

A Study Of Family Ties In The Novel The Lowland By Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract:

“Family is not an important thing. It’s everything”
- Michael J. Fox

True to the words of Michael J. Fox, Family is an important place to share love and care among the relations. Family relationships help the child to develop communication skills and builds trust and respect. The keys to developing healthy family relationships include making relationships a priority, communicating effectively and providing support for each other. Families vary in the expectations they hold regarding children’s behavior and this leads to differences in family relationships and communication styles. In the novel *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the life of two inseparable brothers Subash and Udayan and how their life gets changed when they grow up. Their ideologies are changed and as a result, Udayan becomes a naxalite and Subash takes up further studies at Rhode Island much against his brother’s wish. The novel depicts the relationships between the two brothers Subash and Udayan and between Udayan’s wife Gauri and Subash and between Gauri’s daughter Bella and Subash. Thus it is a sort of complicated family relationship that Lahiri portrays in *The Lowland*. *The Lowland* was a nominee for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book award for Fiction.

1. Introduction

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri was born in London and brought up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Brought up in America by a mother who wanted to raise her children to be Indian, she learned about her Bengali heritage from an early age. Lahiri's debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), was adapted into the popular film of the same name. Her book *The Lowland*, published in 2013, was a nominee for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction. Lahiri is currently a professor of creative writing at Princeton University.

The Lowland is a novel about family, love and sufferings. The novel revolves around the lives of two brothers Udayan Mitra and Subash who were born and raised in Calcutta. Though, they were raised together, their perspectives towards their life differs. They both share the same location and background as children. But their area of interest has taken a different path. Though Udayan was younger, he is bolder than Subash. Udayan was most interested in politics. The novel portrays the story of two brothers Subash and Udayan born apart by 15 months. Udayan, the younger brother gets inspired by Mao and involves himself with Naxalbari movement. Subash plans to pursue his higher education in Rhode Island. Though Subash and Udayan grow up together, they have difference of opinions which make them to take up different ways in their life and the more Udayan becomes involved in politics, the more Subhash feels alienated from him.

Subash never confronts his brother because "He was sick of the fear that always rose in him: that he would cease to exist, that he and Udayan cease to be brothers, were Subhash were to resist him". (30) Udayan hates Subash’s decision for leaving Tollygunge to Rhode Island, "You're the other side of me, Subhash. It's without you that I'm nothing. Don't go. It was the only time he'd admitted such a thing. He'd said it with love in his voice. With need." (31)

Udayan informs Subash about his marriage with Gauri through letter and asks him to come home for the celebration. Udayan and Gauri’s love is unconditional and appealing because they both develop mutual interest between them. Gauri leaves her home for Udayan and elopes with him while Udayan opposes his parents and marries her. Gauri accepts the tortures given by her mother-in-law for Udayan and bears his child. On the other hand Subash gets into an affair with Holly, an American and takes care of her son Joshua well.

We could learn about the love relationship between Gauri and Udayan. They talk about politics, Gauri's childhood and about her love for philosophy and independence. Udayan died when he was in the Naxalite movement. He was killed by the government officials. Subash came back to India on hearing Udayan's death. When he sees the photo Udayan, he cried which shows us their brotherhood. Eventhough they are in different perspectives they value each other very much. Subash returns to Calcutta when he learns of his brother's death. While Subash's parents refuses to tell him about Udayan's death, it is Gauri who tells Subash about Udayan's activities with some resistance initially. And Subash eventually learns that Udayan was shot before his parents eyes. Gauri is pregnant with Udayan's Child and Udayan's parents ill treats her after his death since she has married him without their consent. Subash comes to know that his parents wants only Udayan's child and plans to forsake Gauri after giving birth. At this point Udayan feels compassionate towards Gauri whom his brother loved so much and so tells her to come with him to Rhode Island so that she will have better life and also it is good for the child that she is bearing.

When Subash learns about Gauri's pregnancy, he was much worried about her. He was so concerned about that he marries Gauri after. He takes her to US. Gauri is haunted with the memories of Udayan. Gauri accepts Subash's offer to America and marries him soon after Udayan's death as a means of staying connected to Udayan.

Gauri marries Subash and comes to America but she doesn't live happily with him because her memories torment her of the past about Udayan's death and how they loved each other much. Gauri goes to the University and attends philosophy lectures and gets interested in studying than anything else. Though Gauri loves Udayan so much, she doesn't want her child to be born like him and so aspires for a girl child and also gives birth to a girl child named Bella.

