

LOWLAND OF TRAUMA, MARSHLAND OF MEMORY: A READING OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

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Abstract: Cultural trauma occurs when the members of a collectivity feel that they have been subjected to a dreadful event which has marked their group consciousness permanently and have changed their future identity forever and in irreversible ways. But every social tragedy affecting a community is not transformed in to a cultural trauma. A social tragedy is transformed in to a cultural trauma only through the representation and reconstruction of the collective trauma in cultural texts such as films, drama, music, literature etc. The emotions surrounding the traumatic experience is diffused in to the wider society by the carrier group through these cultural texts. The audience experiences the emotions associated with the event by proxy. The Naxalite movement that shook West Bengal in the 1970s is such an event which have left an ineradicable mark on the collective consciousness of the Indians especially the Bengali community. The Naxalite movement have been represented in countless novels, short stories, films etc. This paper attempts to study the representation of the emotions generated by the Naxalite movement and the violence associated with it in the novel *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Keywords: Cultural Trauma; Memory; Naxalite Movement; The Lowland; Trauma.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural trauma is a situation where a community's identity and consciousness are marked forever as a result of some horrific events that the community witnesses. According to Jeffrey C Alexander cultural trauma occurs "When members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to an awful event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever, and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways." (Alexander 6). Alexander further explains that any event which may inflict pain on the upon the collective psyche of a community may not become a cultural trauma:

"For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing; representations of these events are quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity." (15)

It is decided by the collective actors to represent the "social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go." (Alexander 15). According to Alexander it is the career groups who represent the painful event and act as the broadcasters of the of the representation. The career groups are motivated by ideal and material interests. (Alexander 16). The career groups may be elites or a person hailing from marginal classes, religious leaders but they should possess "particular discursive talents for articulating their claims – for "meaning making" – in the public sphere." (Alexander 16)

Therefore, Alexander views cultural trauma as a social process mediated by the members of the collectivity. A tragic social event or crisis becomes cultural trauma through representation.

Eyerman writes: "There are two sides to a cultural trauma: an emotional experience and an interpretative reaction. Shocks arouse emotion by breaking everyday routines (behaviors as well as cognitive frameworks) and as such demand interpretation, opening a discursive field of interpretative opportunity where well-placed individuals can play a determinante role" (Eyerman 43). Eyerman ascribes a central position to the emotions surrounding a traumatic event which allows a new analytical approach to the process of trauma. Here it is suggested that the carrier group of the trauma primarily communicates the affect and emotion associated with the traumatic experience. Trauma, if seen through this lens appears to be a process through which emotions are disseminated in a society. The traumatic experience is communicated to the wider society by reconstructing the trauma in literature, drama, film, music etc. whereby the audience, by proxy, can experience the emotions associated with the event. The audience, in turn, becomes the carrier group and continues the process of diffusing the emotion in the society. This way the process of trauma expands to include more members from a community as they get emotionally infected by the event. Therefore, deep emotions form the basis of cultural trauma. Cultural trauma, therefore is an emotion driven attempt to revisit the traumatic

event while trying to make sense of the deeply distressing event. Literature and films present both individual and collective memories. The Naxalite movement has been repeatedly presented in literature and films. For example, novels like *Ami Anupam* (1976) by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, *Mahakaler Rather Ghora* (1977) by Samaresh Basu, *Kalbela* (1984) by Samaresh Majumder, *Hajar Churashir Ma* (Mother of 1084) (1974) by Mahashweta Devi, *Drohoj* (2014) by Supriyo Chowdhury. In 1988, Govind Nihalani made a Hindi film *Hazaar Chaurashi ki Maa* based on Mahasweta Devi's Bengali novel *Hajar Churashir Ma*. *Kalbela* was later made in to a Bengali film by Goutam Ghose in 2009.

