

## **Of Love and Betrayal, Sin and Redemption, Exile and Return: Recapturing the Spirits of Rebellion in JhumpaLahiri's the Lowland**

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**Abstract:** *The present paper explores the emotional upheavals chronicling around the lives of a Bengali family, while capturing the spirits of revolution run deep in the veins of the major characters in their own distinct way. Attempt has been made to delve into the inner personal struggle against the backdrop of the nation's disturbances, how they faced the turmoil and turbulences of love and betrayal, sin and redemption, exile and return, before they finally tried to come out of it. It studies the universal theme of love and loss, fate and destiny that lay bare behind the popular Naxalite Movement of the 1960s, exploring the individual lives, uncovering the long lasting consequences arising out of a cumbersome youthful decision.*

**Keywords:** *betrayal, complexities, love, sin, redemption.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The Lowland, the second novel by JhumpaLahiri, published in 2013, shortlisted for the 2013 man Booker prize is a complex novel which cannot be easily placed under a single stance. It is a kaleidoscope of life, creating a spectrum of emotions and struggles against both the inner and outer forces of life in various lights and shades. The novel has varied themes unfolding - a tale about two inseparable brothers forced to part ways owing to their own decisions, the consequences of their choices on themselves and other family members, the parents-child relations, how marital discords affect the psyche of a child, the metamorphosis of a fiercely independent woman, craving out her own career at the cost of her family and many more universal themes like love and loss, fate and destiny, etc. The paper highlights the inter-personal relationships, the networks of complex patterns fabricating the aftermaths of one political event on the lives of the people survived, situating themselves as victims or survivors, or both, showcasing the ultimate human resilience. It also focuses on the general theme of love and loss, pain and suffering, hopes and despair, forgiveness and acceptance, against the backdrop of personal and political tragedies.

### **Context**

This 340 pages novel interweaves the multi-fabrics of one of the most socially and politically disturbed period in the post-independence India and the irreparable loss it causes to a particular Mitra family. Like most of Lahiri's works, The Lowland revolves round the immigrant Bengali family in the United States but, 'placing the book in the category of "immigrant fiction" does not sit well ...' (TK Pius,100). Behind the thin façade of the Naxalite movement, least bothered by immigrant issues, the novel explores the nuances of human emotions, a larger, universal theme of humanity. Diane Leach's views may be mentioned here, 'Lahiri has always written about Indians negotiating America. The contrasts are less jarring here than in previous works ... Yet The Lowland is different in that the isolation comes not from American culture, but from within.'

The novel opens with the description of the happy childhood of Subhash and Udayan Mitra, the two brothers who were separated only by fifteen months and grew up in the 1950s and 60s in a small village of Tollygunge, West Bengal. When the Naxalite movement hit the area, their paths diverged as Subhash, being more cautious and dutiful to their parents, went to the Rhode Island, United States to pursue a career of scientific research in chemical oceanography, and Udayan, being more impulsive and vulnerable, stayed behind to take part in the movement. Subhash came back to India after receiving the telegram, "Udayan Killed. Come back if you can" (83), to console his parents and the wife of his brother (Gauri) who was a widow then, at the young age of twenty three. As per the customary, the young widow was denied of fish and meat and made to wear only white sari and to live an isolated life. Finding the pitiable condition of his brother's widow, he proposed to her for marriage, offering an escape route from such treatment, with an assurance to be a good father to her unborn child and to let her continue her study in philosophy. As arranged, Gauri joined him in the Rhode Island later, much to the anger of his parents.

However Gauri became more absorbed in her study, spending hours at the library in the campus, attending lectures, reading and writing even at night. Initially, Subhash encouraged her but disapproved when

she gave much priority to her study even after the birth of her child, which he lovingly named Bela, a baby girl. When Bela was about twelve years old, he and Bela went to Calcutta, three months after the death of his father. However, they came back to an empty house as Gauri had already left them leaving behind a farewell note, severing the ties permanently, to join a teaching job at a college in California. After this sudden turn of incident, Bela suffered from nervous breakdown and had to take the help of professional counselor. Then the following year, she came out of the shell, but only to live a life quite different from the earlier.

After many years, Subhash, at the age of seventy, moved on with his life, living together with Elise, an American widow as his companion before they finally decided to get married. Accordingly he wrote to Gauri seeking divorce and proposing the settlement of their property in Tollygunge which he was thinking of selling as both the parents had died already. Gauri, wishing to meet them again, decided to go there personally to hand over the signed papers. However when she came, it was Bela, now a mother of a four years old Meghna, who confronted her. Bela behaved coldly but with some reserve, letting Gauri realized how much affected her life was when she had left her at a stage she needed her the most. If there was any faint hope of reconciliation and starting life all over again in the mind of Gauri, it was harshly rejected by Bela's plain reaction, rejecting to accept her as her mother..

