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Broken Bonds: Maternal Absence and Emotional Turmoil in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland

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Abstract

Culture plays a vital role in everyone's life. Jhumpa Lahiri's acclaimed novel *The Lowland* was portrayed the rootless journey of Bella unfolds a tale of loss and emotional upheaval. This study aims to depict the harrowing conflicts and mental disarray inflicted upon Bella by her mother Gauri. Her inexplicable abandonment and negligence of motherhood made subhash as dutiful father. The novelist illuminates the subtle interplay between father and daughter that gives a profound exploration of splintered bonds and unspoken angst.

Keywords: Rootlessness, Abandonment, Derailment, Parent-child bond, Poignancy.

Culture is the most precious one in shaping people's life with trust, identity and social harmony. It is a connecting point between past and future that fostering unity and synchronization through shared practices which creating bonds of solidarity. In addition, customs plays a decisive part in defining gender roles and identities. It expects fulfilling responsibilities of man and woman being tied with each other. The culture also restricts opportunities of woman and marginalised genders. As it is not static, societies evolve with different cultural practices that are interpreted to promote gender equality, woman empowerment.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a celebrated author examined various cultural aspects and its acceptance through many novels and short stories. She received Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. Her first novel *The Namesake*, adopted into a famous film by Mira Nair. In 2008, another successful short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* was released. *The Lowland* is the next novel that was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and National Book Award for Fiction. Lahiri has published her first novel in Italian language is *Dove mi trovo*, later it is translated by herself and released by the title *Whereabouts*. *Roman Stories* is her debut short story anthology translated from Italian was recently released. Most of her oeuvre explored the themes of cultural assimilation, identity crisis and fragmented identities in foreign lands. These writings were explained clearly the multifaceted challenges that are faced by diaspora people who grappled with dual cultures, homes and languages. These dualities were carefully captured in Lahiri's narratives and established her literary voice.

In *The Lowland*, the political conditions of 1960s such as economic crisis, starting of Communism, and rise of Naxalite Movement were showed up as the background of Gauri and Mitra family story. Lahiri started to explain the second generation of Mitra family, Udhayan and Sub-

hash were growing up in Tollygune – ‘had built on reclaimed land’ (14) in Culcutta. Udhayan is brave and bold that leads him to actively participating Naxalite movement by Maoist ideology while Subhash is quite and studious left India for pursuing a degree on marine chemistry in Rhode Island, USA. Udhayan grows increasingly involved in revolutionary activities like hiding weapons, attacking officials and so on. The contrast between the brothers’ life was established. Udhayan was attracted to Gauri by political involvement with intellectual camaraderie. Gauri is a student of philosophy, independent, knowledgeable. They get married without the consent of his parents. Meanwhile, Shubash living a lonely, adjustable life but fascinated to new culture that makes him to keep distance even if he aware of political strife in India.

As Udhayan was deeply involved in radical activities turn him into a bigwig that increased his political obsession. Police and politicians intensify their onslaught on the movement. Resulting, Udhayan was killed by the police brutally in front of his family. He became sowed start in the lowland. “On it was Udhayan’s name. Beneath that, the years of his birth and death: 1945-1971. It was a memorial tablet, erected for political martyrs” (Lahiri, 110). His sudden death devastated his parents and pregnant Gauri. She was neglected and isolated by her in-laws particularly after Udhayan’s death. By seeing her delicate condition as an expectant widow Shubash proposed her on compassionate and responsibility ground to offer a new life in America. As no hope for peaceful life in lowland she reluctantly agrees to marry him.

Trust and understanding are the basic values for a good bonding of any relationship. Shubash and Gauri lead the detached life in Rhode Island even after the birth of Bela. Gauri is not prepared to be a mother for a new born baby since she couldn’t come out of tragic loss of Udhayan and hardly accept Shubash as her husband and a father of his brother’s daughter. But he took a responsibility as a father to Bela. The child itself gravitated towards him proving he is a sanctuary of security and affection to the child. We could observe it by these lines:

“She reacted to the sound of his voice as she lay in a flat cradle he formed by crossing one of one of his legs and resting his ankle on top of the opposite knee. In the nest of his folded limbs cushioned against his thigh, she lay contentedly, seeking him with her eyes” (Lahiri, 175)

As Bela was matured, her communication with mother filled with anxiety and emotional detachment. Gauri also behaved rudely as a stranger with Bela pointing her mistakes by an aloofness and uncharacteristic of maternal affection. By this contradicting nature of mother, Bela withhold the happenings in school and intimate details that daughters typically share with their mother. Lahiri sensitively expressed the disconnection and longingness of Bela for Gauri’s approval like her friends do. Her absolute disappointment with Gauri made her to seek reassurance and care from her father. This is noted by Lahiri as “She was failing at something every other woman on earth did without trying”(197). It is poignantly captured the intricate interplay of estrangement and connection within this fractured family dynamic.