II. THE LOWLAND AS A TRAUMA NOVEL

According to Michelle Baladev, the trauma novel refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear at the individual or collective level. (150). According to him, the trauma novel is characteristically defined by the reformulation of the self, under the impact of an external and often terrifying experience. (Baladev 150). In her novel *The Lowland* Jhumpa Lahiri examines the traumatic effect of the Naxalite Movement on the ordinary middle-class Mitra family residing in Deshapran Shashmal Road, Tollygunge, Calcutta. Lahiri's novel focuses on the emotional and social lives of the members of the ordinary Bengali middle-class Mitra family. Lahiri deals with the involvement of Udayan Mitra in the Naxalite movement and focuses on how his killing in the hands of the police alters the life of his wife Gauri, his brother Subhash, his parents as well as his daughter Bela. Trauma occurs when people are forced to witness an unpleasant situation against their will. Gauri witnesses the execution of her husband Udayan which alters not only her life but also the lives of those who are related to her. The killing of Udayan has a devastating effect on the Mitra family and changes the family dynamics forever. Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud writes "memory of the trauma - acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work;" (Breuer and Freud 6). The memory of Udayan's execution continues to act in the mind of Gauri all her life. After the death of Udayan, his elder brother Subhash marries Gauri, pregnant with Udayan's child and takes her to the Rhode Island in the United States. Though after the death of Udayan Gauri marries her brother-in-law Subhash and leaves Tollygunge, she fails to adjust to her new life in the Rhode Island as she never recovers from the trauma of witnessing the killing of her husband. She is haunted by the memories of Udayan. She becomes introvert, not only she does fail to adjust to her new life, she avoids reading the letters of Manash, her elder brother, who happens to be Udayan's friend back in college, so that she can avoid the rekindling of the memories of Udayan. However, she keenly awaits the news of the Naxalite movement with which her dead husband was involved and receives the news about the movement with a sort of aloofness. Though she is grateful to Subhash for the sacrifices he had made for her sake she is unable to express her gratitude to him. Gauri's inability to overcome her trauma leads her to fail in her duties as wife and mother. She starts taking classes at the University in order to avoid her domestic duties. Gauri fails to perform her duties towards her daughter Bela as the latter reminds her of Udayan, the man she loved and married and wanted to remain married to all her life. As she spends her time with Bela, she is continuously visited by the memories of Udayan. It is to be noted here that when she had walked into her in-law's house after she married Udayan she had unquestionably discharged all the duties and responsibilities as expected of her as the daughter-in-law of the house by her in-laws, although she had done all that unhappily. In Rhode Island, Gauri shuns her Indian attire, chops off her long hair and adopts the western outfit. But she fails to terminate her ties with the past which lives on in the form of her memories that constantly interfere with her present. Migration does not free her from the memories and trauma of the violence and tumult surrounding the Naxalite movement to which she has been a witness, she dreams of sea-gulls, screeching and attacking one another, bloodied feathers and dismembered wings on the beach after she gives birth to her and Udayan's daughter Bela. She feels exactly the way she had felt after Udayan's death: "Again, as it was after Udayan's death, there was an acute awareness of time, of the future looming, accelerating." (Lahiri 144). One morning on the way to the bus stop Gauri and her daughter Bela catches the sight of "a carnage of earth-worms" (Lahiri 169) covering the pathway, which reminds her of the bodies of the Naxalite party members which were left behind by the police in order to scare people. Bela is strongly repulsed by the sight of the earthworms and she is scared to walk across the lawn to her school bus. She requests Gauri to carry her to the bus stand. But Gauri tells her that she is too big to be carried. Then she tearfully pleads to Gauri to allow her to stay home. But Gauri pays no heed to Bela's request, rather she is unnaturally annoyed at Bela's reaction. Lahiri writes, "Another mother might have indulged her. Another mother might have brought her back, let her stay home, skip a day of school. Another mother, spending the time with her, might not have considered it a waste". (169). Gauri rebukes Bela and forces her to avail the school bus: "If you don't get on the bus we're going to walk to school. Over more worms than this.... Don't make a scene, Bela. Don't be a coward." (Lahiri 170). Gauri feels alarmed by Bela's reaction at the sight of the earthworms. It becomes difficult for Gauri to watch Udayan's daughter scared at the sight of the earthworms though Bela's reaction is nothing unnatural for a six years old child. It is Gauri's memory of Udayan as a brave party cadre that interferes with her present making it difficult for Gauri to accept natural emotional responses of her daughter. She feels a compulsion to break the truth to Bela. And it is due to Subhash's objection that the truth might be too shocking for Bela to absorb she abstains from revealing the truth. Gauri's memory and trauma also manifests itself in her dream: she dreams of Udayan, much younger to her in age. Gauri does not get over the guilt of helping Udayan in the killing of a policeman and thus orphaning his son though she was unknowingly involved in this act. Gauri never recovers from this trauma which in turn affects the life of Subhash and Bela.

