

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* a Glimps of Naxalite Movement

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Abstract: *The Lowland* is the tragic story of two brothers Subhas and Udayan and their wife Gauri. The consequences in the novel were the aftermaths of Udayan's involvement in the naxalite movement. In this Postcolonial novel Jhumpa Lahiri captures the tension and political richness of a certain period which influenced people to join the movement and establish socialism in the country. Udayan's execution before his parents and a pregnant wife brought main changes in the family. Gauri supported Udayan in his naxalite activities hence she presumes responsible for his death.

Keywords: Tragic, Naxalite, Socialism, Confrontation, Exploitative, Revolutionary, Deprived, Insurgent.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lahiri 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

2. FOCUS ON NAXALITE MOVEMENT

Udayan was ready to keep his newly wedded wife away from his parents as he was not a kind of person who believes in joint family but had to take her to some safe shelter as he was not earning to feed her. Gouri's, entry in the family was a shock for Udayan's parents as she was not a very attractive girl moreover; she was a stumbling block in their expectation of grand marriage of their elder son. But still in Udayan's case Bijoli (mother of Subhash and Udayan) was ready to accept Gouri because- "*She'd hoped that having a wife would settle him, that it would distract him from his politics.*" (p. 188) But, Gouri actively supported Udayan in his politics. She used to take tuition of two siblings from where she had to keep a watch on a Police who was the obstacle in Udayan's movement. Beside that she used to carry secrete messages of Udayan for his fellow comrades. Udayan's involvement in a murder of the police brought him in the limelight and ultimately to his destiny. He was executed before the eyes of his parents and neighbors and yes a pregnant wife of which he was not aware of.

Udayan's death brought Subhash from Rhode Island to India to console his parents but seeing him Bijoli was not ready to show any happiness but felt in her heart hatred towards Subhash-

"Rage at Subhash for reminding her so strongly of Udayan, for sounding like him, for remaining a spare version of him. She'd overheard him talking with Gouri, paying attention to her, being kind." (p. 186)

When Subhash told his mother about his marriage decision she bluntly replied- *"He was risking everything, and they were never to enter the house as husband and wife."* (p. 186) Bijoli's intentions here was clear sign of hurting Subhash as well as dissuading him from marriage. She said it because –

"A girl she did not like to begin with, did not want in her family, was going to become her daughter-in-law twice over. She said it because it was Gouri not Bijoli, who contained a piece of Udayan in her womb." (p.186)

The boldness of Bijoli was lost with Udayan's death. What left to her was again supposed to be taken away, this was cause of her worry. The complex structure of Bijoli's thinking leads us to think about the Oedipus complex. She fully meant what she said. In the other parts of novel reader could see that Subhash and Gouri never returned to the Tollygunge and this again was shame for a mother to lose her remaining son-

"They have not returned, either together or separately, to Tollygunge; they have stayed far from it, away. So that she feels the deepest shame a mother can feel of not only surviving one child but losing another, still living." (p.186)

Mr. and Mrs. Mitra never recovered from the shock of Udayan's death and Subhash's marriage to Gouri. Mr. Mitra never talked with Bijoli as he used to talk earlier, he stopped sitting on the terrace from where they witnessed execution of Udayan and he died secluded without the interference of any of his family members.

As bright boys with attentive and good-natured parents, Subhash and Udayan grow up to be promising students of Chemical Engineering and Physics respectively. In 1967 they start hearing about a peasant revolt in Naxalbari, a village in the northern tip of West Bengal where feudalism still reigns. What began with a dispute between a *sharecropper and a landlord* becomes a full-scale militant insurgency with farmers occupying land armed with primitive weapons, carrying red flags, shouting "Long Live Mao Tse-tung." The movement, primarily led by Jongol Saothal, Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal, CPI (M) dissidents, made a revolutionary impact amongst the students and youth, especially within college and university campuses. Civil disobedience and violent protests then began in earnest, as Indians sympathetic to the Naxalites began to see a pattern of events. For them, the shaky postcolonial state built by their timid parents was only a façade for the same old, ugly colonial outpost that made subsistence living for the starving masses contingent upon a corrupt state, exploitive landowners and wealthy moneylenders.

