

Psychological Tone of Suffering in *The Lowland*

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Abstract: The paper aims at psychoanalytic reading on Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* going through the major characters; Subhash, Udayan, Gauri and Bela. The study narrates the roles of the major characters to prove the novel as a psychoanalytical discourse. It presents Subhash and Udayan Mitra growing up, Gauri is traumatized by her husband's death and her daughter, Bela, deprived of mother's love. The psychoanalytic theory attempts to fathom into the psychological makeup of the characters. The researcher shows how the characters in *The Lowland* battle within themselves with their deep fears and repressed feelings, mentally disturbs them and makes their lives a struggle, both physically and mentally. The special emphasis of the study deals with the sufferings, depressions, and dissatisfaction of the major characters of *The Lowland*.

Introduction

Nilanjana Sudeshna Jhumpa Lahiri popularly known as 'Jhumpa Lahiri' (1967-Present) is an eminent American author who is known for her short stories, novels and essays with full of complexities of the human mind which is difficult to understand. The Freudian technique of psychoanalysis provided a new path to unravel the inner recesses of the mind and explain human behavior. The present paper deals with Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* and uses psychoanalytic theory to understand the behavior of the major characters. Subhash and Udayan are brothers but they are quite different from each other. Their psychological make-up leads them in different directions. Udayan's impulsiveness makes him a radical and takes him away from his family. Socially concerned Subhash tries to set things right. He struggles within himself before he settles down the storm in his life. Gauri who is traumatized by her husband's death goes through upheavals in her mind and hence her life. Her daughter, Bela, deprived of her mother's love is equally disturbed. This paper explains this psychological struggle that each character undergoes.

The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri is the tale of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra. Born and raised in a suburb of Calcutta, they are inseparable as children, but when they start at the university, their lives take a sudden turn from one another. Subhash is more reserved and obedient, whereas Udayan is more mischievous and impulsive. Udayan is not afraid to break the rules or contradict authority and becomes a member of the Naxalites- a radical group of Maoists who oppose the current Indian government due to the mistreatment of the agricultural workers and lower class. While Udayan becomes more involved in the Naxalite movement, Subhash moves to Rhode Island to pursue a Ph.D. in environmental science. While Subhash is in the United States, the brothers write letters to each other, where Subhash learns that Udayan eloped with a woman named Gauri. One evening, Subhash receives a telegram from his parents reporting that Udayan was killed. For the first

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time in two years, Subhash travels back to his neighborhood Tollygunge, but it no longer feels like home, and his grief-stricken parents are distant and cold with him. Subhash's parents never fully accepted Gauri, and he is alarmed by the way his parents treat her. When he learns that Gauri is pregnant with Udayan's child, Subhash offers to marry Gauri, take her to Rhode Island, and raise the child as his own. Gauri believes that she doesn't have any other options and accepts his offer. Once Gauri's daughter, Bela, is born, Gauri stays home to raise her but is distant and feels no maternal love. Though Gauri and Subhash are living as husband and wife, Gauri doesn't love Subhash. After Gauri leaves six-year-old Bela alone in the house, Subhash and Gauri fight, and the couple starts sleeping in separate rooms. Gauri starts to take classes at the university which leads to a Ph.D. program in Philosophy in Boston, where she commutes two days a week. Bela rarely sees her mother as Gauri is always reading or writing. When Subhash's father dies, he takes a six-week trip to India with 12-year-old Bela. They return home to find that Gauri has left them for a teaching job in California. Bela is devastated and becomes withdrawn. While Bela and Subhash continue to have a relationship, it is never the same as before, and Subhash blames Gauri for taking Bela away from him. Bela continues to live a nomadic lifestyle working on farms after college, coming home occasionally. During one visit to see Subhash, she reveals she is pregnant and wants to raise the child at home with Subhash. Subhash finally confesses to Bela that he is not her biological father. Bela is furious and leaves for a week. At the end of the week, she returns; she forgives Subhash and is thankful now that she knows Udayan is her biological father. Bela stays with Subhash to raise her daughter, Meghna and eventually meets a local farmer, Drew, who becomes a father figure to Meghna. Subhash gets engaged to Elise, Bela's former high school history teacher. Needing a divorce from Gauri, Subhash contacts Gauri for the first time with divorce papers sent in the mail. Gauri flies to Rhode Island to deliver the papers in person, but Bela answers the door and is upset to see her mother. Gauri then travels to India where she ends up letting go of Udayan and the past before returning to California. There, Gauri finds a letter from Bela suggesting that she, Meghna, and Gauri try to meet up again.