Subhash's present is heavily affected by Udayan's death which leads to his marriage with Gauri. Subhash has to cope with Gauri's aloofness and the fear of losing Bela once her identity is revealed to her. Subhash himself is dominated Udayan's memory and his life is shadowed by Udayan even after his death. Subhash feels insecure about Bela's inclination towards activism which according to Subhash she has inherited from Udayan: "And yet sometimes he felt threatened, convinced that it was Udayan's inspiration; that Udayan's influence was greater. Gauri had left them, and by now Subhash trusted her to stay away. But there were times Subhash believed that Udayan would come back, claiming his place, claiming Bela from the grave as his own." (Lahiri 225). In fact, Subhas's decision to migrate to America for pursuing his PhD was motivated by his desire to outshine Udayan: "He was proud to have come alone to America. To learn it as he once must have learned to stand and walk and speak. He'd wanted so much to leave Calcutta, not only for the sake of his education but also - he could admit this to himself now - to take a step Udayan never would." (Lahiri 40).

It is evident that the event not only disrupted the daily lives of those who participated in the movement but also profoundly deranged the lives of those who combated it and finally of those who were related to them. When Gauri meets the young widow of the police officer and her son, she feels that she has met herself. The widow of the police suffers the same ordeal as that of Gauri, struggling with widowhood and burdened with the difficult task of bringing up her son alone. After the death of her father-in-law, Gauri does not accompany Bela and Subhash to Kolkata for the funeral. Finally, she leaves Rhode Island leaving behind only a note for Subhash and Bela.

Udayan and Subhash's parents are heavily affected by the killing of Udayan and the chain of events which follows. Udayan's father retires a year after Udayan dies. He distances himself from his wife Bijoli the only person living with him in his house. He stops reading newspapers to avoid facing the current events which might affect or have affected his life. He spends his days reading Mahabharata and similar other ancient tales, reading about events that they have not been affected by. When his eye sight is compromised by cataract he does not consult a doctor. He confided his wish to sell their house and relocate to another part of India to his wife Bijoli. This is noteworthy because even before Udayan and Subhash was born he had told Bijoli that owning a property in Calcutta however ordinary, it may be was important. And Bijoli had sold her gold jewellery in order to build the house on her husband's insistence. All his dreams surrounding the house was shattered. Udayan's father at one point also suggests reconciling with Gauri and Subhash and move to Rhode Island, where they would be able to enjoy the company of their grand-daughter Bela.