Udayan's involvement with the Naxalites leads to his premature and abrupt execution via police firing squad, which leaves the reader startled and faltering with nearly half the book left to go. Keeping the reader guessing, Lahiri shrouds the events leading up to Udayan's death in mystery, to be fleshed out little by little until everything is revealed in the very last pages. After Udayan's death Subhash returns home to find his parents reserved and even angry for reminding them of Udayan. They try not to speak about Udayan's passing; the only monument to his existence, a small marker of the location where he died, is furnished by the Naxalites and planted in the low land near their house. The insurgency continues, but it is dealt with a major blow by the Indian state and police forces that embrace more authoritarian policing tactics and give up on their democratic pretenses. The violence frustrates the family. They no longer discuss politics, not out of fear, but out of respect for Udayan. The man is remembered by his family, but his painful mission is forgotten. Lahiri offers an unvarnished view of a fallen comrade: Udayan accomplished little in life and even his fellow fighters will forget him soon. His only legacy is his wife, Guari, a philosophy college student who he married in secret, inspired by Mao's criticism of arranged marriages. After Udayan's death, Subhash marries Guari, who is carrying Udayan's unborn child, out of a sense of duty and takes her to Rhode Island where he is studying maritime biology and conducting research. In death, though, Udayan manages to alter the trajectory of his families' lives forever.

Lahiri vividly draws an image of Udayan as the restless youth, who begins championing the Naxalbari cause at home and immersing himself in Marxist theory, listening to news of Che Guevara's guerilla exploits and reading the aphorisms of Mao Tse-tung. To Udayan, CPI (M) was nothing more than the puppets of wealthy landowners, and parliamentary politics have proven futile. Mao and Che's exhortations to bring about a revolution through violent struggle are all that remain for him.

On the contrary, in Subhash, Lahiri presents a more cautious character, sceptical of radical change and uncertain of the future but also cynical about the government. Though he attends a movement meeting with Udayan and paints pro-Naxalbari graffiti with him, Subhash is less affected by the stimulating wave surrounding the Red Corridor and remains more focused on his studies. It was in the year 1969, as Subhash prepares to leave for America to pursue a Ph.D. program, Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal launch the Communist Party of India (Marxist- Leninist), or Naxalites departing from C.P.I. (M). Listening to Sanyal's announcement, Udayan hears him exclaim: "We will certainly be able to make a new sun and a new moon shine in the sky of our great motherland," a revolutionary sentiment that was irresistible to radicals of that era.

Unlike the other insurgencies, the Naxalites managed to win widespread popular support and partial political control across villages in West Bengal where citizens were anticipating a change being disgusted with the revisionary tactics of the Left Front and scared of brutal operation by the congress government. They struggled for a transformative agenda, built on the anti-colonial sentiment that had aimed to redistribute the means of production and farmland to poor workers and share cropping peasants. Civil disobedience and violent protests then began immediately and in a serious manner, as Indians sympathetic to the Naxalites began to see a series of events. For Naxalites, the shaky postcolonial state of India has been just a fascia for the same old, ugly and a fascist colonial outpost that made the living for the starving masses dependent upon a corrupt state, oppressive landowners and affluent moneylenders. Jhumpa Lahiri spares no detail in her evenhanded rendering of the Naxalite's more objectionable tactics:

- 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 nervous to sit in a cinema hall, or stand in line at a bank.
- Then the targets turned specific: Unarmed traffic constables in busy intersections wealthy businessmen, certain educators, members of the rival party, the C.P.I (M).
- The killings were sadistic, gruesome, intended to shock. The wife of the French consul was murdered in her sleep. They'd assassinated Gopal Sen, the vicechancellor of Jadavpur University. They'd killed him on campus while he was taking his evening walk. It was the day before he planned to retire. They'd bludgeoned him with steel bars, stabbing him four times.

Jhumpa Lahiri, in *The Lowland*, Lahiri expertly develops her characters through heartbreak and happiness, through the mundane and dramatic, in which readers cannot stop wondering about them. Besides revolutionary ideals she also contemplates universal themes of human nature; the immigrant experience, familial ties, isolation, love and the desire for companionship. *The Lowland*, on a serious note of pathos, interrogates the lasting impact of loss and political violence on families during the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency of India.

In 1967, in the papers and on All India Radio, they started hearing about Naxalbari, one of the strings of villages in the Darjeeling District, "a narrow corridor at the northern tip of West Bengal. Tucked into the foot-hills of the Himalayas, nearly four hundred miles from Calcutta, closer to Tibet than Tollygunge." (20) Most of the villagers were tribal peasants who worked on tea plantations. For generations they had lived under the feudal system. They were preyed upon by moneylenders, manipulated by wealthy land owners, deprived of subsistence wages, pushed off fields they had cultivated, and denied revenue from crops they had grown. When a sharecropper in Naxalbari tried to plough the land from which he had been illegally evicted, his landlord sent thugs to beat him up and loot his belongings. After this, groups of sharecroppers began retaliating armed with primitive weapons, carrying red flags, shouting "Long Live Mao Tse-tung".(20) They started burning deeds and records that cheated them. The Government authorized about five hundred officers to raid 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." (22)