In the final chapters, Subhash is on his honeymoon in Ireland, thinking about his family in India. Lahiri ends the book from Udayan's perspective; we learn about how Udayan was radicalized and his regrets in being part of the revolution. Lahiri's writing engages the reader as she travels quickly through time and events without sacrificing the details of each character's life. While the entire novel is written in the third person, Lahiri brings us close to each character's thoughts and feelings. The researcher shows how the characters in *The Lowland* battle within themselves with their deep fears and repressed feelings, mentally disturbs them and makes their lives a struggle, both physically and mentally. The special emphasis of the dissertation deals with the sufferings, depressions, and dissatisfaction of the major characters of *The Lowland*. Finally, the researcher examines how their psychological make-up leads them in different directions and explains this psychological struggle that each character undergoes.

Literature Review

Gauri's deepest wish to live with Udayan still lurks in her unconscious. This fixation takes a toll on her life as a mother. She neglects Bela, her daughter, and communicates very little with her. She rather prefers her work to spend time with Bela. Michiko Kakutani calls her a "cold, selfish witch who's fulfilling her nasty mother-in-law's worst predictions." This "maternal ambivalence" (Barrett 2014) makes her guilt-stricken. She leaves Bela in Subhash's care and goes to California where she takes up a job. Freud explains identification as "perception of a common quality which is shared with some other person" (Freud 137) This feeling of offense for their desire to survive is symbolic of his desire to die, that is, his "death instinct" which Freud describes as "an urge in organic life to return to an earlier stage of things" (Freud 36). The inner struggle is most prominent in Gauri's character. Her personality is marked by a conflict between id and superego. As Nancy Chodorow (2014) puts it,

“According to psychoanalytic theory, personality is a result of a boy’s or girl’s social-relational experience since the earliest infancy”. The understanding of the human mind has been a constant endeavor of the artists. Literature, too, is replete with works that focus on human psychological make-up. According to Lev Grossman (2013), “It’s not intended as a criticism when I say that Jhumpa Lahiri’s new novel is the two-thirds epilogue”. If the lowland declines to conform to a conventional three-act structure, it’s only because reality often does the same thing. Some people’s lives are all build up with no pay off; for Lahiri’s characters, life is largely the aftermath. *The Lowland* is an engrossing family saga steeped in history: the story of two very different brothers bound by tragedy, a fiercely brilliant woman haunted by her past, a country torn apart by revolution, and a love that endures long past death.

For further study, it is found that except for a few articles, actually no broader research work has been done on the characters on *The Lowland* that are portrayed with specific psychological traumatization. Since few articles have been done on *The Lowland* of Jhumpa Lahiri from various perspectives, but most of these studies did not provide enough evidence to support the psychological tone of the sufferings of the characters. Thus, a critical reading of these characters in the present study helps us understand their thoughts and ideology, their inner struggle and which undoubtedly contributes to the existing knowledge.

The Tone of Sufferings in *The Lowland*

Literary works try to understand human life and behavior. Human psychological make-up has been an area of interest in literature for ages. Aristotle discussed the effect of a tragedy on the audience but it was Sigmund Freud who made the groundbreaking contribution in psychoanalysis by emphasizing the unconscious part of the mind as the major source of all our actions. It gave an altogether different way of thinking about the human mind. He also gave literary allusions to elucidate his point. In literature, psychoanalytic literary theory adopts the principles of psychoanalysis given by Freud to interpret a literary work. It maintains that a literary work is like a dream in which the real matter is not directly expressed. The hidden material can be discovered by making use of this theory as it goes beyond the obvious and locates other potentials contained in the text. It can be used to understand a literary work as a writer’s neurosis as well as to understand the characters in any literary work. It provides a window to the mind of the characters and gives insights about the mental processes going on in them.