In the last section of the novel, Gauri went back to India, to Tollygunge, her hometown, visited her childhood home, and the lowland, the place where her youthful dreams had been shattered, the place her beloved husband, Udayan was shot death in front of her, uncovering some more details, the actual happenings in that fateful evening, thereby providing some glimpse, a missing link of why she had become the kind of person she was. The whole truth was never revealed to anyone, even to Subhash who had enquired about it. The novel ends recalling the last harrowing moments of Udayan, when he was hiding in the lowland while the police had rounded him from all sides, following his thoughts, doubts and realization of the futility of the 'misguided cause' for which he had to leave his parents, brother and his beloved, young wife to live without him for the rest of their life, leaving their lives at jeopardy.

Out of these materials, the novelist tactfully arranges the sequences of events by revisiting the same incident from the perspective of different characters, constantly manipulating the time sequences, swinging from present to past, past to present, like a pendulum, carefully holding the whole view till the very end of the novel, forcing the readers to view and review their impressions about some events and characters as Stephannie Merritt writes:

Lahiri structures the novel with exquisite precision, building atmosphere through cumulative detail, parsing out the backstory as Gauri and Subhash allow themselves to revisit memories from their youth, so that it is only towards the end that we learn the full truth about Udayan's death – a truth that asks us to revise our opinions of the characters and their actions.

The manipulation of sequencing the events and the deliberate delineation of narratives by changing of focus, zooming in and out, not only add to the contemporariness of the novel at one side but also successfully withhold the basic essence throughout, keeping the climax intact. In this novel, The Lowland, Jhumpa Lahiri's effort to make it sparingly simple, perhaps, following Earnest Hemmingway's 'Iceberg theory', leaving out even some important links and information unexplained, seems to be a conscious attempt of taking one step further from her earlier writings as she said in an interview by Cressida Leyshon:

I mean that the story was heavy, the material was heavy, the situation, the circumstances, all of this was very weighty. And I didn't want the writing to feel heavy. I just wanted to say what I needed to say in the sparest way that I could. I wanted to have some sort of lightness. So I was trying to pare back even more than I normally try.

### **Love and Betrayal**

It is interesting to note that the theme of love and betrayal works metaphorically in the structural level of the novel too, besides its dominant impact on the inter-personal relationships of the characters. Structurally, the novel starts revolving round Subhash, focusing on him and narrating from his point of view the major portion but only to let Udayan steal the limelight all the way covertly and at the end, overtly, despite having rather a short life. The novel closes with Udayan, minutely measuring every detail of his thought, thereby imposing a final, permanent impression on the minds of the readers, just as those footprints he had left on the wet cement while he was a boy. Towards the end Subhash, along with his newlywed wife, Elise, became any other old couple, addressing them as just "a couple" (329), nothing more, nothing less. His image became so distant and vague with such description, 'On the western coast of Ireland, on the peninsula of Beara, a couple come[sic] for a week's stay.' (329) Subhash, despite being loyal, generous and cautious all his life, could not hold such a privileged position that Udayan did, and all his goodness and generosity seems to wash away like those footprints on the sand, 'washed clean by the encroaching tide.'(137) This simply reflects the realities of life that it is not always fair and reasonable. Whether or not it was intended to arouse pity for Subhash, the ending of the novel itself does not fail to create a sense of betrayal.

The theme is more discernible in the relationship between Subhash and almost all the major characters in the novel – defining his relationship with his brother, his parents, Gauri and daughter Bela as while. As the novel unfolds, the love and interdependence of the two brothers were shown to the extent that one felt incomplete without the other. They grew up together, played together, yet their differences in temperament and personality became more pronounced as they grew up, though the juxtaposition is slightly tone down by the novelist's signature art of subtle expression. They shared secrets, bonded well, and hid nothing from each other, always doing things together until the Naxalites hit the state in the year 1967. When Subhash asked Udayan to accompany him to America, Udayan accused him of being selfish to which Subhash retorted him for not being considerate for their parents. Moreover Subhash was not convinced of such movement based on Maoist, calling it an imported ideology, though he sympathized with the poor farmers. This was their first major differences demonstrated by their follow-up actions to further their respective courses. Nevertheless, they continued to share their thoughts and deeds through letters.

