

THE LOW LAND: A FAMILY SAGA BY JHUMPA LAHIRI

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Abstract

The Lowland is Lahiri's fourth book. It was shortlisted for the National Book Award in 2013, the Man Booker Prize 2013 and the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction 2014. She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2012. In this novel, Lahiri goes back to post-independence India, but draws attention to the poverty that determined young and idealist intellectuals to envision violence against wealthy landowners and then self-sacrifice as the only possible solutions to change the system. The tumultuous political context in the wake of colonial rule in India marks the personal saga of a family deeper than in any other Lahirian book. As Stephanie Merritt remarks in her review for *The Guardian*, "*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." The plot-generating chronotope (literally meaning time-space) in *The Lowland* can be summarized as follows: the two main characters leave Calcutta physically, but temporally they remain stuck in Tollygunge. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, chronotopes "are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative" The knot of this Lahirian text is tied at the intersection of the spatial distance from the homeland and the temporal proximity to the traumatic events of the Indian past.

Key Words: class, family, home town, India, lives, saga, world,

Introduction

The central difference compared to the other books is that the spotlight is on India, the country left behind presumably in search of a happier life abroad. The novel starts and ends in India, the title refers to a lowland in the neighbourhood of Tollygunge, and the motto reads: "let me return to my home town entombed / in grass as in a warm and high sea" (Giorgio Bassani, "Saluto a Roma"). There are numerous other chronotopic references and flashbacks to Calcutta, the Communist Party, and the Tolly Club (a recurrent symbol representing class difference and the colonial legacy). In fact, the whole plot hinges on some incidents that take place in India during a brief time span in the 1960s.

Growing up in Tollygunge, Subhash and Udayan are put in the same class at a Bengali medium school for boys. The two brothers learn how the neighborhood was formed: around 1770, the English “started clearing the waterlogged jungle, laying down streets”. Major William Tolly makes shipping trade possible between Calcutta and East Bengal; later, when the English shift back to the center of Calcutta, Tollygunge becomes populated by Muslims. After Partition some Muslims stay behind, and the small mosque at the crossroads of Deshapran Sashmal Road remains a local landmark. In the early 1930s the tramline is extended so that the British can easily reach the Tolly Club, “to escape the city’s commotion, and to be among their own” In the 1950s Tollygunge is a rather poor neighborhood, with lower middle-class Indian families living in simple huts, in stark contrast to the exclusive Tolly Golf Club. Besides the golf field it has a swimming pool, a tennis court, stables, as well as a billiards and bridge rooms; it is restricted to rich British- educated Indians and visiting foreigners. Characteristically, a portrait of Queen Elisabeth II still hangs on the wall. Living in its proximity, Subhash and Udayan often jump the walls of the Tolly Club in order to explore this forbidden space. Udayan, the younger brother, is always the one who initiates the trespassing. Subhash prefers to spend his time studying the flora and fauna of the nearby ponds, and he is often frustrated with Udayan’s daring and with his lack of it. Nevertheless, he has “no sense of himself without Udayan. From his earliest memories, at every point, his brother was there”.

Jhumpa Lahiri may not be eager to promote herself as the exquisite image of an immigrant writer, unmistakably in *The Lowland*, Calcutta of the 70's with its Naxalite movement and the Rhode Island of America have been fused inseparably. Calcutta(or Kolkata), as she reveals, is at the same time absent and vibrantly present in her life. "The impact that the absence of a place can have on a person is an intrinsic part of my existence. I do not know a world without it", said the writer in Jaipur Literature Festival, 2014 (*India Today*). Thus, there is not a single element of surprise that one of the major settings of *The Lowland* is Calcutta of 1970's. The novel in fact casts its net wider and tries to offer a glance to the readers at the Naxalite movements of late 1960's and turbulent 70's which altered and trembled the lives of Bengal in many ways.

The novelist recollects the source of the political plot of the novel on a tragic incident heard by her during one of her many visits to her father's ancestral home in Kolkata. It was the story of two brothers who were suspected of being Naxalites and killed by the police in front of their families. "The story was haunting and it stayed with me for years", said the author in Jaipur Literature Festival (*India Today*). Elsewhere, she almost replicates it: "That was the scene that, when I first heard of it, when it was described to me, was so troubling and so haunted me-and ultimately inspired me to write the book " (Neary).

The Naxal era, in fact, proves to ignite the imagination of the Bengali writers in different periods of writing. The Bengali readers are already familiar with the sorrowful account of Broti, and his mother Sujata Chatterjee(in *Hajar Churashir Maa* or *The Mother of 1084* by Mahasweta Devi) or the life story of Animesh Mitra (in *Kalbela* by Samaresh Majumdar) or in more recent times, the conflicts of Panchali, Sukanti, Dronacharya and Nirupam (in *Aatta- Natar Surjyo* by Ashok Kumar Mukhopadhyay). The last work even transports the reader from the Naxalite uprising of 1970's to the anti-establishment movement of 2008-10 at Lalgarh, West Midnapur of West Bengal. Nevertheless, for a non-Indian English reader, the background of Naxalite movement is almost a novel experience. Lahiri's novel at least ventures to provide a glimpse of the Naxalite uprising of 60's and 70's.