Bijoli is full of memories, the history of Tollygaunge, Mejo Sahib the descendant of Tipu Sultan, who had once lived there, on the same parcel that now formed their enclave, the communal violence during partition, when they were planning to move in to another part of the city in order to save their lives, how Mejo Sahib's nephew stood firm to protect the Hindus of the area, Mejo Sahib's family had fled after partition. She remembers watching dead bodies rotting on the roads during the Bengal famine. Bijoli remembers how she and her husband had built their house over time and how they had cared for it together. She remembers nurturing Udayan and Subhash, in their boyhood days and watching them grow up. Her personal memory of Udayan as a charitable, sensitive and socially inclined youth sharply contrast the way Udayan is framed and projected by the dominant political forces of the time. The trauma of Udayan's death sits silently in the subconscious of Bijoli, which finds a trigger in the death of her husband. After her husband dies Bijoli loses her sanity. She often walks to the memorial stone erected in Udayan's memory beside the lowland by the members of his party and talks to him as if he is alive. She starts picking out the empty bottles of Sunsilk shampoo, Dettol, cigarette packets that have been dumped in to the lowland.

Lahiri also touches upon transgenerational trauma through Bela. Gauri's act of leaving Bela and Subhash has a traumatic effect on Bela. There are remarkable changes in Bela's behaviour. Her performance at school declines badly and she requires psychiatric treatment in order to recover. Bela becomes an introvert and withdraws herself from people around her. She cries but does not discuss her pain with Subhash. Bela also withdraws from her classmates and wanders aimlessly. She becomes a lonely child. Just like Gauri, who become unpredictable after Udayan's death, Bela's temperament becomes unpredictable after Gauri abandons her. She keeps changing her job. Bela's trauma just like that of Gauri, also manifests itself in silence as she neither discusses about Gauri with Subhash nor does she mention her name to Subhash after Gauri leaves them. She breaks her silence after many years when she confronts Gauri as an adult when Gauri comes down to Rhode Island to handover the signed divorce papers to Subhash that he had sent her. Even after many years Bela refuses to meet Gauri or even speak about Gauri to her daughter. Bela writes to Gauri that she does not want her child to meet Gauri.

Bela also refuses to identify herself as the daughter of Udayan when she learns who she is, she even refuses to hear it. Bela urges Subhash to stop when he tells Bela that he is her uncle and step father at the same time: "She refused to believe him. She thought something had happened to him, that he had lost his mind, that perhaps he'd suffered a stroke.... Stop saying that, she said" (Lahiri 266). Bela is disturbed and reacts violently: "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." (Lahiri 266-267). As she comes to absorb the shock of the revelation, she grows curious about Udayan, the circumstances of his death and the Naxalite movement. But the shock is too much for her to bear, she refuses to listen to Udayan's letters, the letters that Udayan had sent to Subhash when Subhash offers to read out those letters to Bela. Bela leaves next day without informing Subhash and shuts down any communication with him for next few days. She rejects the truth of her identity: "She'd been lied to all her life. But the lie refused to accommodate the truth. Her father remained her father, even as he told her he wasn't. As he told her that Udayan was." (Lahiri 268). She remembers Udayan's portrait that she saw during her visit to Tollygaunge, that her grandmother Bijoli had referred to her as her father.

Following this revelation, she comes to understand the reason behind the strange behaviour of her mother Gauri and feels some sort of compassion towards her:

"Here was an explanation for why her mother had gone.... Here was the source of the compunction that had always been in her, of being unable to bring pleasure to her mother.... Around Bela her mother had never pretended. She had transmitted an unhappiness that was steady, an ambient signal that was fixed. It was transmitted without words." (Lahiri 268)

"She understood now why her mother had not returned with them that summer to Calcutta. Why she'd never gone back any other time, and why she'd never talked about her life there, when Bela had asked. When her mother left Rhode Island, She'd taken her unhappiness with her, no longer sharing it, leaving Bela with a lack of signal instead." (Lahiri 268-269)

The personal experiences of Udayan, Gauri, Subhash, Bela, Bijoli, the widow of the police officer who was killed by Udayan and the police officers who killed Udayan calls up the experience of a community which had revolted against the establishment, tried to suppress the revolt and have been a vocal or silent witness to it. These characters therefore establish a link between the personal and collective experience.

