and were not given appropriate wages. The revolt began when one of the sharecropper was beaten up brutally by the landlord's thugs because he was cultivating the field from which he was barred. Because of the suppression and injustices done by the landlords and because the police was not ready to intervene in the matter, the sharecroppers started protesting against the landlords by using violent tactics. They burned houses and deeds of their former employers and acquired land forcibly. Udayan was angry with the way the government was handling the entire situation by giving orders to the police and the paramilitaries to kill anybody they found suspicious. The two brothers always debated whether the approach adopted by the Naxalites was apt or not. Both felt that the injustice done by the landlords was unacceptable but Udayan became so deeply involved by the movement that he forgot about the effect it could have on his family. The fact that Udayan supported the violent approach is evident when he tells Subhash that "They rose up they risked everything. People with nothing, People those in power do nothing to protect." (Lahiri 24). This clearly illustrates his support of the Naxalite movement. He joined the Naxalite Movement mainly to improve the plight of the rural poor. Just like many other people, even Udayan blamed the state government of Bengal led by Ajoy Mishra, for the rising violence and not keeping its pre-poll promises. In one of his letters to Subhash, Udayan told him about the progress of Naxalism in Calcutta. He wrote

"Here developments are encouraging. A Red Guard is forming, traveling to villages, propagating Mao Tse-tung's quotations. Our generation is the vanguard; the struggle of students is part of the armed peasant struggle, Majumdar says. You'll come back to an altered country, a more just society, I'm confident of this" (Lahiri 38).

This instance clearly depicts the faith that Udayan had in the Marxist ideologies of leaders like Kanu Sanyal, Charu Majumdar he was optimistic about the change that the revolution would bring. After seeing the incompetency of the government Udayan full-fledged took part in the movement painting slogans, going to villages

to spread word about the movement and taking part in the discussions about the future of the movement with his likeminded friends like Kanu Sanyal, Sinha and a lot of other students.

“The small smoky room was filled mostly with students. The meeting was orderly, run like a study session. A wispy-haired medical student named Sinha assumed the role of professor. The others were taking notes. They distributed the latest copies of *Deshabrati* and *Liberation*.”(Lahiri 27).

Udayan’s involvement with the Naxalite Movement grew day by day which worried Subhash .Out of concern for his safety when Subhash asked him if he was painting slogans in order to make people aware about their ideologies he bluntly replied that if the leaders of CPI (M) can put slogans, so can they. “The ruling class puts its propaganda everywhere. Why should they be allowed to influence people and no one else?” (Lahiri 28)

Lack of faith in the government, unemployment and social injustice were also major reasons why youngsters started joining the movement. Unhappy with the way the government misused its power by making illegal arrests and killing innocents without proof, the students from the various colleges joined the movement and protested against the government by displaying banners, enacting street plays etc.

On hearing the radio as to how the government ordered officers/ police to raid the villages, and kill people if they refused to listen, Udayan became angry at the state government led by Ajoy Mishra to take such inhuman measures. The report had shocked them both, but Udayan was reacting as if it were a personal affront, a physical blow. (Lahiri 24)

He could not believe the turn that the Naxalite revolution had taken. He believed in the ideology of the movement and wanted it to transform India. Magazines like *Deshabrati* and *Liberation* which republished articles from Chinese Communist magazine kindled his hope. . He fought with his father because he did not support the Naxalite movement. According to Udayan “Naxalbari is an inspiration, it’s an impetus for change.” (Lahiri 25) .Fascinated by the movement, he started reading more books and articles pertaining to the Naxalite movement. “The reactionary government of India has adopted the tactics of killing the masses; they are killing them through starvation, with bullets.”(Lahiri 26). He stated painting Naxalite slogans on the wall “He was writing, in English,” Long live Naxalbari” (Lahiri 29). Udayan being a pro Maoist blamed US for the problems which India was facing and did not want Subhash to go to US .When Subhash told him that he was planning on going to the US to pursue his higher studies, he reprimanded him saying “How can you walk away from what’s happening? There, of all

places?” (Lahiri 29). He could not understand how Subhash could leave his country and parents behind.

Udayan fell in love with Gauri who was one of his friend’s sister. What made him fall in love with Gauri was their common interest in philosophy and politics. They used to debate about political issues. “They exchanged opinions about the limits of political freedom, and whether freedom and power meant the same thing. About individualism, leading to hierarchies, about what society happened to be at the moment, and what it might become.” (Lahiri 48).