Udayan wrote many secret letters sharing the development of the movement, his ideas, ideologies and struggles, with the strict instruction to destroy the letter as soon as he read to avoid any possible complication. Subhash used to read them many times before he destroyed them. However, one particular letter that contained the information about Udayan's marriage made him feel cheated and he read only once. That Udayan had got married the woman of his choice, defying the tradition and ahead of him, and the fact that he had kept it discreet about their relationship all the while for one whole year as they had been dating each other even while Subhash was in Calcutta were received with shock and disbelief. He felt 'defeated by Uadyan all over again, for having found a girl like that.' (47) This is one of many examples of Udayan forging ahead of Subhash. The second betrayal came in the form of deceiving letters which Udayan wrote after marriage, carefully filtering out all his rigorous illegal activities and active involvement in the movement, sharing only his daily routine, trivial matters about football scores, or about some neighbours, a certain store closing down or the latest film by MrinalSen, successfully creating a peaceful atmosphere at home. 'Udayan's letters no longer referred to Naxalbari, or ended with slogans.' (63) This was something Subhash would not expect from Udayan keeping in view that their relation was built on trust and togetherness no matter what.

It seems Subhash had witnessed only betrayal or greater degree of it when it comes to his relationships especially with the three major women in his life - his mother, Gauri and Bela. Subhash was a disciplined person, always cautious and considerate since childhood. 'His mother never had to run after him. He kept her company, watching as she cooked at the coal stove, or embroidered saris and blouse pieces... He helped his father plant the dahlias that grew in pots in the courtyard.' (10) 'His parents did not have to worry about him and yet they did not favor him. It became a mission to obey them, given that it wasn't possible to surprise or impress them. That was what Udayan did.' (11) Despite all these, it was Udayan who was dearly loved and adored by his parents with all his waywardness. Being a dutiful son, Subhash made it a point to visit his old and ailing mother at regular intervals, all the way from America after the death of his father, but his mother seemed to choose to live in a different world where only Udayan existed. Subhash was on his way to the hospital when she died, depriving him of being by her side in her last moments. 'She'd died on her own, in a room with strangers, denying him the opportunity to watch her pass.' (221)

His love and attachment to almost all the characters, even the minor one like Holly whom he met in his early days at Rhode Island, were not fruitful and leaving him with a sense of disproportionate and unreciprocated to the way he felt for them. His relationship with Holly, a divorcee and mother of a nine years old boy, though, brief and casual, ended too soon, unexpected. Subhash was 'furious with her for being the one to decide' (82) to end it. Here too, Subhash was dissatisfied and felt deceived though he never meant the relationship to be serious. His wife Gauri, too whom he had treated generously with love had abandoned him the moment she became independent. She had neither given him enough respect and care, nor love even in small portion in return. Though Gauri regarded him as a better person than Udayan, she gave him nothing but nurturing jealousy and hatred towards him for being so loving and kind to her daughter, for proving a better parent than herself. She declined to have a second child with him when Subhash suggested it was time to give Bela another sibling as company. If she could not be a loving mother to Bela, she failed totally as a wife, thus shattering subhash's dream of a loving family altogether. She left them when Bela was only twelve years old, after which Bela totally cut off from everything and everyone, even Subhash as if without Gauri, he was nothing to her. This new attitude of his daughter baffled him greatly and at the same time made him felt extremely low and down as he loved Bela dearly and she was the only one left for him after the deaths of his brother and parents, and the abandonment of Gauri. All these added much to his loneliness and unhappiness, leaving him with the feeling of insecure and worthless in every relation he had.

Their parents witnessed the bitter-sweet relationship with their sons. As the novel begins, a beautiful, normal, happy Bengali family is depicted. The parents, like any other parents, having high hopes and aspirations of their children, only to be shattered by their sons, though unintentionally. First, by the sudden announcement of marriage of Udayan, their younger son, and forcing them to accept the relationship as the new couple was

ready to move out in case they disagreed. This was the first heavy blow to the parents considering the traditional and cultural expectation of the Bengali community. Till then, they had not given up their hope on Subhash, as they wrote: 'We hope, when the time comes, you will trust us to settle your future, to choose your wife and to be present at your wedding. We hope you will not disregard our wishes, as your brother did.' (63) Little did they know that they would witness the greatest catastrophe of their life, and along with it their expectation from the other son who had never failed them, would also go in vain. It happened when Subhash decided to get married to the widow of their younger son. The house they built nearby the lowland with all their love and hope that in their old age, they would settle together with their sons, could never become a home as fate had another plan. Subhash and Gauri never came back home for the first twelve years as Bijoli had told them not to enter the house as husband and wife. She did not fully mean what she had said but had to bear 'the deepest shame a mother can feel, of not only surviving one child but losing another, still living.' (186) In their old age where most parents settled under the care of their sons, they were forced to live a life of austerity, devoid of love, comfort and security, betrayed by fate and destiny, by their own sons, quite different from the life they wishfully foresaw.

