

The Ideal And The Real: Characters As Foils And Complements In *The Lowland*

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to analyze the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* as foils as well as complements. Subhash and Udayan, the principal protagonists of the novel, are poles apart when it comes to their political ideologies and worldviews. One is a radical Marxist and the other is a more balanced and politically neutral person who is skeptical of sudden revolution. One is an admirer of Subhash Bose and Mao while the other practices the Gandhian values of humanity, kindness and tolerance. The paper tries to analyze the contradiction between violent political activism and a pragmatic and humane approach through Udayan and Subhash respectively.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* which covers a span of almost 60 to 65 years, shows the various political and social changes which the middle and lower middle class family of Calcutta pass through. The novel depicts clashes of various ideologies as they shape the political discourse particularly in the aftermath of independence. The novel tells the story of two brothers who belong to a lower-middle class family of Tollygunge in South Calcutta. Subhash and Udayan are the two brothers who right from the beginning are brilliant students with enquiring minds. Out of them, Udayan is the rebel who, in his quest to change the society, is so blinded by ideology that he destroys his own world. For the ordinary people like Udayan's parents he might appear to be brave but Lahiri questions such notions of bravery which looses anarchy on the

world. Right from his childhood, Udayan shows a streak of questioning the status quo as he wonders why only white people can enter the aristocratic Tolly Club whereas Subhash was always careful as the novelist writes, “Since childhood, Subhash has always been cautious.”¹ And about Udayan, she writes, “He was blind to self constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colours.”²

It was Udayan who encourages Subhash to break the law and trespass inside Tolly Club risking the ire of the watchman. This attitude of being a change shapes Udayan’s worldview making him both admirable as well as dangerous, heroic as well as doomed for death, a revolutionary, a zealot as well as a true and eternal rebel who dies for his ideal of an utopian world. Compared to him, Subhash, in the first half of the novel appears to be insipid, placid and unattractive. Only after the first half of the novel does the novelist start giving brush-strokes which in the long run makes Subhash’s character admirable and memorable. Subhash represents the super human courage of the ordinary man who acts on his conviction, whereas Udayan was a man of conviction who has contempt for a large part of the society and wants to eliminate a large section of the population for establishing his ideal republic. Udayan has more in common with ¹

Mao and Stalin who sacrificed millions of their countrymen for misguided concepts like the great ‘Leap forward’ and the centrally administered development programmes of the former Soviet Union. Subhash does not give-up the world or run-away from his worldly responsibilities.

Udayan is a classic example of how ideological moorings can leave an indelible impression on the young mind and change one’s life forever. As Udayan and Subhash attend their respective colleges, Udayan was always enthused by the speeches of Chairman Mao of Chinese Communist Party and thinks about bringing a similar revolution in India. He thinks that although India has got freedom from the colonial British Empire, real freedom for the poor has not come about. According to Udayan, real freedom will come with the coming of the communist revolution like it happened in China. For ushering in the revolution, Udayan becomes a part of the Naxalite Movement started by Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar. Udayan valorizes Fidel Castro of Cuba who was imprisoned at the age of 26 for trying to bring revolution in Cuba. But the basic difference between Fidel Castro who brought the revolution in Cuba and became the longest serving president of Cuba is that he remained a bachelor committed to revolution while Mao married and his wife unleashed a reign of terror in China and was

imprisoned after his death. Similarly Udayan falls in love with Gauri and marries her. Subhash who by this time had won a scholarship to an American University hopes in vain that marriage would stabilize Udayan's life. Little did he know that Udayan was getting more deeply involved in the violent activities of the Naxalite movement and without her knowing makes Gauri complicit in his political designs. Meanwhile, Mrs. Indira Gandhi had declared emergency and to stop the Naxalite violence which had engulfed the streets of Calcutta police adopted violent means. Many students were killed in police firing on the campuses. The Naxalite leaders had gone underground and were actively directing the committed cadres to carry out bomb attacks and assassination of policemen and political leaders. Udayan too actively participates in the uprising and is the mastermind behind the murder of a police inspector who was just doing his duty. Udayan uses Gauri in order to exactly pin-point the location of the inspector so that Gauri becomes a pawn in this game of violence and hatred. After the killing of the inspector, the police forces track down the killing to Udayan and ultimately he is killed in a police encounter.