Gauri was obstinately rejected to acknowledge Shubash as her husband and the father of Bela. For Shubash, Bela’s entrance in his life imbued with renewed cause and ecstasy. Consequently, Gauri becomes incapable of embracing maternal tenderness because of reminding Udhayan’s loss. To her, Bela’s arrival seemed as a forerunner of desolation rather than solace. She is diverting her focus to get intellectual pursuit for escaping haunted memories of the past. By doing this, she failed to grasp Bela as the embodiment of hope and continuity. Traditionally, a newborn baby will be a transformative, ushering a sense of renewal and purpose for a mother, who perceives the new world through her child. But Bela symbolized a painful history. Shaffer denotes the vital role of maternal affection as “Usually mother love is regarded as an absolutely essential requisite for development of life” (22). Bela was deprived of foundational nurturing and affection since Gauri is too young to comprehend mother’s turmoil.

When Gauri concentrated only on research, Bela adapted her mother’s absence with resili-

ence and navigated daily routines independently. Even after the departure of Gauri to California, her shadow remained in Bela's consciousness. Gauri had given many indelible scares like avoiding talking on her birthday and listening her words of feelings and memory. But Bela reminded oblivious to the permanence of mother's absence, clinging to the hope that she will come back one day. Lahiri has pictured the character Gauri as a crucial symbol of mother and wife by the absence of fulfilling societal expectation. This gender study indicates the formation of family and society for practicing such actions by the name of love, care, responsibility beyond personal fulfilment.

In an adolescence stage, Bela's estrangement begins to fade her relationship with Shubash. This sudden shift gets trepidation, his father role undermined by the secret identity as a stepfather. Bela did the same to Shubash what Gauri did on birthday. This emotional retreat pierced the heart of dedicated father. Shubash is tormented by his helplessness to alleviate Bela's pain and blaming Gauri for the emotional damage. "At times Gauri capitulated, holding on to a book she was reading, stealing glances while it was Bela's turn. She played, but it was never enough" (Lahiri, 193). Shubash thinks that this kind of rejection took away Bela's good will and innocence. Gauri is unaware of this change since she was submerged in research oriented works.

Jhumpa Lahiri's this intricate exploration brings out the divergent approaches to parenthood that pictured the pressure between self-sufficiency and familial responsibility. We can see this from the perspective of gender studies also. Gauri's maternal negligence and poignant withdrawal constitute a rejection to conform patriarchal anticipation of motherliness. When Simone de Beauvoir affirms that women has historically confined to the role of 'eternal famine' that explicated by sacrifice, submissiveness, reproduction and domesticity. By avoiding these roles Gauri searches intellectual independence and modify her identity. However, her denial of maternal concern originates emotional derailment for Bela who rose up in a fractured household that makes her to catch between freedom and guilt. In contrast, assumption of care giving respon-

sibilities of shubash subverts conventional gender binaries. He became an example of Nancy chodorow's psychoanalytic argument that the parental tasks are culturally reproduced instead of biologically fixed. His parental care not only compensates Gauri's absence but also challenges patriarchal recommendations of fatherhood.

Apart from gender role and binary opposition the diasporic context further convoluted these roles. In America, by alienation, Gauri reinvents herself as an academician that highlights her detachment from cultural familial setup. Likewise, Homi K Bhabha's idea of the 'third space' clarifies the pressures inhabited by Gauri that caught between inherited cultural prospect of Indian motherhood and revised life in America. It proves that Gauri is occupied an in-between space where identity is always negotiated. In contrast, Shubash accommodated himself in the affective effort of paternity rather than renunciation.

As a result, *The Lowland* novel not only transpired the individual characters but a crucial interrogation of gender role, sentiments and diasporic identity with grand values. By Shubash's dedication and Gauri's withdrawal Lahiri foregrounds the tenuous family union through the splash of migration that explaining how diaspora restructure motherhood and fatherhood in an unsettling way.

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