Sometimes 'betrayal' goes beyond the control of personal level; rather it seems the play of fate, an external factor to which the characters were cruelly subjected, rendering them helpless. This is especially true in the life of Gauri, the most lonesome character in the novel. She had an unusual childhood, staying with her grandparents, away from her parents before they died in an accident. Her 'willingness to live apart from her parents, her estrangement from most of her family, her independence' (57) in decision making, quite fascinated Udayan. From these early days her strong will and independent spirit were shown. She preferred to sleep outside at the balcony, unlike many of the children of her age who loved to be cuddled by their mothers. Her only favourite pastime was to study and to leisurely watch people passing by from the balcony. She was one of those few women who preferred 'books to jewels and saris' (46) and who had decided not to get married at all. Then she met Udayan who was a regular visitor to her home as her brother's friend and associate and got mesmerized by his charismatic personality. It was only for the love of Udayan that she was ready to do anything, to go to any extent believing in him whole-heartedly, blindly, holding back nothing. She would attend various meetings, doing errands, handing over small secret notes, spying on some unknown person. At last she felt betrayed by Udayan's sudden and untimely death, leaving her behind to live the whole life on her own, something she had never think of. Moreover, in hindsight, it seems she felt cheated as she came to realize the crucial role she was made to play without even letting her know about its consequences.

She'd been linked into a chain she could not see. It was like performing in a brief play, with fellow actors who never identified themselves, simple lines and actions that were scripted, controlled. She wondered exactly how she was contributing, who might be watching her. She asked Udayan but he would not tell her, saying this was how she was being most useful. Saying it was better for her not to know.' (292)

She accepted Subhash's proposal as there was no other better options. Since she had run away to get married, there was no support from her family side too, and her life as a widow at her in-laws' house was miserable. Another reason for her to accept was that her unborn child would get a father in Subhash and also the prospect to continue her study which was her first love. When Subhash expected her to give priority to her new born daughter, and adjusted with her study, she felt betrayed by him as he was not supporting enough to her study as he had promised. Gauri, who had stopped living after the death of Udayan, found solace only by digging deep into the philosophy, did specialization in German Idealism and the philosophy of the Frunfurt School. Hence, she decided to move out and continued her career. She wrote articles, and engaged herself fully, writing one after another. She got a job in a college at California and used to give lectures in colleges and universities. She had successfully ward off any possible situation, avoided private dinners at colleague's place or any unwanted advances except once when Lorna, a younger scholar woman in her early 30s responded to her instinct and they continued to have physical intimacy for some time. Though it was not a serious relationship, Gauri felt somewhat betrayed when Lorna, after getting her dissertation and job moved on as if nothing had happened between them. A sense of guilt and shame enveloped her. 'The liaison ended, without rancor but definitively. Yet Gauri was humiliated, for not taking it as lightly.' (240)

Though she did not hope for a fairytale ending, she was not prepared to hear the reason for getting divorced, that Subhash was getting married again. She came to realize that the 'divorce was not to simplify but to enrich his life.' (311) Hearing this news unexpectedly from, Meghna, her four years old grand-daughter, Gauri found herself losing grip. When she met Bela after so many years, Gauri was shocked to find the young woman in her early thirties so unmindful of her look and appearance, the unkempt hair, the rough skin, and the old T-shirt she put on, making her unladylike. She realized that so long she had betrayed herself, blinded by her selfish indulgence in her study, the futility of her well-guarded justification that her absence would make things easier for Subhash and Bela. It is interesting to note the varied forms of betrayal, sometimes it came from others, at times, it came from self, within.

In case of Udayan, the themes of love and betrayal interlaced each other, creating a complex pattern difficult to view separately. His spontaneous love of his parents, his brother, and wife Gauri had won their hearts. After the incident of killing the police officer, Nirmal Dey, Udayan began to doubt about the way their organization was heading to, the leadership and meaning of their violent deeds. He hid the kind of activities he got involved and the heights of danger he was in, purposely, allowing his family to enjoy some peace and happiness he could afford at the maximum under the circumstances. He could not take back his steps from the movement he joined with a noble cause; at the same time, he seemed helpless about the changing phase of the movement, resorting to more violent activities, involving killings. 'Writing cheerful letters to Subhash in America, pretending the movement was behind him, ... Lying to his brother, hoping that it would bring them closer again. Lying to his parents, not wanting to concern them.' (337) Under the scenario, this appeared to be the only feasible means perhaps, for him to provide some shield and he was ready to protect them even if it was a false one, a temporary deception. Betrayal seems to have a different connotation here.

