

Covert influence of politics on the lives of Jhumpa Lahiri's characters in *The Lowland*

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Abstract— Many have categorized Jhumpa Lahiri's oeuvre as the "immigrant genre", in which the immigrants search for a location where they can feel at home in their new homeland. All her works explore this element of diaspora where there is a generational tension between immigrant parents and their children, clash of cultures, the conflicts of assimilation, and displacement in their new societies. *The Lowland*, to some part, deals with this usual immigrant experiences, but what sets the novel apart from all her previous works is that it has the complexity of a political novel whereby the writer uses and explores the Naxalite political movement in India as the background on which the main plot of the book drifts. Such subjects have never been covered by Lahiri before. One of the protagonists of the novel joins this movement, and its repercussion on his family members forms the core of the novel. While the writer does not delve into a political discussion of the movement itself, it forms the basis of the whole plot of the novel. It talks about how a person's engagement in the naxalite movement affects a grueling three generations of his family after he is killed by the police. This paper shall therefore focus on the political aspect of the novel by presenting the political and personal side by side and by analyzing how politics affects the personal lives of the characters.

Keywords— Personal, political, Naxalism, revolutionary.

I. INTRODUCTION

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London in 1967 to Indian parents who were from West Bengal. When she was two years old, they migrated to the United States.

The Indian-American writer, Lahiri fits comfortably in the pantheons of Indians writing in English which includes established writers such as Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga and Salman Rushdie.

Lahiri earned her B.A in English literature from Barnard College in 1989, and M. A. in English, M. F. A in Creative Writing, M. A. in Comparative Literature and a Ph. D in Renaissance Studies from Boston University.

In most of her writings, Lahiri talks about the Indians who have migrated to America and the experiences of these migrants in the new land. Lahiri is thus agreed by many to be a writer of immigrants and their experiences. Lahiri's writing is distinguished by her simple language and her characters, mostly Indian migrants to America who must strike a compromise between the cultural values of their original homeland and their adopted new homes. Lahiri's fiction is mostly autobiographical and frequently includes her own experiences as well as the experiences of her parents, friends and acquaintances in

the Bengali communities which she is familiar with. Lahiri examines her characters' struggles, apprehensions, and biases to account the nuances and details of immigrant experiences and behavior. *The Lowland* is a familiar territory in which she is back to telling the story of generations of Indian-American immigrants just as in her earlier books.

Lahiri wrote *The Lowland*, her fourth book in 2013. It was shortlisted for the National Book Award and the Man Booker Prize in 2013, and the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction in 2014. The book, Lahiri says is based on a real tragic incident she first heard about in India during one of her visits there. She says that an incident in which two young brothers were executed in front of their family for getting involved in a revolutionary political movement was described to her. This story, she says troubled and haunted her ultimately inspiring her to write the book.

Lahiri has artistically presented the Naxalite movement of the 1960s and 1970s by perfectly blending fiction and reality, that is, while the Naxalite movement is a true occurrence, it is presented through the lively fictional characters that Lahiri had created just as Rushdie presents the historical events of India through his fictional characters in his *Midnight's Children*. Lahiri has said in an interview that the story is based on a true account in which two brothers joined the movement and are then

killed by the police right in front of their family. But she deviates slightly from the original story in *The Lowland*. While both brothers join the movement and are both killed in the story Lahiri was told, in *The Lowland*, only the younger brother, Udayan, joins the movement and is killed. The elder brother, Subhash lives, yet he bears the brunt of his brother's involvement in the movement. He marries his brother's pregnant widowed wife. The marriage never works. Besides, he also has to raise Udayan's child all alone when Gauri runs away. This forms the main exciting plot of the novel.

The novel noticeably presents political and personal side by side which makes the plot of the story more interesting. Anita Felicelli (2013) maintains that:

The pleasure of *The Lowland* is the tension between the political and the personal, the novel's consistent demonstration that the moment may be all that is, but that our individual choices matter intensely, that the knitting together of our relationships through both personal and political actions are crucial to the stories of our lives.

Naxalism started in 1967 as a dispute between a sharecropper and a landlord. But like wild fire, it quickly spread and became a full-scale militant insurgency where the farmers, armed with their primitive weapons, bows and arrows came together in collaboration with communist activists and revolted against the centuries of oppression by the rich landlords, marking the beginning of an organized armed struggle and the beginning of the political movement. The conflict is named Naxal movement because it started from a small village called Naxalbari in West Bengal.

Rancière Jacques, in his article "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization" states that the political is the encounter between two heterogeneous processes. The first process is that of governing, and it entails creating community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions. He calls this process policy. The second process is that of equality. It consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal. However in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, both these processes are broken or non-existent, which ultimately led the farmers to revolt in demand of equal share of wealth.