This paper is an attempt to look at the major characters in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Lowland* by applying Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis. Most of the critical works on Jhumpa Lahiri’s works explore the themes of rootlessness, alienation or study of the women characters. This paper deviates from these themes and tries to explore the psychological make-up of the characters using the psychoanalytic theory. *The Lowland* is about the lives of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan. Although they resemble each other, both are poles apart in their attitude towards life. Subhash is reserved and responsible whereas Udayan is radical, dominant and daring. His behavior is instinctual and governed by id as the writer says “He was blind to self-restraints” (Lahiri 11).

According to Freud id strives to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle. Despite being asked not to set a foot on the new pathway Udayan walks on it just for the sake of fun “forming impressions of the soles of his feet” (Lahiri 12). He does not shy away from flouting rules. He joins the Naxalite movement which leads him to his death. Like the impressions of his feet, his death also leaves a permanent mark on the lives of all those related to him. Though he loves his brother there exists sibling rivalry between them. In Freudian terminology “sibling rivalry” is “the competition between siblings to win parental favor” (Barry 97). Even as a child Udayan tries to win his mother’s attention by hiding himself and then his mother has to leave her work and search him. After his death, his mother religiously visits his memorial stone in *The Lowland*. On the other hand, Subhash is introverted and studious. He goes to

the U.S. for graduate school. This journey of Subhash is not just physical but also a psychological one. India is symbolic of the world of rules and restrictions. Subhash is bound by societal and familial rules. These rules internalized as his superego repress his desires. But the movement to the U.S. means freedom from these rules and hence his libidinal force suppresses the superego and takes id to the forefront. This is exemplified in his physical relationship with Holly. But his overpowering superego will not let him go against his parents' wishes. Unlike Udayan, he is unable to marry a girl of his own choice. Unfortunately, this, too, does not help him win his parents' love. Yet again he feels defeated in winning his mother's love. He finds his parents more inclined towards Udayan even after his death. The return of the prodigal son was not celebrated as his parents do not come to the station to receive him when he arrives in Calcutta after his brother's death. He is aggrieved by this behavior of his parents: "He understood this diminished welcome but he could not understand why, after he'd traveled for more than two days after he'd been away more than two years, his parents were unwilling to come even this far to acknowledge his return" (Lahiri 88). It is perhaps because of this rivalry that Subhash never tries wholeheartedly to stop Udayan from taking part in the Naxalite movement which ultimately leads to his death. His unconscious wish to do away with his brother is thus fulfilled. He then marries his wife and accepts his unborn child. In this way, his desire for revenge gets sublimated. According to Freud, "sublimation is the transforming of an unacceptable impulse ... into a socially acceptable ... form" (Boeree 2009). His superego does not let him do anything immoral. So instead of becoming a murderer, he becomes a savior. He does his best to look after Gauri, his wife and Bela, his daughter. Later he discovers that Gauri leaves Bela alone at home. He feels infuriated but does not give vent to his anger. He does not shun Gauri for Bela's sake and also because she is not financially independent. Gauri grows up away from her parents with her brother Manash, in their uncle's home. By the age of sixteen, she has lost her parents and grandparents.

On the conscious level, she pretends to be happy to be a loner but her desire to have a support system makes her marry Udayan. Unconsciously she fears loneliness and hence finds "the constant din more soothing than silence would have been" (54). She observes others from the balcony. "She'd observed the world ... all of life from this balcony. Political processions, government parades, visiting dignitaries ..." (Lahiri 54). After marrying Udayan she feels that she can divulge her feelings to him. Her hopes are dashed when he gets preoccupied with the Naxalite movement. She realizes that she has been prepared by her husband to live alone. Then his untimely death leaves her unaided to face the silent hostility of her in-laws. These familial and social norms make her repress her desire of living a happily married life. She internalizes these norms and becomes an introvert. She feels isolated in a hostile world and lives a melancholic life with her second husband, Subhash. Repression makes Gauri behave abnormally. She is always irritated: "She felt antagonized by a man [Subhash] who did nothing to antagonize her, and by Bela who did not even know the meaning of the word" (Lahiri 164). She also fails to become a good mother. She thinks she will discover the mother in her with time. She assures herself that it is like "a favorite pen that would turn up a few weeks later, wedged between the sofa cushions" (Lahiri 164). It also explains that she is stuck in the moment of Udayan's death and cannot move on in life. She feels traumatized by this tragedy and in the absence of any psychological help, she becomes an introvert and alone she tolerates the burdensome life with Subhash. She is traumatized by Udayan's death as well as by the horrors of the Naxalite movement. This experience throws her into isolation even when she is surrounded by people. She struggles to come out of it but fails utterly. Even remarriage and migration to the U.S. cannot help her. Time and again she is reminded of Udayan and feels him watching her. She even expects to get some news from him. Also, she is reminded of the bloodshed caused during the movement: "She dreamed of gulls on the beach ... screeching and attacking one another, blood feathers, dismembered wings on the sand" (Lahiri 144). While dropping Bela to the school bus she sees "a carnage of earthworms" which brings back to her memory the bodies of party members who "were left by the police, to shock