On the Acknowledgements part of *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri mentions seven books, one journal and one webpage to her understanding of the Naxalite movement. An interview with Cressida Leyshon (to whom the novelist also acknowledges her gratitude) reveals that the author "wanted to understand that history completely and digest it" (Leyshon) before she started to write.

"Periodically I would read them. And I would take notes, and I would put them away. And I felt that I had to keep doing this over a period of many years... The initial phase was a lot of research, but it remained opaque, and then slowly the research, the history, became more clear to me, and the clearer it became, the less I felt that I needed it." (Leyshon) Although a critical reading of the novel may make one skeptical of these claims as one may wonder whether Lahiri's pre-writing researches were sufficient enough to produce a lively portrayal of the youths like Udayan who were instrumental to the Naxalite movement of that time.

Lahiri's treatment of the character Gauri seems to be another interesting facet of the novel's political plot. While all the major characters here seem to be rather static, the novelist takes pain to develop the character of Gauri as the novel progresses. Thus the meek and insignificant girl of the first part who, after the tragic death of Udayan, draws our attention and sympathy becomes increasingly opaque when she moves to Rhode Island. She even emotionally detaches herself from her second husband, Subhash and her twelve years old daughter, Bela and abandons them in the name of her career.

This development of her character puts the reader in an apathetic state towards her and we wonder why this character is excluded from the author's sympathy until towards the end of the novel we are informed of Gauri's role, though quite unintentional, in the murder of Nirmal Dey, the policeman as her observations and reports had made it possible for Udayan and his comrades to decide the appropriate day and time to attack. Thus, she too was the partner of that "crime" and though she avoids a similar fate like that of Udayan, the author does not let her go unpunished for her deed.

In a novel like *The Lowland* where politics plays a crucial role, it is expected from the author to portray the political events mainly through the eyes of the characters and by means of their activities. However, in this novel, Naxalite movement is presented mainly through the use of authorial voice. The author simply goes on to describe the political events sometimes in a dispassionate manner and sometimes with her attitudes covertly woven. Sometimes the elements of irony do not evade the attention of a careful reader.

The *Lowland*, steeped in the violent and outlawed Naxalite movement of the 60s, revolves around the lives of brothers Subhash and Udayan, in Kolkata, and the enigmatic Gauri, the woman destined to become the wife of both of them. First, to the charismatic revolutionary younger brother Udayan, whom she loves, and then when pregnant with his child, marries the sedate and moderate scholar Subhash, who studies and lives in Rhode Island, after Udayan is shot by the police. His death, though, remains a mystery that hovers like a jack-in-the-box that threatens to startle the reader at any turn of the page throughout the book. Subhash convinces Gauri to marry him for the sake of the unborn child, even though his parents oppose it. Gauri sees it as an escape from the place where everybody, except her brother, has rejected her, for her alliance with Udayan and his incendiary politics.

In America, Gauri caves in to her first love — the study of philosophy. She starts to focus her attention and more time on taking classes at the local university, even as Subhash becomes the role model of a pristine father to Udayan and Gauri's daughter Bela. His greatest fear is the child coming to know that he is not her real father, even as his marriage to Gauri starts to crumble. Bringing matters to a head are Subhash's ageing parents in Kolkata, whom he finds increasingly hard to ignore, and yearns to take care of.

Conclusion

Lahiri superbly juxtaposes the tug-of-war between Subhash's comfortable life on the East Coast in America versus the debilitating life of his parents on the East Coast in India, where his intrinsic memories also live on, and he cannot tear away from. Like a patch of land at the back of his house in Kolkata, which becomes submerged during the monsoons—a lowland and emerges again when the rains abate, showing also two distinct ponds side by side separated by an embankment, the two cultures he wears and breathes, often become inseparable, distinct at the same time. After the death of Subhash's father, his mother, who is going senile, starts to clean the detritus of the two ponds with her bare hands — the rotten waste she surfaces symbolic of her and her husband's dashed ambitions and hopes of living in a joint family with their sons and families, the modern indestructible plastic refuse uncovered, of the negligence by her sons. Spanning over six decades, the constant flashbacks and non-sequential narrative — used by Arundhati Roy to great effect in *The God of Small Things* — gives *The Lowland* a rhythm similar to a thriller. Lahiri's incisive, detailed prose of small and big tragedies, in the intense minimalist style of Raymond Carver, which lands like snowflakes without leaving traces of water, builds in momentum only as decades go by in the novel.

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