On the birth of the Naxalite movement, Raman Dixit in his article "Naxalite Movement in India: The State's Response" writes "The young and fiery ideologies of the Marxist-Leninist movement in India formed the CPI (M-L), envisioning a spontaneous mass upsurge all over India that would create a liberated zone." He further maintains

that the government initially viewed the uprising as a normal law and order problem which could be put to end in a short span of time. It did not analyse the causes of the movement or its scope. But when the government realized the grave danger that the movement posed to the whole nation, it acted out to put the revolution under control immediately. Through her fictional characters, Jhumpa Lahiri highlights the suppression of the uprising:

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 (Lahiri 22).

Yet the fact remains that even after four decades, the movement continues to be one of the greatest threats to the Indian nation state. The movement was never truly brought under the control of the state, let alone wipe it out in its entirety. In his *Naxalism: The Maoist Challenge to the Indian State*, Bendfeldt (2010) asserts that:

the Naxalite armed movement is a serious threat to the Indian state and that it is based on Maoist ideology and gains its strength through mobilizing the poor, underprivileged, discouraged and marginalized, especially in rural India.

He figures that they are now active in 223 districts in 20 states and the strength of their armed cadres is estimated between 10,000 and 20,000.

In a way the Naxalite movement in India was an Indian variant of a number of political upheavals that were going on in some other parts of the world around the same time, noticeably the new wave of feminist movement in America. With the publication of an essay titled "the personal is political," by Carol Hanisch in 1969, feminist movement gained a new momentum. This feminist movement in America emphasized on the personal problems of women being political and the need to address those problems through larger political participation and willingness. Talking about the 1969 essay by Hanisch, Behrent (2016) in *The personal and the political: Literature and feminism* writes:

'Personal is political' transformed consciousness by insisting on the need to understand the social, economic, cultural, and political oppression of women as the basis for all personal problems that afflicted individual women. At its most extreme, however, it could

also lead to a rigid understanding of feminism that insisted that no person could fight a form of oppression he or she did not personally experience.

Put simply, the feminist movement in America demanded that the oppression of women in any form was the basis of all problems. But in India though the Naxalite movement rose on a similar principle as the feminist movement in America, that is, the demand for equality by the peasants in West Bengal, the discussion shall focus not on the movement itself but on the engagement of Udayan, one of the principal characters in the novel who took the political uprising to be personal, and the consequences he brings upon the three generations of his family because of this involvement.

The Naxalite movement of the 60s to 70s is shown in the novel through its main characters that get themselves involved directly or suffer the agony of someone they love being killed for getting involved in the movement. The characters of the story live in Calcutta where the movement has become well known by the late 1960s: "On Lenin's birthday, April 22, 1969, a third communist party was launched in Calcutta. The members called themselves Naxalites, in honor of what happened in Naxalbari. Charu Majumdar was named the general secretary. Kanu Sanyal the party chairman." (Lahiri 23). The official name of the party was CPI (M-L) the acronym of Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist. So it was only natural that Naxalism was at its peak during this period in West Bengal, Calcutta in particular where all the leaders of the party were based. Perhaps it was the only place in India which saw the repercussions of Naxalism at its worst, and so the setting of the novel is perfectly chosen by the writer to depict the experiences of the movement through the characters who actually lived the movement.

Udayan, the younger of the two brothers in the novel was always radical in his outlook. When the brothers first hear about the movement in Naxalbari on the radio in 1967, Udayan felt himself already taking part in the movement. To him, it was an opportunity to turn the country for the better by fighting against injustice and unequal distribution of wealth. The readers can only assume that Udayan is the representation of thousands other young and zealous people who have been swayed to take part in the movement and do something worthwhile for the country in their lives. In a rally in Calcutta, Kanu Sanyal pronounced these words:

By the year 2000, that is only thirty-one years from now, the people of the whole world will be liberated from all kinds of exploitation of man

by man and will celebrate the worldwide victory of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Tse-tung's thought. (Lahiri 33)

Like thousands other young blood, ready to do anything for a cause they thought was worth fighting for, Udayan was deeply involved in the movement.

By 1970, the Naxalites started operating underground. Their tactics was guerrilla warfare. They took Mao Tse-tung as their ideological leader for the movement which advocated the overthrowing of the government and upper classes by force and the uprising became violent. The author, once again shows her sentiments towards these revolutionaries and describes their tactics and murky practices in her authorial voice:

They intimidated voters, hoping to disrupt the elections. They fired pipe guns on the streets. They hid bombs in public places, so that people were afraid to sit in a cinema hall, or stand in line at a bank. Then the targets turned specific; unarmed traffic constables at busy intersections, wealthy businessmen, certain educators, and members of the rival party, the CPI (M). The killings were sadistic, gruesome, intended to shock (Lahiri 87).

