

Tragic Trajectory in Jumpha Lahiri's *The Lowland*

Dr. Padmavati S. Undale,

Assistant Professor, MIT Arts, Commerce & Science College, Alandi(D), Pune.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Padmavati S. Undale,

Abstract: The present research paper deals with the tragic trajectory in Jumpha Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*. The paper presents how the life of each character in the novel is full of tragic experiences. The novel is the story of two brothers and the impact of the death of one of the brothers on the whole family. The paper is an attempt to present the emotional suffering of the characters in the novel.

Keywords : Tragic trajectory, miserable life, loneliness, Naxalbari movement

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I. Introduction

Literature reflects the socio-cultural environment of the society. It depicts ups and downs in the development of the society. The literature mirrors the issues emerged in the society. The socio-cultural environment have a great influence on people. The transitions in the society may have positive or adverse effect. People willingly or unwillingly follow these changes. Adverse effects of the transitions and unwillingness of the people to follow the changes are the root causes of social unrest. People demand and revolt for a change. Such situations lead to social controversies. Literature presents this social scenario in the literary pieces. It depicts the victims of such controversies in the society. Literature creatively unfolds various angles of human life. Shelley in his essay *On Life in a Future State* (Shelley: 2007) described life as a miracle. According to him what can happen nobody can guess. These happenings have to be accepted with or without willingness. Nothing is predictable. These happenings bring changes in our life. That may be adverse or beneficial. Buddha explained four Noble Truths. The first noble truth is *Dukkha*. It means life is unsatisfactory, disjointed and suffering. The second is *Smudaya*. It means there is a cause of suffering which is attachment or desire. The third is *Nirodh*. It means once the person eliminates his cravings, ill will, delusions, and ignorance, then true and lasting peace is the end result. The fourth truth is *Marga*. It means path that leads out of suffering. These four noble truths reveal the real cause of man's suffering and ways to overcome these suffering to make life happy. But it is difficult for a common man to follow these truths. This inability to follow results into tragic happenings in life. The literature presents how man engages himself in the desires and attachments. The man caught in desires suffers if these desires are not fulfilled. Jumpha Lahiri presented tragic life story of Mitra family in *The Lowland*.

Jumpha Lahiri is one of the prominent women writers in English. Being the daughter of Bengali Indian emigrants, her writings reveal the presence of memories about India. She depicts struggles, anxieties and solidarity predominantly observed in human life. She has written novels and short stories. Her major works are *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and *The Lowland* (2013). *Interpreter of Maladies*, collection of short stories, won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. *The Lowland* was a nominee for the Man Booker Prize.

The Lowland is a story of a family, Mitra. The family consisted of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan and their parent. The father was a clerk in Indian Railway and mother did some earning by helping neighbourhood tailors. The story begins with the childhood description of the brothers, their love for each other and their parents' expectations from them like other parents. The novel describes the influence of Naxalbari movement started in 1967 and led by Charu Majumdar, Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal. Mao Tse-tung provided ideological leadership for the Naxalbari movement, advocating that Indian peasants and lower class tribal overthrow the government and upper classes by force. A large number of elites were attracted to the ideology spread through Charu Majumdar's writings. Udayan's involvement in Naxalbari movement became the cause of his early death which disturbs his family life. The novel also presents how Subhash's marriage with Udayan's wife, Gauri, though done by their choice turned into forced arrangement day after day and finally broken as Gauri left him.

Lahiri had skilfully presented this tragic trajectory in *The Lowland*.

Tragic life story of the characters:

Subhash:

Since childhood Subhash was cautious of everything. He helped his parents and never troubled them. His parents were not worried about him as he was most obedient and honest son in the family. Subhash, first, lost his dear brother as the police killed him due to his involvement in Naxalbari movement. Though he tried his best to convince his brother to stay away from such rebellious movements, Udayan continued to it. Subhash, insisted Udayan to join him in abroad for further study. But he did not show any interest in that. Since their childhood they did everything together. They supported each other. They had good bond of love and understanding. The two best companion walked on different path without each one's support. Even though, they continued their own choice of path, Udayan shared everything by writing letters to Subhash and invited him to come back as early as possible. Subhash was shocked as he heard the news of Udayan's death because Udayan never mentioned anything which could give a hint that he was in danger.