people” (Lahiri 169). She never fully recovers from this trauma and struggles with it all her life. Gauri unconsciously punishes herself by separating Bela from herself.

The act of unknowingly helping Udayan in killing a policeman and thus orphaning his son gives rise to a feeling of guilt which she could not get rid of even after moving to the U.S. Gauri appears to be a projection of Jhumpa Lahiri’s psyche. She projects her fears and anxieties as a working mother through the character of Gauri. The guilt feeling in Gauri for destroying Subhash’s and Bela’s life does not let her live a peaceful life in California also. This guilt stops her from making friends and thus she punishes herself with loneliness. She feels doubly alienated. First, as an immigrant and secondly as rejected by her own family. A sense of belonging is a basic need and, in its absence, she loses her desire to live. Like Mrs. Dalloway, she feels “there was an emptiness about the heart of it” (Woolf 33). This makes her lose her Eros. She holds the desire to end her life. Loneliness and rejection make her feel “an embrace in death” (Woolf 202). Gauri’s death wish is reflected in the “Para praxis” i.e. slip of tongue: “She had wanted California to swallow her” (Lahiri 233). Her liking for “the rich fog of certain afternoons” is symbolic of her death instinct (Lahiri 235). She, indeed, tries to commit suicide but her life instinct stops her. At the end of the novel, Gauri is left alone whereas Subhash and Bela move on. She even ceases to exist for them. *The Lowland* appears to be a metaphor for Gauri’s life. It is drowned by the two ponds during monsoon every year. In the end, the lowland also vanishes. It is populated with houses. Gauri’s life is also shattered by the two brothers who never fully understand her. The person most adversely affected by Gauri’s actions is Bela, her daughter. She craves for mother’s love which she never gets. She fears that her mother will leave her for the sake of her work. This fear is manifested in her dream in which she finds “their house burned down to a skeletal frame ... with only the file cabinet, intact ...” (Lahiri 202). In the dream, Gauri’s work has been displaced by the image of the ‘file cabinet.’ Whenever Bela tries to reach her mother, she finds the door shut. The door is symbolic of the barrier between Gauri and Bela. Bela’s fear comes true and Gauri leaves her. The impressionable mind of the child is scarred forever by this decision of her mother. She loses interest in everything. Kumari ShailBala says, “Neurology approves this fact that man/ woman becomes crazy or eccentric because of the constant pressure of nerve caused by suffering and suffocation” (123). Suffering in Bela’s case is her separation from her mother. She cries but never discusses anything with her father.

Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. (Quoted in Blake) But timely psychological help saves her from slipping into neurosis. Though Bela isolates herself from her parents, her isolation is productive. Unlike her mother she does not undergo self-destructive mode rather she helps others through her work. She is also not a blind optimist like her biological father. Her psychological conflict subsides when she decides to be a mother herself. Thus, her desire to get motherly love gets sublimated, just like that of Subhash, when she chooses motherhood for herself. A literary work does not directly express the psychological material. Just like dreams, it makes use of symbols.

In *The Lowland*, the fragmented lives of the characters are presented by an equally disunified narrative that shifts in time and place. The characters are not able to live in the present as they are always disturbed by past events. The narrative, thus, aptly presents their unconscious mind which, according to Freud, is chaotic. A symbol like creatures “burying themselves in the mud” for survival, subtly represents the struggle of the characters themselves (Lahiri 1).