Both the brothers were speechless and shocked when they heard over the radio how the government arbitrarily brought the rebellion to its end. Udayan, by nature a dynamic idealist, charismatic and impulsive, finds himself propelled by social conscience into the Naxalite movement, a rebellion waged to eradicate inequity and poverty; he will give everything, risk all, for what he believes. He was affected so much by the police action against the sharecroppers that he was reacting as if it were a personal affront: "People are starving and this is their solution, he eventually said. They turn victims into

criminals. They aim guns at people who can't shoot back... This could only be the beginning of ... Something bigger. Something else." (23) True to the spirit of the movement, Udayan, becomes convinced that he should set himself on to better the living conditions of India's poor through violent uprising.

When their father sensed the danger of Udayan's deep emotional involvement in the movement, he accusingly admonished them: " I've already lived through change in this country, ... I know what it takes for one system to replace another. Not you." (23-4) But Udayan persisted, challenging their father, in a way he used to challenge teachers at school. He started reading pamphlets written by Charu Majumdar who said India has turned into nation of beggars and foreigners. The reactionary government of India had adopted the tactics of killing the masses; they are killing them through starvation, with bullets." (24) Lahiri says at an interview, "Udayan and his comrades are "basically kids... I mean, they're college students. And so one can see how a certain ideology can be very attractive, and appear to be the solution, and appear to be the key to solving an enormous problem in a country and a society." (Neary)

His vision of life and reality was born anew in the new ideology of the Naxalbari movement so much so that if he happened to pass through the Tolly Club - where he had once sneaked in to play golf - on his way to or from the tram depot, Udayan called it an affront." People still filled slums all over the city; children were born and raised on the streets. Why were a hundred acres walled off for the enjoyment of a few?" (25) Udayan now considers golf as "the pastime of the comprador bourgeoisie." (25) He said that Tolly Club was a proof that India was still a semi-colonial country, behaving as if the British had never left the place. He used to be out for meetings in a neighbourhood in North Calcutta, to hear a wispy-haired medical student named Sinha, who asserted with emphasis: " If history is to take a step forward, the parlour game of parliamentary politics must end" (27) But Subhash was never convinced that an imported ideology could solve India's problems. Yet Subhash often went with his brother because " He was sick of the fear that always rose in him: that he would cease to exist, that he and Udayan cease to be brothers, were Subhash were to resist him". (30) Yet all these hectic activities and rampant student boycotts and unrest against prevailing system going on did not prevent them from pursuing their studies: both brothers began postgraduate studies, Udayan at Calcutta University, Subhash continuing at Jadavpur. After their studies ended, Subhash and Udayan found themselves among so many others of his generation, overqualified and unemployed. Udayan turns to radical politics because of the injustice and poverty he sees around him. But the more Udayan becomes involved in politics, the more Subhash feels alienated from him.

3. CONCLUSION

Naxalite movement strengths are present in *The Lowland*, they seem adrift in its larger swaths of time and space, diluted by waves of politics and history that Lahiri herself has chosen to bring in. Apart from Gauri, compellingly opaque at moments, the characters seem frozen into types — Subhash (dull but capable), Udayan (charismatic but irresponsible) and Bela (the rebel with a tattoo on her ankle and a compost bin in the backyard). Their misery, although powerfully depicted in scenes of confrontation or isolation, seems to be deeply private, personal, ultimately without reference to the ostensible political background introduced every now and then as Lahiri returns to the execution scene, playing it one way in depicting the brutality of the police and then the other in revealing Udayan's own complicity in a crime. There is mention of Marx and Adorno, of S.D.S., and of Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal, the two central ideologues of the Naxalite movement. There are somewhat rote descriptions of demonstrations, political meetings and slogans on the wall, but not a single line of the Naxal poetry or songs that flared through India at the time, in numerous languages, and that formed a far more defining aspect of the movement than the badly made bombs and dense theoretical tracts mentioned in the novel.

There is a similar absence even when it comes to depicting America or contemporary India. There are passing references to the civil rights movement and the antiwar demonstrations, to organic farming and an Obama sticker, to India's vaunted new economic policies (now suddenly in trouble) and to the re-emergence of the Naxalites, now underground in the forests of central India, but these things seem to have as little to do with the characters as the characters have to do with them. It makes all four generations of the family appear strangely bereft, not so much upwardly mobile immigrants making it into the promised land as much as characters flailing at the boundaries of life, wanting to be let across the borders into the mysterious disquiet that afflicts so much of the rest of humanity

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