Subhash dreamed of having a good companion selected by his parents to continue happy family life. But circumstances forced him to marry Gauri, his dead brother, Udayan's wife. He took this decision because he observed that his parents did not treat Gauri well. He did not want to spoil Gauri's future in unprotected environment. He wanted to provide a good and healthy environment to Gauri and Udayan's coming child. But his decision changed his life. The relations between Subhash and Gauri did not developed as normal husband-wife relations. Subhash trusted that things would change after the baby came. That the child would bring them together, first as parents, then as husband and wife. But his expectations did not fulfilled fully. They became parents but not a good husband and wife. They did not have much communication between them. Subhash thought whether his decision to marry Gauri was taken in haste. Their married life was a failure, though he supported Gauri and Bela, her daughter. Subhash became father, but unfortunately he did not enjoy it because he always thought of what might happen when Bela would come to know that he was his uncle. This fear of being an uncle performing the role of step-father made him restless. In such circumstances he needed support but he did not received it from anyone as his true brother was dead, his parents were unhappy because of his rebellious decision to marry Gauri, and then his wife, Gauri wanted to stay aloof. His life became miserable. In addition to this, Gauri left him by giving whole responsibility of Bela.

It was very difficult for Subhash to handle all these circumstances. When Bela became grown up she often stayed away from home due to her study work. Once Bela informed Subhash that she was pregnant but she did not want to declare the baby's father name. It was once again a great shock for Subhash. He did not want Bela to continue with single parenting. He had replaced Udayan and turned into her father. But he could not want to become a grandfather in the same surreptitious way. He told her the truth of her life. He felt pathetic and frail. Bela reacted violently and left Subhash. That was again a very critical situation in Subhash's life because for a moment he thought he lost everyone in his life without his any mistake.

Thus, the story of Subhash is the story of a real sufferer who did not have imagined that his life would turn in such a miserable way. All his expectations turned into failure step by step, still he survived with great courage. He fought with all ups and downs in his life and tried to complete the responsibilities he had taken i.e. being son, brother, husband, father and later grandfather of Bela's daughter, Meghana.

Udayan:

Since childhood Udayan was different. He took initiative to challenge his teachers. While doing his college education, he heard about Naxalbari and involved in it. Udayan was not much worried about how his parents would get affected due to his involvement in Naxalbari movement.

He was connected with Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML). The task of CPI was to organize the peasantry support movement. They made headquarters in the villages. Their enemy was Indian State. They believed that the people of the whole world would be liberated from all kinds of exploitations of man by man and would celebrate the worldwide victory of Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Tse-tung's thoughts.

The villagers were tribal peasants who worked on tea plantations and large estates. For generations they lived under a feudal system. They were manipulated by wealthy landowners. They were denied revenue from crops they had grown. Deprived of subsistence wages, some died from lack of food. A sharecropper in Naxalbari tried to plough land from which he had been illegally evicted, his landlord sent thugs to beat him. They took away his plough and bullock. The police refused to intervene. After this, groups of sharecroppers began retaliating. They started burning records that cheated them forcibly occupying land. Peasants since generations generally revolted. This time their tactics were militant. Armed with primitive weapons, carrying red flags, shouting *Long Live Mao Tse-Tung*. Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal supported these peasantry movement. As the rebellion spread, the police started patrolling the area. Imposing undeclared curfews, making arbitrary arrests. A group of peasants, male and female attacked a police inspector with bows and arrows, killing him. The next day the local police force encountered a rioting crowd on the road. Eleven people were killed in this encounter. Udayan supported this peasant's rebellion.

By 1970, things had changed. Naxalites operated underground. Members surfaced to carry out attack. They ransacked schools and colleges across the city. In the middle of the night they burned records and defaced portraits, raising red flags. They plastered Calcutta with images of Mao. They fired pipe guns on the streets. They hid bombs in public places to fear people. They targeted unarmed traffic constables at busy intersections, wealthy businessmen, certain educators. The killings were sadistic, gruesome, intended to shock. Then new legislation was passed and the old law that had been created by Britishers to counter Independence, to cut off its legs, was renewed. That law authorized the police and the paramilitary to enter homes without a warrant, to arrest young men without charges. Udayan became victim of these circumstances.

After completing education Udayan became a teacher and was happy in that. He believed that his involvement in Communist Party of India would bring change. The explosion he did create hearing problem to him. He lost his fingers. He had to run to hide and protect himself from police. He complained of feeling alone even though he was in family. Police were under order to locate and arrest Udayan. They called Udayan to surrender. They warned him, if he had not surrender they would shoot his family members. Then, Udayan surrendered. According to them, Udayan had betrayed the country. They pushed him into the van. After going few distance. They stopped the van and one of the soldier freed Udayan. Udayan started walking back towards home. But then a gun was fired. Udayan was dead. They carried his dead body and did not inform what they did with that. This was the tragic death of Udayan, watched by his parents and wife. A young but misguided Udayan ended his life incomplete. Subhash felt that Udayan had given his life to a movement that had been misguided, that had caused only damage that had already been dismantled.