Udayan is so possessed by the idea of revolution that for him anything that comes in the way of revolution is an obstacle to be removed. Human relations, responsibilities and obligations do not mean much to him as politics is the centre of his existence. For him what matters is the end and not the means. Even the sanctity of human life loses its meaning. The reverse is true of his brother Subhash. Subhash is most concerned about his relationships as well as the responsibilities brought about by relationships. Even as a child he used to help his mother in

sewing clothes. When he comes back to Calcutta after the death of Udayan, he feels repelled by the treatment of his brother's widow Gauri. He quarrels with his mother for her heartless treatment of Gauri. When he learns that Gauri is pregnant, he ultimately decides to marry her and take her to USA where she would be free from the tyranny of orthodox conventions:

“The only way to prevent it was to take Gauri away. It was all he could do to help her, the only alternative he could provide. And the only way to take her away was to marry her. To take his brother's place, to raise his child, to come to love Gauri as Udayan had. To follow him in a way that felt perverse, that felt ordained. That felt both right and wrong.”³

In short, this shows the humane aspect of Subhash but unfortunately his generosity is neither understood nor appreciated by his parents and Gauri. Subhash is so caring as a husband and so

non-demanding that he cooks his own food in the morning before going to office unlike his brother Udayan who talks about the empowerment of the deprived but at the same time expects all the house-work to be done by his wife:

“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.”⁴

Subhash practices in real life what Udayan preaches without making a show. Despite being a good and dutiful husband, Gauri does not value Subhash nor does she reciprocate his love. She is not even attached to the child she gives birth to. It is Subhash who cares for the baby and nurtures it lovingly all the time thinking that he is discharging his duties towards his brother. Despite Subhash’s attempts, Gauri is unable to love him and is interested only in the advancement of her own career. She enrolls in Subhash’s university for her masters in philosophy and Subhash actively supports her by adjusting his schedule so that he could take care of her child. After completing her masters, she enrolls for her Ph.D. in a university far away from Rhode Island and ultimately deserts him and starts her own career in California. Her daughter grows up in Subhash’s care and Gauri never looks back even for a moment in order to enquire as to what happened to Subhash and her daughter from Udayan. But for all her ingratitude, Subhash does not complain against her or has any ill will against her. It is Gauri’s daughter who hates her and resents the way she has treated Subhash. The only consolation for Subhash is that he gets love in full measure from his step-daughter who adores him.

Subhash’s life does not have the dramatic turns and twists which characterizes Udayan’s life. Subhash represents the balanced life of everyman whereas Udayan represents the life of a romantic aspiring for the impossible. Subhash in his own way is more than happy with the love he gets from Bela. He does not want to change the world he only has achieved the goal of being good in his personal sphere which amounts to a life lived well.

Subhash is not a political ideologue nor does he advocate any kind of activism. He does not indulge in high sounding rhetoric. As a student in USA he refuses to take part in anti-war protest during the Vietnam War. He only believes in living his life according to certain convictions without harming his fellow beings discharging his responsibilities to the fullest. He sacrificed his marital happiness for the sake of his brother’s love and daughter. He truly represents a human being who lives the Gandhian virtues of tolerance, kindness and generosity.

Throughout the novel, Udayan is a foil to his brother Subhash but at some points Udayan also complements Subhash. For example, Udayan always likes to take the lead instead of carefully calculating the cost and benefit. Udayan has a relentless capacity for tolerating physical discomfort and living in poverty. Although himself a brilliant student, who is selected to study Physics in Presidency College, he does not aspire to be a rich and worldly man. But like his ideals Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar, he preferred to embrace poverty becoming a humble school teacher while at the same time working for revolution. He lacks the desire for worldly success unlike his brother. He always lives in an ideal world of his own imagination hoping that the next day will bring revolution unlike his elder brother who was a realist who could bargain for a second hand car easily while it is impossible to imagine Udayan bargaining and carrying out a successful business transaction. As the dust jacket of the book declares, “.... *But they are also opposites, with gravely different futures ahead.*”⁵

