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Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* as a Tragedy of Relation

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Abstract

Displacement in all the cases proves painful. It always bears smell of agony and anguish. In this way, any kind of break away from a unitary body happens always painfully. In the cases of diasporic and nomadic folks, the situation usually gets grim time to time. They painfully manage the emotional pendulum of their lives across the borders. They constantly try to negotiate with centre from the periphery (that is, where they stay) but occasional disturbances cause emotional

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breakdown rising up to the level of trauma. Displacement occurs due to some disturbances and it carries all the way the memories of things either seen or thought at the mind's level.

Keywords: Diaspora, alienation, crisis.

The term 'diaspora' has now widened its scope of meanings. It is extensively used to denote political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, expellees, asylum-seekers, knowledge-seekers, guest workers, racial and ethnic minorities who still strongly feel and maintain emotional relationship with their land of origin through various cultural practices and ways of life. The term diaspora immediately conjures up the image of a journey. But this journey is altogether different one. Diasporic journeys are about settling down and putting roots or 'staying put' elsewhere. (Brah 182)

Jhumpa Lahiri in the novel *The Lowland* breathlessly recounts the diasporic lives. She in the novel in fact made us accept the view that alienation-isolation as the necessary qualification for diasporas. Her women manage the diasporic settings differently compared to that of their partners. Their acculturation looks slightly painful. All diasporas share and carry a common history of unfinished shifting and setting. 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. Her characters' sole problem is to make a balance between internal and external mental conflicts that the host settings brewed up.

Jhumpa Lahiri in *The Lowland: A Fiction* (2013) takes readers right away to the 'lowland' to the East of Tolly Club located in Tollygunge, a suburb of Calcutta. Past the lowland there existed a open space where Mitra brothers used to go for playing football. Subhash and

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Udayan were two brothers of similar 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. They were sons to a simple clerk in Indian Railways department, and a seamstress named Bijoli (their mother). Both started their formal schooling from a Bengali medium school. Once, Udayan listened to Bismillah a caddy of the club telling that over the club field, so many golf balls lay simply that he used to sell off. Under the impression, Udayan took the initiative to enter the Tolly Club. By the help of putting iron and kerosene tin both managed to climb over the fence. In wake of Partition, 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 to prevent any intrusion into the club. Having entered the club, their eyes surprised to see the dashing 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. Both boys were highly sharp and they proved their talent at their schools.

In 1967, they began to listen about Naxalbari movement to radio. Naxals were demanding ownership rights for sharecroppers. 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 ruling party led by Ajoy Mukherjee. The United Front came into power that it would abolish large-scale landholdings having with few people. Landowners were being abducted and killed. What have State and Central governments done in response?

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. (23)

Udayan and Subhash both took it altogether as a shock. But Udayan took it emotionally. 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. (23)

Udayan approves of Naxalbari for its demand of the abolition of arbitrary ownership. He even criticizes central government's slackness and looking for solution and support from the United States of America, and USSR. Udayan felt India still in the bondage of the British slavery. Later on Udayan actively involved himself into the uprising against the government. He made many posters and affixed them here and there in the city. Subhash who was practical minded, 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 flatly and told Subhash that you would never come back if you went there. Udayan took a job of tutoring.

By early 1968, Subhash set out 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, cast-system etc. Another man named Narsimhan from Madras India, the professor of economics married to Kate, an American whom he met there. Narsimhan still know few words of Bengali. Meanwhile, Udayan married

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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 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, 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 told her that he did not want a family before his elder brother. 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:

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. Both within her and remote. 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 she'd just flown across. (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, 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." (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. (128)

Gauri kept using her Indian clothes and ways of life. Subhash as a dear and dutiful husband helped her lot feel happy and comfortable. He even suggested a name Bela for would-be baby. 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 to have a baby of his own with her. But she never allowed him except mechanically. She has little emotion for him. Slowly time passed, Bela began learning language and admitted into a school located nearby, having an identity card bearing the names of Subhash Mitra and Gauri Mitra. Subhash has a dream of his own baby with Gauri which to the lost remained merely dream. Gradually, gap between them began increasing.

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None prefer to tease anyway. No doubt, their relation was not based on emotion. It was “a connection at once false and true.” (156) Meanwhile, Gauri got a chance for doctoral programme in Boston. Subhash did not oppose her anyway. Few months later, information came to Subhash that his father passed away. 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 her husband's death, a letter from Subhash came to Tollygunge mentioning his possible visit 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 and so forth. After a week, Subhash began to stay outside in the name of few lectures. 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. Finally, they returned to Rhode Island finding Gauri absent. Bela found a letter which was telling about Gauri's departure for California where she was hired to teach students of a college. She there, settled with least remorse. 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. He received such a deep emotional injury that was never to be recovered. Gauri so far seems 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. And 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." (237) Here in California, Gauri recalls her haunting past relation with Udayan. "Without that there would be nothing to haunt her. No grief." (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. (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." (242)

After many years gap, one day he came to know Richard Grifalconi his university friend, passed away. Like him, he would also leave everything except one thing as a secret which he should reveal immediately. The secret that Bela was daughter of Udayan not his was like a heavy stone put on his chest. Subhash began thinking about his property to be handed to 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

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bears names of Subhash Mitra and Gauri Mitra. It was managed by their relatives 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.” (275)

Subhash via web 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 the poor people.

To the conclusion, it can be said that Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is a narration of the agony and anguish her characters undergo. 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. Gauri appears sheer selfish and opportunist. She tried hard to shun all her Indian ethnicity but failed largely. Bela is just victim to her parents' unhappiness and estrangement. Vijay Mishra's hypothesis that 'all diasporics are unhappy' (1) is one hundred percent correct. Her all characters are emotionally broken. It seems that alienation is part and parcel of their lives. It circulates into their veins constantly. The trio of trauma, exile, and alienation pervades the entire novel.

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