Gauri:

Gauri lost her parents in her early childhood. She lived with her brother, Manas. She brought up as an independent girl. She married Udayan but became widow in her early young age. At the time of the death of Udayan, she was carrying their child. Their marriage was against Udayan's parents' wish therefore they did not welcome Gauri happily. Udayan's early death created Gauri's life worst. As she saw his death directly, she lost the hopes in her life. The shattering of her happy married life made her miserable. Her brother-in-law, Subhash, knew her interest in learning, he married her and supported to continue her education. Gauri showed her willingness to marriage but after marriage she didn't find any emotional attachment with Subhash. She was always conscious of the thought that Subhash has married her to take her responsibility in the absence of Udayan. The memories of Udayan remained present throughout her life. She found Subhash different from Udayan but she didn't develop any wifely feelings about him which she had for Udayan. She maintained distance from Subhash because she came to know that there was an American woman in his life before her and she was just a replacement. She gave birth to a girl child whom she named Bela as Subhash suggested. She kept herself busy in study. She didn't develop a motherly attachment with Bela. She found Subhash as a good father for her daughter as Subhash took more care of Bela. She left Bela and Subhash to continue her study.

Gauri's life is full of miseries. She didn't get much parents' love, love in marital life, love of being a mother and love from in-laws. The happiness, satisfaction, pleasure and hopes remained absent in her life. Only the moments she spent with Udayan remained present in her life. She felt guilty when her daughter Bela accused her for leaving her in early childhood. Bela said Guiry, "You are as dead to me as he (Udayan her father) is. The only difference is that you left me by choice." (*Lowland*: 313) Gauri for a long time didn't communicate Subhash or Bela. She left alone at the end of the story.

Bela:

Bela is the daughter of Udayan and Gauri. She was not aware of her real father in her childhood. Gauri, her mother left her to continue her study. She found it difficult to live without mother. She became miserable. She overcame but lost faith in married life. She lived a free life. She stayed away from home for a long time. She wanted to grow her baby without father. She didn't want to disclose the name of man who made her pregnant without marriage. As Subhash knew the difficulties in being single parent, he didn't want to continue the same by Bela. He told her about her real father and his death. Bela had another shock in her life. She left Subhash as she was unable to accept this reality. After that, she disappeared as Gauri had disappeared. She left him never saying when she would be back. But she returned and gave birth to a girl's child whom she named Meghana.

Udayan and Subhash's parents:

The Lowland presents the tragedy in the life of parents who lost their expectations from their children. Udayan married the girl of his choice Gauri, whom his mother disliked. They expected their son to marry the girl of their choice. They describe their desire in one of the letters addressed to Subhash.

'We hope, when 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.' (*The Lowland*: 63)

But due to circumstances, he married Gauri, which was again not accepted by the parents. Udayan joined Naxalbari and police killed him accusing his involvement in Naxalbari activities. The parents saw how he

was killed by policemen. It made their life lonely and miserable. Their father renovate the house as he didn't want his sons to start their married life in the old house. But his dream of having full family with grandchildren didn't come into reality. Both father and mother lived lonely life as Subhash left for America and Udayan died. Even Subhash didn't attend his father's funeral as he was in America. It showed the tragic end of the father's life.

Thus, *The Lowland* presents how circumstances lead a man to do mistake and that mistake turns into suffering in the lives associated with that man without considering whether they are involved in that mistake or not. The novel is a comment on social, political, economical cultural dimensions of the society. It describes issues like rights of women, impact of Western culture on Indian society, Naxalbari movement, family relations, love between brothers, sacrifice for the betterment of the others, sense of loss and psychological crisis. All the characters in the novel had pleasure for a while in their life but grief through out the life. Lahiri described three generations story i.e. Udayan and Subhash parents who had happy life when they had children but as they become grown up they took their own decisions which made parents' life lonely. It is the story of unhappy parents. The second generation in which Udayan and Guari did not enjoyed their married life. Udayan was an unfortunate father who was not aware about his baby's arrival and ended his life without thinking much about his family. Gauri did not enjoy the pleasure in being wife or mother as she lost her husband within a short period of marriage life and in second marriage the memories of Udayan made her restless. She did not enjoy the happiness in being mother. She lived an isolated life by her choice. The third generation is of Bela, who lost both of her parents and lost belief in marriage system. Her daughter Meghana again did not know her real father. The novel depicts the series of tragedies occurred in various generations. The novel presents the real sufferings in human life.

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