Bela too had her share of love and betrayal in the most unusual ways. Her father loved to spend time with her in the weekend, going to the beach and playing with her, while her mother had her study at the topmost priority. She taught herself to be independent from an early age. However she was extremely shocked and took a whole year to come out of it when her mother left them for good. The trauma was aggravated by the apparently indifferent attitude of her father as he seemed unaffected and tried no means to bring back her mother. The separation of the bond between her and her parents was double fold as she cut herself off from her father too. Then one fine day, she was told the truth about her paternity that disoriented everything in her life. The truth was too much for her to take in and shook her entire world. Eventually, she was able to calm down and, her love and respect of Subhash restored and increased. Thus the hiding of her paternity, the most basic truth about one's life, for more than three decades, ultimately led to a more beautiful relationship between herself and her father (Subhash) as she realized the unconditional love he had showered selflessly upon her since childhood. This is another paradoxical impact of 'betrayal' highlighted in the novel. This is how the theme of love and betrayal intertwined each other, adding to the variant aspects of the inter-personal relationships among the major characters, making the narration enriching and engrossing in which the novelist is highly adept to.

### **Sin and Redemption**

Another theme that lay deep undercurrent is sin and redemption. The concepts of sin and redemption come up as the layers and depth of the psyche of each character reveal, adding complexity to the already not so easy lives of the Mitra family. The killing of the police officer made him feel like a sinner, especially so when he considered the fate of the little boy and the young widow. The guilt had engulfed him till his last moment. He shared his fear and insecurity with Gauri. He sensed his end was near. He had no opportunity to redeem for his sins either to the family of the policeman, or to his own family especially his young, innocent wife for putting her in the dark about the consequences of her contribution, for making her involved with the crime, for dying so early, unexpectedly, leaving her behind to live the life she did not deserve, for not being honest to his ever loving brother, and to his ever loving and caring parent for cheating them, for not able to realize their dreams, leaving them to a standstill, no forward movement, a life of living dead.

Gauri set herself free from the burdens and bondages of family life by walking out. Outwardly she was an independent woman but she was constantly living under the shadow of fear, guilt and loneliness. She felt the crime she committed by neglecting her own daughter and to Subhash by leaving them behind, was much greater than the one Udayan had committed. She deliberately killed the relationships, the bond, the ties, whereas Udayan had no choice. 'It was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed.' (242) She was not searched and not tried to reach out and she felt this as her punishment. She had been living a life of dichotomy throughout after that fateful incident, the killing of a policeman, and being the invisible, undetectable crime partner, a predator, despite having a crucial hand in the plot, managed to escape scot-free. Following one of Udayan's instructions, she, on the pretext of tutoring some students, kept an eye on the policeman who always came to take his son home from school in civil dress on every Thursday at a particular time. Based on this information, Udayan and his party could successfully attack the policeman and got him killed. For Gauri, the guilt at the core of her heart haunted her throughout. One week before leaving for America she, on some pretext, went searching for the house of the deceased policeman and met his wife and small son. This shows how deeply she had felt about the whole incident and her visit may be construed as an admission of her guilt and act of repentance. Seeing their innocent faces, talking to her, helping her finding the address she was feigning to look for, without the least suspicion about her hand being involved in the making of their present fate adds to her remorse. She saw the small boy's face for the first time so close and noticed the young widow's white sari, a symbol of widowhood, she too used to wear after Udayan's death. Gauri was particularly aware of the sudden change of status as she was wearing a printed sari, bangles on her wrists, as by then she got remarried to her husband's elder brother. She escaped from the police too but her conscience tormented her day and night as she kept this secret to herself, not sharing with anybody, not even to Subhash. She also failed to fulfill the dreams

Udayan had, could no longer be a part of his dream anymore, now settled in America far from the hometown for which Udayan had laid his life. At one point, she felt like committing suicide but withheld the thought as if to live on as it was, living the tortured life with all the guilt and sin was in fact a form of redemption for her.

Subhash besides all the good he had done, had his share of guilt, the burden of hiding the secret of Bela's paternity. All throughout his life, Udayan had outshone him in every single deed, small or big. It was Udayan not him who ruled their parents' heart, it was Udayan who had found a girl like Gauri and won her heart, even Bela, the only one he could claim the world as his own was Udayan's daughter not his. He had unreasonable fear that one day Udayan would come and take away Bela from him. He carefully avoided situations, places and people who would know that he was not the real father. At times he agreed he thought that 'Udayan had been right in calling him self-serving.' (251) Out of the three women in his life the two had already gone, his mother being dead and Gauri, left, only Bela was there. Though she was oddly behaved and indifferent to him, he could content that she was not leaving him altogether. But the weight of holding the secret was too much and he was prepared to master up the courage to tell the truth. It was when Bela told him about her plan to stay with him as she was carrying a baby of the man whom she did not care to inform because she felt he would not be a good father like Subhash had been. Subhash with a heavy heart and tears in his eyes, risking of losing Bela forever 'prepared himself to give her back to Udayan.' (266)

I'm not your father.

Who are you then?

