

The Rise from the Lowland: Protest against the Normative Cannons in the Lowland

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the significant Indian Diaspora voices who received the attention of critics and readers worldwide with her poignant style and the dexterity in handling complex thematic concerns. Her gripping narratives focus mainly on instances of cultural mediations and psychological strategies. With suspenseful, sweeping and piercingly intimate story of protest in life *The Lowland* is a masterly novel of fate and will, exile, return and forever exile. Shifting among the protesting cannons of wide range of richly drawn characters, it is at once a scintillating, limpid, sharply crafted and scathingly placed novel; beguiles the reader with mingling of expected and unexpected. Lahiri's work is a complex protesting saga of family with very high stakes and story steeped in history that seamlessly spans generations and geographies. A tour de force and an instant classic of Lahiri ensnares the dimensions of social protest, Naxalism, familial protest, marital protest, protest in man- woman relationships, protest in man -man relationships, protest in woman- woman relationships. The paper attempts to examine the protest of the protagonists against the normative cannons in *The Lowland*.

KEYWORDS: protest, relationships, culture, Naxalite movement

Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-) is one of the eminent postcolonial female authors known for her diasporic writings that deal with agonies of the migrants who are expatriated from their native land. Lahiri chronicles cultural interface and under its pretext her characters explicit serious protest through the enigma and discord in society and in man-woman relationship. The protagonists diffuse the normative cannons in *The Lowland* (2013) as they face alienation, rejection and loss of love and relationships. *The Namesake* (2003), as well as her past two short story collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) illustrate the similar themes about diasporic identities and the revolt of the characters in their fixities. *The Namesake* brings forth the revolt of Gogol and Moushumi, and their struggle for self-realization and identity. *The Lowland* also projects the same theme of revolt and diasporic existence on the backdrop of the Naxalite movement in India during 1970s wherein Lahiri's characters articulate their strong revolt against the normative social cryptograph. In doing so, they create a subculture of their own, protesting against the normative society and culture. Jhumpa Lahiri promulgates the plight of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan bound by tragedy of Naxalism, brilliant women, Gauri haunted by her past and of relations torn apart by protest, their daughter Bela's self-enforced anguish and protest against the obscurity of her life due to her parents.

Lahiri presents the saga of Mitra brothers, born fifteen months apart, Udayan and Subhash from Tollygunge in the neighborhood of Calcutta where they grow up in a normative middle class Indian Bengali culture. *The Lowland* epitomizes the future of two brothers as opposites with gravely different future yet tangled and enslaved into the normative cannon of disparity in relationships with Subhash's initiative to pick up the

shattered pieces of family and to heal the wounds his brother left behind. It is in the 1960s and 1970s, India was much disturbed by the political unrest and social revolts against the decisions taken by Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. The declaration of Emergency in India took away by force the basic human rights of citizens. All over the country there were protests and revolts. Protest is a solemn declaration of opinion and usually of dissent. Protest is the act of objecting or a gesture of disapproval. St. John Barned-Smith defines:

A protest is an expression of bearing witness on behalf of an express cause by words or actions with regard to particular events, policies or situations. Protests can take many different forms, from individual statements to mass demonstrations. Protesters may organize a protest as a way of publicly making their opinions heard in an attempt to influence public opinion or government policy, or they may undertake direct action in an attempt to directly enact desired changes themselves. (Barned-Smith: Web)

The Lowland projects the life and struggle of the Mitra brothers who retaliate the prevailing social system by following certain ideology. Lahiri shows how young generation upholds certain ideology to repair social problems. In one of her interviews Lahiri says, "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: Web)

Lahiri projects Udayan as a rebel from the very opening of the novel. He is impulsive and strong protester of Indian normative society as a result; he joins the Naxalite Movement. On the other hand, Subhash is a dutiful son who protests retaliating against his parents and Udayan to pursue a life of scientific researcher in the coastal corner of America. Contrarily, Udayan is a dynamic idealist, finds himself propelled by social conscience into the Naxalite movement, a rebellion waged to eradicate inequity and poverty. The poverty stricken people during the 1970s raged a protest against the rich in the society. They targeted the landlords. Jhumpa Lahiri vocalizes the revolt in the society, "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." (Lahiri: 2013: 23) True to the spirit of the movement, Udayan, sets himself on to better the living conditions of India's poor through violent uprising. Under the influence of Naxalism he succumbs to the need of being away from his parents and his brother, Subhash, for many days, working for the Naxalites.

Gradually, Udayan exhibits his revolt against the institution of marriage also, as he decides to marry Gauri, a sister of a Naxalite. In his reaction to marriage, Udayan protests against the social norm of marriage, as he prefers to elope with Gauri and have a registered marriage. The registered marriage of Gauri with Udayan articulates the couple's decision of protest against family and the Indian system of arranged marriages. In his letter to Subhash he writes his revolt against arranged marriage, "Like Chairman Mao, I reject the idea of an arranged marriage. It is one thing. I admit, that I admire about the West. And so I've married her. (Lahiri: 2013: 47)

For Udayan marriage is a knot between a man and a woman. It is merely a social permission for a man and a woman to stay together. Therefore, Udayan revolts against this system and prefers registered marriage. In his letter to Subhash to tell how he states his marriage with Gauri to his parents, "I told them, either you accept her, and we return to Tollygunge together, or we live as husband and wife somewhere else. (Lahiri: 2013: 47).