Gauri is a brilliant student of Philosophy who can never overcome her strong and destructive love for her first husband Udayan. Although Subhash had been too generous to her, she can only accept a mechanical relationship with Subhash as a return for all that he has done for her. Even the act of sexual intimacy was an act of returning the obligation. Her feelings for Subhash is transactional whereas her love for Udayan is passionate, impulsive, sweeping, something which changes her personality forever. Udayan's impact on her is so infectious and permanent that she metamorphoses from a simple middle class Calcutta girl to a self-accomplished academic at the University of California, Berkeley. This change happens because throughout the period when she was living with Subhash, she felt the relationship to be a burden and wanted to be free to live her life keeping in mind the image of Udayan. Her love for Udayan is so intense that even after forty years of his death; she is ready to commit suicide with the hope of meeting him again after death.

“She leaned forward. She saw the spot where she would fall. She recalled the thrill of meeting him, of being adored by him. The moment of losing him. The fury of learning how he'd implicated her. The ache of bringing Bela into the world, after he was gone. She opened her eyes. He was not there.”⁶

Subhash for her, represents the ordinary the mundane, Udayan, the profound, the sublime idea which does not loose its grip on her. The idea on which she has hinged her existence. Thus, even

in the mind of one woman for whose love the two brothers aspired, they appear as opposites. But the same Subhash acquires a superhuman and stoic dignity in the eyes of his step daughter who wants her future husband to be modeled on him. Bela refuses to marry the father of her child and says,

“ Because he’s not the kind of father I want for my child. She added after a moment, He’s nothing like you.”⁷

Even when we compare Gauri who cannot come out of Udayan’s shadow, to Bela we find that there is a difference between Gauri’s attitude to motherhood and Bela’s attitude to motherhood.

“And yet this child, their child, was now determined to be a mother. Already he knew she would be a different mother than Gauri. He sensed the pride, the ease, with which she carried the child.”⁸

Udayan does not reveal the truth about his involvement in the murder of the inspector to Gauri and the guilt into which he without her knowledge made her complicit.

“ He knew that he was no hero to her. He had lied to her and used her. And yet he had loved her.”⁹

But Subhash in a contrasting manner is determined to tell the truth to Bela fully knowing that he might lose her love and affection forever.

“He was afraid Bela would hate him now, just as she hated Gauri. Because she had not married, he had not to give her away, symbolically or otherwise, to another man. But this was what he felt he was about to do. He prepared himself to give her back to Udayan. To push her away at the very moment she wanted to come back to him. To risk letting her go”.¹⁰

Again the contrast between Gauri, the mother and Bela- the daughter is quite telling. Gauri is a studious woman who loves reading whereas for Bela, even completing her school becomes a difficult job. The contrast between Subhash and Bela lies in the fact that Bela is distinguished by her social activism and her feelings for the poor and the environment. In this respect, she resembles her real father Udayan as she never aspires to an elitist job like Subhash and Gauri who are both distinguished members of the academia.

The novelist balances the claims of Udayan and Subhash by showing how Bela resembles her real father Udayan in her attitudes and ideology but in real life she solely loves and respects her step-father Subhash. Even for a moment she can never entertain the idea that anybody other

than Subhash can be her dear father. Bela represents the best of both the worlds, the ideal and the real, the mundane and the sublime, the reconciliation of the opposites, the fusion of the binaries. Ultimately, the two brothers and their worldviews are united in Bela. In the whole process of reconciliation of opposites, there is no space for Gauri. She can only wishfully hope for a closure when Bela's daughter Meghna grows up until then the storm unleashed by the persona of these two brothers is too strong for her to leave a mark in the private sphere of Bela who rejects her out rightly and holds her guilty of ill treating Subhash and herself. In the eyes of Bela, Gauri's guilt is too enormous to be washed away so soon. She has to wait patiently until the time when destiny decides to bring her redemption. Until that time, she has to bear the albatross of her crime.

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