Your stepfather. Your uncle. Both those things.

... She shouted at him, asking why he'd never told her, pushing him angrily against the sofa. Then she started to cry. She behaved just as he felt – as if he had suddenly died in front of her. (266-267)

For him, it was an act of self redemption. The late declaration of truth of her paternity did affect Bela as Subhash had expected. She left the house and went away. No phone call, no coming back, no sign of her, but by weekend she made a call telling him about her plan to come back and stay with him. After she became a mother, she told Subhash it made her love him more, knowing what he had done.

At this point, Bela was making up with Subhash trying to bring back the bond of affection she had once shared and gave back the happiness and security Subhash richly deserved. She even acted a kind of guardian of him, protecting and shielding him from her selfish mother. All these served as redemption of all the hardships and troubles she had caused to her father. However, she had been rude and cynical at her best when she confronted her mother. She could not control the bottled up emotions finally getting released at the sight of her mother for whose love and company she had longed for and been denied so coldly. Her words were like bullets, silencing Gauri, putting an end to Udayan, claiming that she had known about Udayan.

I can't stand the sight of you ... I can't bear listening to anything you have to say... I know why you left us ... I know who I am ... You're not my mother. You're nothing. Can you hear me? I want you to nod if you can hear me... You're as dead as he is. The only difference is that you left me by choice. (312-313)

Despite her exasperation, Bela did not continue to cut off totally from her mother as she finally cared to send a letter to her, stating that Meghna asked about her, ending the letter with a possibility of reconciliation in future: 'If, then, she still wants to know you, and to have a relationship with you, I'm willing to facilitate that ... maybe, when Meghna is older, when she and I are both ready, we can try to meet again' (324-325). Bela, as she matured with ages, seemed to realize the complexity of the situation and the circumstances her parents' lives were thrown in. Her self-realization facilitated redemption of her own life by accepting the weaknesses of others and pitfalls of life, and picking up the pieces of life which remained scattered all around, till then. She was more kind and open to life which otherwise she had been shunning herself from developing any relationship, 'never allowed herself to be courted' (298). She finally accepted Drew, a divorcee who loved her and ready to accept her child. Finally, she found someone whom she could trust completely.

### **Exile and Return**

The theme of exile and return works in both physical and emotional level. Structurally, the novel starts with the lowland with ends with it. Udayan and Subhash's favourite place in childhood, finally proved to be the actual hide-out for serious matter as deciding as life and death. In the final scene he hid there in the lowland. It was both physical and emotional returns for him after having exiled to different places, hiding from the police. Sometimes it becomes self imposing exile as in the case of the parents. The mother and the father exiled themselves, confining to their home near the lowland despite having options of selling the house, making terms with the elder son and estranged daughter-in-law and lived with them in America. However, they chose to remain in the house where they could confine themselves, and hence the same house which was once a happy home became a place to exile. Subhash never came back for twelve years, keeping himself exiled in the Rhode

Island only to return as often as he could to the place of his birth. Even in America too, when he came to attend a party Elise had invited, the venue happened to be the same room where he and Richard, his then room-mates stayed years before when they were students.

Likewise Gauri too came back to their old house at Rhode Island after a long gap of more than two decades. The old place, the campus, the library, the house, the room inside reminded her of those early days of her in America. She became nostalgic. Then she immediately went back to India on the spur of the moment after Bela confronted her, vomiting out all her misdeeds, her wrongs, pushing back to her place. She cancelled all her prior commitments and came back to India, to Calcutta, to her childhood place, to Tollygunge, 'to the house in which she was once destined to grow old with Udayan. The home in which she had conceived Bela, in which might have been raised.' (319) Then she visited the lowland where she had lost Udayan, and with him, lost the vital part of her life. 'She was unprepared for the landscape to be so altered. For there to be no trace of that evening, forty autumns ago' however, 'Standing there, unable to find him, she felt a new solidarity with him. The bond of not existing.' (320) Though brief, this physical return acted as a 'catharsis' to her, releasing the suppressed emotions. Bela too had been in depression and kept herself in self-imposed shell, trying to cope up with the kind of life she had been through. But she reconciled with her father and backed to her normal self eventually and even tried to make peace with her mother. These physical and emotional exiles and returns are too many to consider as coincidences, and these play a pivotal role in building up the multigenerational tale of this particular family so engrossing.