Further, Udayan's revolt is evident more poignantly as he plans and murders a policeman. This act points out that the Naxalites rejected the government and the prevailing rule. Gauri, Udayan's wife and his crime partner is a scrutinized character in the start of her life rarely put into limelight though a strong and fierce woman she too like Udayan protests the enigmas of Indian society. She explore prerogatives which are evident in her support to her husband, Udayan in his Naxalite activities as she discards the 'typical' feminine role and prefers to reading books on philosophy, the masculine domain, especially of thinkers and revolutionaries. Gauri prefers to revolt against her typical feminine role of cooking and rearing children. On the contrary, like an independent human being she prefers to remain in the company of books. These books of the revolutionaries and thinkers facilitate her revolt against her role.

To certain extent protest is evident in the relationship between Udayan's mother, Bijoli and Gauri as Bijoli does not treat Gauri well. Bijoli subjugates Gauri by catering her stale food and the leftovers. This becomes more poignant after Udayan's encounter by the police. Lahiri shows how a widow is pushed into the periphery of the domestic space. This presents the ideological protest among two females in normative scenario. Bijoli blames Gauri for the death of Udayan. She says, "Her mother in law lashed out, telling her....he would still be alive, if he'd married another sort of girl". (Lahiri: 2013: 127) Gauri's marriage with Subhash indicates a major protest against the cultural cannons of familial ties, society, and institute of marriage as it is widow remarriage. This provides her relief and release from her fixities. Gauri exercises her second marriage to explore herself by escaping from Tollygunge and from her widowhood. Gradually, Subhash convinces Gauri to marry him and go along with him as his wife in America where she can lead her life the way she desires. He is ready to give the liberty that the West provides, which in itself, is a protest against the parochial norms. Subhash states, "that in America no one knew about the movement, no one would bother her. She could go on with her studies. It would be an opportunity to begin again". (Lahiri: 2013: 119)

Jhumpa Lahiri projects Subhash as a rebel against his familial laws as he decides to marry Gauri, the widow of Udayan. Also, he protests the social customs in marrying a widow. Lahiri comments, "She's is Udayan's wife, she will never love you, his mother had told him, attempting to dissuade him. At the time he stood up to her.....he'd been determined to prove his mother wrong." (Lahiri: 2013: 160)

Further, change in location serves for her escape and refuge from the normative culture. Out of her protest for past and the previous identity, Gauri changes her clothing and outlook. The following conversation between Gauri and Subhash throws light upon her revolt against her identity. Lahiri observes:

"Why did you cut off your hair?"

I was tired of it.

And your clothes?

I was tired of those too. (Lahiri: 2013: 141)

Further, Lahiri showcases the relationship between Gauri and Bela—mother and daughter as strained relations. Gauri does not perform her duties as a mother. On the contrary, Bela develops a very affectionate tie with Subhash. There is no affection between Gauri and Bela. Lahiri comments, “Rarely did Subhash see her smiling when she looked into Bela’s face. Rarely did he see Gauri kissing Bela spontaneously. Instead from the beginning, It was as if She’d reversed their roles, as if Bela were a relative’s child and not her own.” (Lahiri: 2013: 159) Gradually, Gauri separates herself from Bela, and goes to California for teaching. This act of distancing herself from her daughter and husband shows her protest against the parochial notions of marital life. She also enters the masculine domains of society, teaching and research revolting her culinary and docile role.

The sexuality with two men push her to have a third man—the man of her choice—in her imagination. This stronghold of her sexual fetish for her professor and her attempt to pacify her carnal desire is evident when Gauri tries to pacify her body alone. This instance very well fits a member of subculture. Lahiri projects Gauri as a rebel against the actual physical satisfaction. It is in imagination she satisfies her bodily desire Lahiri captures:

She was alone, there was no one in the neighbouring stalls, and she could not help herself, she pushed her hand up her shirt, to her breast, caressing it, another hand unzipping her jeans, hooking her fingers over the ridge of bone, her forehead against the cold metal of the door. (Lahiri: 2013: 172)

Lahiri also exhibits Gauri’s protest against man-woman relationship as Gauri enjoys lesbian relationship with her research student, Lorna. A psychiatrist Greven states, “The familiar nineteenth-century division of separate gender spheres inevitably produced feelings of gendered exclusion or dissociation in some subjects. He describes this gender disturbance in a number of antebellum literary texts that show how “an essential distance from one’s own gendered identity informs and perhaps even incites...sexual desire for others of the same gender”. These scenes of what he calls “gender protest” open pathways for a wider “sexual possibility”, particularly same-sex desire.” (Greven: Web) Gauri and Lorna experience physical intimacy and sex without a male partner. Lesbianism, thus, projects a revolt where the members involved in the act rebel against the normative society and the normative heterosexual relationship. This protest is evident when Lahiri states, “She entered a new dimension, a place where a fresh life was given to her.” (Lahiri: 2013: 232).

Jhumpa Lahiri showcases that protest in the Mitra family prevails in the following generation as well; as Bela, the daughter of Gauri and Udayan protests the stereotypical education system. She becomes an activist to preserve natural habitation and farming.

She picks up the thread of revolution that undergirds the frame of her extended family, and becomes a quiet sort of activist, a wandering farm worker, an enigma both to all the dominant cultures in her life. Bela inherits revolt in her blood. She develops live-in-relationship with an American. And, when she is pregnant, they get married.

Jhumpa Lahiri projects protest through every subject in *The Lowland*. Almost every character—Gauri, Udayan, Subhash and Bela—revolt against the normative social constraints. They prefer to remain alone. They live a solitary life. They collide, disperse and reunite. Each character inherits the impulse of protest.

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