In one such act, Udayan is directly involved in the killing of a police constable and is thus pursued by the police. And to counter such act of terrorism, an old law that authorized the police to enter any homes without a warrant and arrest young men without charges was reinstated. The law had been introduced by the British to counter any freedom movement. Reinstating the law was felt necessary to cut off the legs of the naxalite movement. In one such raid, Udayan is arrested from his hiding place near his house and is executed by the police right in front of his family. And in presenting this, Lahiri describes the struggles of three generations of Udayan's family to come to terms and navigate through the hollowness he created in their lives with his death.

After Udayan's death, Subhash marries Gauri, to save her from the torture of his parents and the frequent police questioning regarding Udayan's revolutionary activities. He takes her away to America where she gives birth to Udayan's child, a daughter they name Bela. The marriage doesn't seem to reverse the fate of Gauri. Somehow she never appears to come out of the doldrums created by the death of her first husband. Perhaps she is never capable of loving someone ever again like she loved Udayan. Subhash could never fill the space left by Udayan. Not even the birth of Bela brings complete joy in her life. Perchance Bela only served as a reminder to her painful past. Gauri thus goes away for good from the lives

of Subhash and her daughter Bela when the two had gone to India to attend the funeral rites of Subhash's father. When Subhash and Bela returned, they found only a note telling them of her choice to go away.

Subhash has his own share of legacy of his brother. By marrying Gauri, the widow of his brother, Subhash had hoped to give a new life, a new beginning, but things don't work out and he is left to bear the responsibility of raising his brother's daughter alone when Gauri leaves them for good in silence. And expectedly, he has to endure the ordeal of having to raise a child in absence of the mother. But he is never deterred in bringing up Bela responsibly.

Bela is the next generation to face the impact of Udayan's revolutionary fanaticism. First, growing up with her mother and Subhash (whom she only thinks of as her father), Bela has only witnessed hollowness in the relationship between her parents. She didn't have the fortune of growing up in loving environment. The relation between Gauri and Subhash had only been like a contract in the most literal sense. There was no emotion attached in their relation. Second, after her mother ran away, Bela had to face the emotional and psychological turmoil of not having both parents by her side. This takes an adverse toll in her life. She doesn't do well in school, and often Subhash is called to the school to discuss matters concerning her behavior. But she lives through them and completes high school. And perhaps in a matter of sheer coincidence, just like her late father, she believes in the equal distribution of wealth and the possibility of improving the world if we worked together. She is a revolutionary just like her father. She believes she had learned enough and doesn't go to college. Instead she said she would do something that would help the poor. Having witnessed the hollow relationship between her parents, she doesn't believe in committed relations. She thus comes home one day, pregnant. When Subhash asks, she doesn't name the father of the child. Thus, Udayan's involvement in revolutionary politics and its covert effects on a grueling three generations of his family are vividly visible till the end of the story, affecting everyone, one way or the other. Talking about the negative consequences of the Naxalite movement on Udayan's family for his involvement in it, Lahiri, in her authorial voice comments,

“Udayan had given his life to a movement that had been misguided, that had caused only damage that had already been dismantled. The only thing he'd altered was what their family had been” (Lahiri 115).

The writer makes clear her thoughts on the actions of Udayan and the burden that his family has to carry because of his actions. But Udayan was aware of what he was doing and the possible consequences that his involvement in the movement would bring on himself and his family. However, he was ready to take that risk for a larger cause. Udayan thus, one day tells Gauri, his wife that certain friends of his have left Calcutta to be among the peasants for the cause of the movement. He asked “would you understand, if I ever needed to do something like that?” (Lahiri 59). He also makes his intentions clear when he tells his brother “if we don't stand up to a problem, we contribute to it, Subhash.” (Lahiri 29). In this way, Udayan had already dedicated his life to the movement from which there was no turning back.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Lahiri speaks about the Naxalite Movement, its founding members Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar as only felt necessary for the plot of the novel to move forward. She stays away from giving any superfluous information from the perspective of her main story, that is, she only wants to talk about the consequences of the movement on a certain family and not on the movement in its entirety. And she is successful in presenting the covert influence of Udayan's political radicalism on his family. Udayan may have thought of changing the country but little did he achieve by joining the revolution. What he did change beyond repair was the fate of his family, especially of his wife Gauri, his brother Subhash, his parents and to a lesser extent even of his daughter Bela, who was yet unborn when he died. This was his legacy to the family. Udayan's family, most importantly his wife Gauri bears the personal punishment of his involvement in the revolutionary politics, for Gauri never gets over Udayan's death, and it affects the rest of her life. Thus almost every member of Udayan's family bears the brunt of his actions which can be felt till the end of the novel.

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