A few days before Durga Puja, Subhash received a telegram from India stating that Udayan was dead. When Subhash reached home he was surprised to see his parent’s behaviour. Nobody greeted him or asked him about his well-being. They were still in shock and numb after the manner in which their young son was killed in cold blood before their eyes. Still in mourning, they didn’t want to talk about the circumstances in which Udayan died, so when Subhash inquired about it, his mother scolded him for being insensitive. Later on Subhash learnt about how the Naxalite movement had taken a violent turn, the naxalites burned records, raised red flags, fired pipe guns, hid bombs in public places and started killing members of opposition party CPI(M). They also seized control of a few places and declared them red zones. In order to handle the situation, the police were given the permission to enter homes without warrants and arrest and kill young men without charges, based only on suspicion. While searching Udayan’s house the police had found a diary in which he had sketched the map of Tolly Club and also contained equations for making a bomb. The police interrogated Udayan and were satisfied by his reply. But things changed when Udayan injured his hand in the process of detonating the bomb near Tolly Club, thus making him a suspect. He was now kept under surveillance.

Subhash did not like the way his parents treated Gauri. She was not allowed to eat with them, wore white sari, stayed in a separate room on the second floor and his parents did not talk to her. He defended her and tried to make her comfortable. Initially she was reluctant to talk about Udayan but gradually she opened up and told Subhash how Udayan was killed by the central reserve police in front of their eyes. The police barged into the house looking for Udayan and when they couldn’t find him they threatened to kill them all if he didn’t turn himself in. When he surrendered, they took him to an open field opposite their house and shot him in front of his family member’s. The police did not return his body and when asked, refused to accept that such an incident had ever happened. “The body was not returned to them. They were never told where it had been burned. When her father-in-law went to the police station, seeking information, seeking some explanation, they denied any knowledge of the incident.” (Lahiri 79) Incidents like

these were very common as the police was given unwanted power and they were not answerable to the public. The government conveniently used the term 'Naxal' to refer to the people who questioned the decisions taken by the government and put them behind bars even without proper interrogation. This is depicted in 'The Lowland' where the police were making arbitrary arrests without any interrogation and proof and most of the convicts were executed even without a judicial trial. Udayan suffered from the same fate in the novel.

Udayan played a major role in shaping the identities of his family members. Even after Subhash married Gauri and gave her the independence to do whatever she wanted to, she was dissatisfied. She respected Subhash for taking her away from Calcutta where she had to endure a lot of problems, but could not love him the way she loved Udayan. Subhash's commitment that he would raise the child as his own could not please her. "Your brother was supposed to be here, she added. This child should have been his responsibility, whether he wanted it or not." (Lahiri 98). This reflects the anger which Gauri had because Udayan left her alone to raise the child. Subhash married his brother's widow Gauri out of a sense of responsibility and love for his brother. He tried his best to make Gauri happy and comfortable in the new place but in vain. He hoped that after the birth of the child they would come close but that too did not happen when she heard in the news about how leaders like Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar were tortured in the prison, she was reminded of Udayan. She wanted him back in her life desperately. "Even now, part of Gauri continued to expect some news from Udayan. For him to acknowledge Bella, and the family they might have been." (Lahiri 110). Even though she tried to love Bella, she could not because she reminded her of Udayan.

Bela was more close to Subhash than to Gauri. Subhash used to pick her up from her school, made her hair, got her dressed up for the school, played with her, he loved her like his own daughter. But in spite of that he felt guilty for not being able to tell Bela the truth. He was haunted by Udayan's ghost as he felt that he betrayed his brother by marrying his wife. He was also afraid as to what would happen if Bela found out that Subhash was her uncle and not her father.

Years after Udayan's death, Bijoli still could not come to terms that he was dead. She suffered from PTSD. She went to the pond everyday where Udayan was killed and place flowers at the plaque. She waited for Udayan to appear amid the water hyacinth and walk toward her. "It is safe now, she tells him. The police have gone. No one will take you away. Come quickly to the house". (pg. 134) "Udayan's ghost does lurk, inside the house and around it, in and around the enclave" (127) she could hear him call out her name, she sees him coming into view, approaching the house after a long day at college. He walks through the swinging doors into the courtyard, a book bag over his shoulder, still clean-shaven, focused on his studies,

eager to settle down at his desk, telling her he's hungry, thirsty for tea, asking why she hasn't already put the kettle on. (Lahiri 128) When her husband suggests moving in to a new house, Bijoli refuses because she did not want to leave the place where Udayan was born and brought up. These instances depict the impact that Udayan's death had on his mother who refused to accept that her son was dead, she still longed for him to return.