Subash and Gauri never have intimacy in their life, though they have sex occasionally. Subash gets intimate with Bella and he doesn't want him to be seen as her uncle but her father. This makes him to forbid going home for a long time worrying that everyone will see him as Bella's uncle in his homeland. At times, Subash felt that Gauri cared for Bella still she didn't feel happy when she looks at her. Subash thinks

Though she cared for Bella capably, though she kept her clean and combed and fed, she seemed distracted. Rarely did Subash see her smiling when she looked into Bella's face. Rarely did he see Gauri kissing Bella spontaneously. Instead, from the beginning, it was as if she'd reversed their roles, as if Bella were a relative's child and not her own (190-191).

As Bella grows up, Subash takes care of her as his own child and even chides Gauri for going errand leaving Bella alone. Whenever Gauri asks Subash to tell Bella about Udayan, Subash neglects her. This shows Subash's love towards his brother's daughter and also for the rest of his life Subash behaves like Bella's real father.

When Subash asks Gauri to prepare herself for another child to play with Bella, Gauri remains quiet. It is obvious that Gauri's interests are towards studies than taking care of her child Bella and infact she doesn't care for Bella and Subash. Gauri spends most of the time reading books at the nearest library and even tries to get positive comments from the professor Otto Weis who appreciates her talent and motivates her to do doctorate. Gauri wants to spend the rest of the time by studying without any disturbances and she views Subash and Bella as external disturbances. Subash also remains aloof because of Gauri's silent treatment at home. They both never share anything and their only subject of talking is about Bella.

Subash and Bella goes to Calcutta leaving Gauri at Rhode Island upon his father's death. But before their arrival Subash informs his mother Bijoli not to reveal Bella anything about Udayan. But Bijoli couldn't forget Udayan, infact both Bijoli and her husband were haunted by Udayan's memories.

She sees him coming into view, approaching the house after a long day at college. He walks through the swinging door into the courtyard, a book bag over his shoulder still clean-shaven, focused on his studies, eager to settle down at his desk. Telling her he's hungry, thirsty for tea, asking why she hasn't already put the kettle on. (217)

When Bella and Subash go back to America, they find a letter written by Gauri and find that Gauri has left them and moved to California. Gauri herself insists in the letter that she leaves Bella to him for all the good things that he has done to her and Subash is a better parent than her. She states "You are her father. As you pointed

out long ago, and as I have long come to accept, you have proven yourself to be a better parent than I. I believe you are a better father than Udayan would have been" (257)

After Gauri's departure, Bella begins to face the trauma of growing up without a mother and so she keeps herself aloof from Subash. It takes a year almost to reconcile herself. Gauri begins to feel alone and although she wants to go back, she never does and involves in lesbian relationship with Lorna. Bella occasionally comes to visit Subash, who at that time was in relationship with Elise, who was Bella's school teacher.

Oneday Bella reveals Subash about her pregnancy of an unknown father whom she wants to raise alone and so Subash was compelled to tell the truth about Udayan because he thought that Bella was taking him as role model to live alone throughout her life. When Bella gets to know the truth, she goes out of the home upset and disgraced. Later she reconciles and begins to realise why her mother left her alone "She could not blame her father for not telling her until now. Her own child might blame her, someday, for a similar reason. (327)

Bella forgives Subash despite hiding the truth from her and asks him to stay with her again in Rhode Island and she begins to love Subash knowing what he'd done. Bella eventually meets Drew and gets engaged after the short courtship. Gauri comes to Rhode Island to give Subash the divorce paper which he has asked for through email. When Gauri finds Bella and her four year old daughter Meghna, Bella introduces Gauri as her grandmother's friend. When Meghna is out of earshot, Bella tells Gauri that she cannot forgive her. It shows the great ordeal that Bella has overcome during the absence of her mother. When Gauri moves to Tollygunge to see her brother Manash, she gets a letter from Bella that perhaps oneday Bella would tell Meghna everything about Gauri and three of them can meet because of Meghna's wish to see Gauri again. Subash marries Elisa and moves to Elisa's ancestral homeland Kenmare.

2. Conclusion

Gauri accepts Subash's offer to go to America only because of the change of circumstance after Udayan's death and the academic advancement that she longs for and not for any love that she feels towards Subash. And so she stays with him until her carrier advancement and moves to California after doctorate. Her life becomes jolted because of Udayan's memories which lead her to leave her daughter Bella alone and so she spends the rest of her life alone. But Bella, unlike her mother, decides to bring up Meghna by herself. It is only at the later part of the novel Bella gets to know the truth still acknowledges Subash as her father and hates her mother for leaving her. Jhumpa Lahiri gives more importance to relationships and complexities in human relationship in her novels.

Work Cited

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