### **Spirit of Rebellion**

The spirit of rebellion runs deep in the veins of almost all the major characters, touching their lives at one point or the other, be it the setting of the novel itself which is based on a popular peasant rebellion or the rebellious nature of the characters. The deplorable conditions of the landless farmers dying of hunger, living under the mercy of the landlords, forcing them to live in inhuman conditions, in the early 1960s created sympathy among the intellectual public, including the young college students. Many of them believed that the violent reaction against such injustices meted out to those poor and helpless farmers was the only solution to end their sufferings. They joined the movements, without much knowledge of where it could lead them to. The depiction of the Naxalite movement in the novel seems to be too brief and indirect to place it at par with other novels that successfully represent the Movement. The view observed by Sugata Samanta in this context is worth mentioning:

With the death of Udayan, the political turbulence almost disappears from the novel. The main characters are transported to United States and show no collective responsibility towards the society. They seem to have been much preoccupied with their personal aims and motives. (113)

... Thus the novel hardly appears to be a representative fictional counterpart of the Naxalite movement which is supposed to be intrinsic and instrumental to the plot. (115)

However, the rebellious nature of the major characters in the form of defying tradition, the family customs and parental control and authority are quite pronounced and discernible. Udayan had a revolutionary spirit throughout and manifested it in everything he did. He was a nonconformist and rebel since his childhood. He joined the movement; he got married to the girl of his choice in a culture where it was normally the parents who would search the life partners of their sons. He eloped and opted for a registered marriage instead of the traditional ceremony. All these were symbols of defiance exhibiting his rebellious spirits.

Subhash had been living under the shadow of Udayan, measuring his steps with his, constantly comparing but always ending up losing. The matter might be as simple as climbing the Tolly Club wall while they were boys, or as serious as defying traditions and customs when he grew up. He felt timid and inadequate against the highly spirited, adventurous and rebellious nature of his younger brother. 'He'd wanted so much to leave Calcutta, not only for the sake of his education but also – he could admit to himself now – to take a step Udayan never would.' (40) Inspired by Udayan's adventurous spirit, he might have dared to venture out a step further by sleeping with Holly, when he was still a bachelor. He defied his parents, breaking perhaps for the first time his own mission of being the dutiful and obedient son, by his decision to get married with his brother's widow. This step was indeed a big jump in his personality and quite unexpected of him by his parents, especially his mother whom he had religiously obeyed all his life till then. His mother warned him of the dire consequences as Gauri would not be able to love him as she loved Udayan, and she could not be a good mother either as she said, 'She's Udayan's wife, she'll never love you, his mother had told him attempting to dissuade him. At the time he'd stood up to her, convinced it could be otherwise, and that he could make Gauri happy. He'd been determined to prove his mother wrong.' (160) Despite this warning, he took up the challenge.

True to his mother's words, Gauri was neither a loving wife nor a caring mother to her daughter. Gauri's metamorphosis - from an independent girl to a sweet lover, from a loving wife who followed her husband's path to an obedient, timid widow following the dictates of the tradition under the strict supervision of her mother-in-law to again back to an independent, unloving and self-centred person, thereby completing the circle, might sound a little unconvincing but these potential traits were shown in her early childhood. For her it was as easy as cutting the umbilical cord, getting separated from the baby, regaining her whole past self without any excess, unnecessary elements. When Udayan was no longer in her life, even the child born out of their love became a poor substitute, and Subhash, to whom she was initially drawn in as he reminded her of Udayan, became nothing as 'it was useless to save a single earring when the other half of the pair was lost' (128). So she bounced back to the time and self she once had been before Udayan came to her life. It seems she had successfully erased everything in between.

The depiction of Gauri as a passionate student of philosophy, the one who detached jewellery and saris, who thought that marriage was not compulsory, and as an indifferent mother in that age and cultural set ups, is no way a mere coincidence; it may be considered as a conscious departure from the popular and traditional concepts of being a woman in general, and an Indian woman in particular. It defies and challenges the preconceived images of woman in the tradition bound society. On the contrary, Subhash's soft and nurturing qualities are projected, highlighting the possibility of traditional gender role reversal, demystifying the aged old paradigm that had set separate role for man and woman. The view observed by Noreen Malone regarding this is worth quoting:

It can be no accident that Lahiri chose to make Gauri, a mother uninterested in nurturing, obsessed with philosophy. Philosophy, of course, is at once deeply concerned with the human condition and also at an academic, theoretical remove from actual humanity—not to mention, it's often a male-dominated discipline. Subhash, whom Bela doesn't know isn't her biological father, is the family's nurturer. He doesn't let himself get trapped by the past, as she does, and instead learns to adjust to the present. What happens to a family in which there is a reversal of traditional gender roles, with an ambivalent mother and a flexible, gentle father, is a crucial part of what Lahiri is exploring in the book.

As Gauri observed Subhash, in their initial year as husband and wife at Rhode Island, making his own breakfast and packed his lunch, she was bewildered. 'Udayan had wanted a revolution, but at home he'd expected to be served: his only contribution to his meals was to sit and wait for Gauri or her mother-in-law to put a plate before him.' (126) Here the novelist seems to question the very concept of revolution through this subtle irony and rebelliousness does not confine only to the characters but also extends to the overall handling of the novel.