Bela is a child of a broken family and turns out to be a very independent person who doesn't rely on family. Bela unwittingly becomes much like Udayan, a sort of activist motivated by a deep need to educate and help others. She wanders around as a farmworker. At first, Subhash is a little concerned about how Bela is bent upon destroying the stability, he had worked so hard to provide her, but gradually he realizes that it was a part of her nature. Bella becomes much like Udayan, but unlike her father, she is not a blind optimist in sway to ideology or speeches. She is not interested in formal education. She is into organic farming and helps the poor to grow their own food. Bela's nomadic life suits her. She finds a shared accommodation in a house in Brooklyn and walks to a dilapidated playground she is working on turning into a vegetable garden. She teaches teenagers, seniors, does supervising and overseeing. She lives with ten others, sharing time, space and occasional meals with them. Being a witness to Gauri and Subhash's failed marriage, she avoids commitment. Her abiding relationship is to the Earth itself. Later on she gives birth to a daughter, and a ray of hope appears when she is ready to let her mother Gauri have a relationship with her granddaughter. Bela's rebellion is more constructive than her father, who had to pay with his life for his conviction. Her father had used violence to redress social inequities and to voice his inner frustration, but Bela uses ways that will protect, heal and help our disintegrating and degenerating world to grow into a better and just world. All these instances depict the scars that Udayan had permanently left on the family members because of his involvement in the Naxalite movement.

India has altered lot since 1970, when the movement began. It is more confident, socially mobile, and ambitious and has opened avenues of progress to a lot of people but it is still not a just society. Economic reforms have improved the living standards of a lot of people but millions still continue to live in abject poverty. Farmers still commit suicides, crushed under debt which they are not able to pay. The marginalised groups like the tribals, Dalits and Adivasis are the new victims. Even though their ideology remains the same, the approach has changed. Today the Maoists have access to ammunitions and latest warfare equipment's which they use against the state.

The main reason why people are still joining the Naxalite movement is because it claims to fight for the rights of the poor and the marginalized sections of society.

To overthrow the Indian state is still their stated goal. Their root grievance i.e. gross economic injustice is the same as that of the original Naxalites, but now they are also fighting the mining companies who are eager to extract the billions of dollars' worth of minerals in the forests where Adivasis (or India's indigenous tribal people) subsist without basic services. The negative side of this struggle is that many innocent civilians get killed in the crossfire, extortion from rich traders and destruction of public property. The Naxalite Movement today is concentrated mainly in the tribal and rural areas because they are still backward and lack even the basic facilities. Poverty and exploitation by the mining companies is also a factor due which they use militant tactics. The paramilitary and police forces have continued the atrocities forcing many tribals to turn to Maoists for protection, thus keeping the issue still burning.

I believe that literature enriches readers. Literature fosters personal and cultural pride within readers and sparks cultural awareness, tolerance, mutual respect, and a sense of understanding among various readers from diverse backgrounds. A wide range of literature that offers stories and ideas can promote interest in and increase the level of sensitivity towards problems that have an impact on the lives of people. Good literature makes readers to wonder, inquire and invent. Literature can fuel the imagination to show us possibilities instead of boundaries. To respond to literature is to envision alternatives. The *Lowland* is a novel that evokes sensitivity to social issues. Writers not only have a right to comment on issues of race, class, and gender—they have a responsibility to do so. And Lahiri being a responsible writer tells the story of *The Lowland*, so that readers become aware of the circumstances that lead to and resulted in a mass movement like Naxalism. She gives the reader a glimpse into the lives of the so called activists. Idealism has always attracted youth, their enthusiasm for change has many a times given birth to mass movements, and India's Freedom Struggle is one example. The enthusiasm of the youth is perfectly justified and appreciated as long as it contributes towards national integration and unity, however the same zeal when focused on attaining ulterior motives guided by regional interests and feeling becomes a source of concern and sometimes the social wellbeing and security of people is compromised. The Naxal movement is one such movement that has turned the remote tribal areas of our country into training camps, where youth is trained to fight against the state. The *Lowland*, tells a story about how this politics affect the personal life of Udayan and his family. A study of this novel will help us understand the thought process of the idealist youth. By bridging our understanding of diverse groups, literature can help us to create a better and just society.

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