Thus, in *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s focus shifts from immigrants’ experience to their psychological landscape. This landscape can be discovered by using psychoanalytic theory which attempts to fathom into the psychological makeup of the characters. This paper is an effort to show how the characters battle within themselves with their deep fears and repressed feelings. It mentally disturbs them and makes their lives a struggle, both physically and mentally. Subhash and Bela can

overcome their repressed fears and desires. Their conflict is lessened through the sublimation of their desires.

Migration to the U.S. proves to be psychologically beneficial for Subhash but not for Gauri. She is unable to strike such a balance. Her unfulfilled desires and sense of betrayal haunt her all her life. Udayan joins the Naxalite movement which leads him to his death. Like the impressions of his feet, his death also leaves a permanent mark on the lives of all those related to him. Even as a child Udayan tries to win his mother's attention by hiding himself and then his mother has to leave her work and search him. After his death, his mother religiously visits his memorial stone in the lowland. Secondly, we have seen the sufferings of Subhash in the whole story. He goes to the U.S graduate school. This journey of Subhash is not just physical but also a psychological one. There he loves Holly. Unlike Udayan is unable to marry a girl of his own choice. Unfortunately, this, too, doesn't help him win his parent's love. Yet again he feels defeated in winning his mother's love. He finds his parents more inclined towards Udayan even after his death. Then he marries Udayan's widow Gauri who is the mother of Udayan's child Bela. Later Subhash discovers that Gauri leaves Bela alone at home. Eventually Bela, too, withdraws from him once her mother leaves home. Subhash struggles to deal with the commotion created in his life by the death of his parents and brother. Gauri grows up away from her parents with her brother Manash, in their uncle's home. By the age of sixteen, she has lost her parents and grandparents. On the conscious level, she pretends to be happy to be a loner but her desire to have a support system makes her marry Udayan.

Unconsciously she fears loneliness and hence finds "the constant din more soothing than silence would have been" (54). She observes others from the balcony. She observed the world all of life from the balcony. After marrying Udayan she feels that she can divulge her feelings to him. Her hopes are dashed when he gets preoccupied with the Naxalite movement. She realizes that she has been prepared by her husband to live alone. Then his untimely death leaves her unaided to face the silent hostility of her in-laws. These familial and social norms make her repress her desire of living a happily married life. She internalizes these norms and becomes an introvert. She feels isolated in a hostile world and lives a melancholic life with her second husband, Subhash. She also fails to become a good mother. She struggles to overcome this pain but fails. Even remarriage and migration to the U.S. cannot help her. Time and again she is reminded of Udayan and feels him watching her. Gauri unconsciously punishes herself by separating Bela from herself. This guilt feeling in Gauri for destroying Subhash and Bela's life doesn't let her live a peaceful life in California also. This guilt stops her from making new friends and thus she punishes herself in loneliness. She feels doubly alienated. First as an immigrant and secondly as rejected by her own family. Gauri's life is also shattered by the two brothers who never fully understand her. The person most adversely affected by Gauri's action is Bela, her daughter. She craves for mother's love which she never gets. She fears that her mother will leave her for the sake of her work. This fear is manifested in her dream which he finds. Whenever Bela tries to reach her mother, she finds her door shut. The door is symbolic of the barrier between Gauri and Bela. Bela's fear comes true and Gauri leaves her. The impressionable of the child is frightened forever by this decision of her mother. She loses interest in everything. She cries but never discusses anything to her father. The research attempts a psychoanalytical reading on the sufferings of the major Subhash, Udayan, Gauri and Bela and reveals the mental disturbances that make their lives a struggle, both physically and mentally.

Conclusion

This paper shows how the characters battle within themselves with their deep fears and repressed feelings. Subhash and Bela can overcome their repressed fears and desires. Their conflict is lessened through the sublimation of their desires but Gauri's unfulfilled desires and sense of betrayal haunt her all her life. The paper displays a psychological landscape using psychoanalytic makeup in the

fragmented lives of the characters of the novel. Psychoanalytic reading on Lahiri's *The Lowland* hosts the reader's curiosity interestingly.

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