Bela was greatly affected by the whole outcome of the tussle and rift between her parents. Unlike Gauri who chose to be away from her parents even while they were living, she, like any other child longed to be in the company of her parents. She had expected them as normal parents who showered all the love and affection to their children unconditionally. She chose a simple yet fulfilling job of growing organic vegetables, helping people. She did not care about her looks and appearances like other young girls of her age. She found peace and happiness doing farming, packaging vegetables, helping and promoting farmers to sell their home-products. She did not want to spend her life inside a university, researching things, thereby successfully rejecting the kind of life both her parents had spent. This deliberate choice is indeed an act of her rebellion against the expected routes. She picked up a job of an agricultural apprentice on a farm at Western Massachusetts, far from Rhode Island. She kept on shifting places, coming back on weekends, defining herself, directing her own course. 'Over the years her work started merging with a certain ideology.' Subhash 'saw that there was a spirit of opposition to the things she did.' (224) This revolutionary spirit of hers reminded him of Udayan to the extent that 'sometimes he felt threatened, convinced that it was Udayan's inspiration; that Udayan's influence was greater' and he might claim 'Bela from the grave as his own.' (225)

The spirit of rebellion takes another level as Bijoli and her husband stopped living their lives normally after the death of their loving son, refusing to give in to the dictates and demands of life. Every evening she went to the place where her son was shot dead, offering flowers to the memorial stone tablet erected in his memory, removing and cleaning the dirty and unwanted things piling up, while her husband exempted himself of all the indulgences he normally had and reduced to the bare minimum. He stopped sitting in the terrace, which was otherwise his favourite pastime, taking simple and little amount of food. This self deprivation is also another way of revolting against the ways of life. Their defiance against the course of nature through their passive resistance appears to be a deeper challenge, another form of rebellion against fate and destiny by refusing to erase the event, reliving the memory, choosing an alternative time zone altogether.



## II. Conclusion

The *Lowland* is a novel as intricate and at times monotonous as the life itself with some few spectacular events, followed by some unwise decisions and the rest is filled with the consequences of such deeds that forever altered the contours of the lives of the near and dear ones. The complexity of the structure of the novel does not stand alone as it is paired with the intricate plot and characterization. Regarding characterization, the view expressed by Patricia Wall throws some light:

In her 2003 novel, “The Namesake,” as in her two collections of short stories (“Unaccustomed Earth” and the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Interpreter of Maladies”), the lives of Ms. Lahiri’s characters were made palpably real to us, through her exacting evocation of their day-to-day routines ... While the reader came to know these earlier people as distinct individuals, the characters in “The Lowland” seem to have been conceived as representative types with designated roles to play in a family melodrama constructed to underscore generational patterns of resentment and redemption, rootedness and freedom. (The New York Times)

The daily aridness of growing old, trying to come to terms with one’s past and move on with the future are some of the larger themes highlighted realistically. Like the image of *The Lowland* keeps on changing with the change of time, the violent movement too changes, but leaving the defects, the irreparable loss it causes - loss of a husband, a father, a son, a life-partner- making the deaths live on with the livings in their memory and thereby making the living, almost dead. This paradoxical truth about human life is well painted with the fine mixture of love and betrayal, exile and return, sin and redemption, smearing all over the characters throughout the novel. Spencer Lenfield rightly observes that the ‘primary work of *The Lowland* is to explore the experience of loss—loss of place, loss of love, loss of family ....’ It is noteworthy that despite the gloomy atmosphere and tragedies looming large as dark clouds, no character opted for suicide, though Gauri came very close to that. The novelist expressed in the interview with Cressida Leyshon:

I thought about it. I did. I thought about the novel having a grimmer ending than it does, but then I thought, you know, no. I felt that the book had had enough death; it had enough loss. And, in a way, more than that, for those are more writerly things, I thought about Bela ... how she would feel, and the way she was raised, and all of the secrets and lies and things that happened to her, I just felt, My God, then I’m going to end the book with this other burden that she will carry around her whole life... It just seemed too much to me and I felt that I wanted to protect her. And I felt that Gauri had been through enough. I didn’t want to resolve anything for her, but I wanted to leave it as a half-open door of perhaps.

It subtly suggests that life should go on, move on no matter what and how, either by clinging to the remote past as done by their parents after the death of Udayan, or trying to move on a new path like Subhash, Gauri and Bela. Understanding of self and others enables them to redeem themselves, providing a cathartic impact on their otherwise burdensome lives. Hence the need to confront one’s inner guilt and fears, and to accept our own mistakes along with the weaknesses of others to move on with life, lies at the core of this novel.

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