A trauma novel explore space as a symbolic representation of trauma. The particular place where traumatic experience is situated indicates that the trauma is a culturally specific event, the practices around this particular place attach particular meaning to the locations which takes up a symbolic value. Lang suggests a useful way to understand place when he writes: "The physical environment is often understood best as a symbol that represents cultural values and perceptions invested in a place" (Lang 89). The symbolic significance of the place expands the operation of the trauma and its significance for the individual as well as the collective. The landscape metaphorically presents the experience and remembrance of trauma. It also inaugurates a new approach to the interpretation of cultural and social trauma. It also acknowledges the cultural and political forces at work in the creation and erasure of trauma. According to Michelle Baladev, descriptions of the geographic location of trauma and the place of the traumatic event draws attention to the wider influences and the individual processes of memory and the configuration and reconfiguration of the self. (149-150). The Lowland also explores cultural trauma in terms of space. The lowland in Lahiri's novel is the place around which the life and memories of the major characters are organized. Subhash and Udayan spend their childhood playing around it, Udayan hides in the lowland overgrown with water hyacinth and is killed in it. Gauri watches her husband getting killed in the lowland. A memorial tone is erected there to commemorate Udayan's sacrifice by his party, to which Bijoli walks every day and talks to dead Udayan after she loses her sanity. The lowland gets filled up with litter following the death of Udayan. The residents of the locality dump their litter on Udayan's grave marker. Bijoli religiously cleans Udayan's grave marker every day only to find it covered in trash again. For Bijoli, Gauri and Subhash the lowland is synonymous to Udayan and his killing. The lowland dominates their mind for the rest of their life. It constantly reminds Bijoli of the childhood days of Udayan and Subhash, the two brothers have spent their days playing in and around the lowland. The sight of the lowland reminds her of Udayan's execution. When Subhash walks in to the lowland during his visit to Calcutta after Udayan's death he is reminded of the games he played with Udayan in the lowland, how he had once twisted his ankle while playing football and had returned home supported by Udayan. The lowland also symbolises the state of the Naxalite movement, the trauma of the movement, its suppression and forgetting. The lowland remained mostly flooded when Udayan was alive and Subhash was abroad. Soon after Udayan is killed the neighbours begin to dump their waste in the lowland. This relates to the withering away of the movement. After many years of Udayan's death, on her way to London, where she was supposed to deliver a lecture in a conference, suddenly Gauri feels an urge to visit Kolkata. Memories of Udayan, his execution and the movement continue to haunt her and forces her to visit Kolkata though had she avoided doing that on previous occasions. When Gauri returns to Kolkata, she finds that the lowland has dried up and new building are housed on it, while the Tolly club, the mosque the film studios stood still though now shielded behind new buildings. The drying up of the lowland and new buildings being erected on it indicates the effort put on by the existing socio-political institutions to erase the memories of the movement, the political and moral values associated with it. But the movement continues to influence people as Gauri gets to read about Naxalite activities in various parts of India, or in Nepal in American papers. She is also approached by her former student named Dipankar Biswas who is writing a book on Naxalite movement who is requests her to be his primary source for his work. Dipankar tells Gauri that his own uncle was involved with the movement and was imprisoned his grandparents managed to get him released and had sent his uncle off to England. He confides to Gauri that he was fascinated by Kanu Sanyal and that he would like to visit Naxalbari if he could.

III. CONCLUSION

In her novel *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri, thus explores how trauma plays a decisive role in shaping the life of the characters and that of a community. Years after the occurrence of the traumatic event the memories of the incident continue to stay with those who had witnessed it and were affected by it. Their self and identity and transformed and reconfigured under the influence of trauma unleashed by the act of violence. Their actions influenced by their memories. Their daily lives and emotions organized and shaped around their memories. Their unhappiness transmitted to people around them. Lahiri also explore how a community indulges in remembering and forgetting the event inflicting trauma in the life of a community. Despite the attempts by dominant political forces that do not sympathise with the Naxalite movement to erase the markers that may remind the movement the ideology and values related with the movement continue to propagate, intrigue and inspire the youth.

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