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A STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THE LOWLAND" AS A CONUNDRUM OF SINGLE FATHER-
DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This research article intends to discuss the relationship between a father and a daughter in the last novel by the Diasporic author Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*. This relationship is not about a biological father and his daughter but it comes with a twist. So, this paper endeavours to study the psychological and behavioural repercussions of an estranged marriage on the child and how the gender difference between a father and a daughter makes the matters worse. The paper concludes with the observation that mother's walking out of a marriage makes the daughter also distant from the father. And the daughter comes closer to him only when she herself is in the same shoes as him: becoming a single parent.

Key words: Diaspora, single parent, father-daughter relationship, gender difference

Amy Tan reviews *The Lowland* in these sublime words- "The kind of writer who makes you want to grab the next person you see and say 'read this'" *The Lowland* is different from the other previous works of Jhumpa Lahiri in the sense that it doesn't delve deep into the immigration crises but rather into the human relationships, irrespective of the geographical locations. Out of all the relationships, the most important to study is the relationship between Subhash, Udayan's elder brother and his daughter Bela.

Lahiri has always been concerned with the predicaments wives face when they come to a foreign land along with their husbands. The husbands have a dream to follow but wives have to bring about a meaning in their axiomatic presence in a distant land. As Safran says, "they continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship" (1991: 85).

But this paper endeavours to study the psychological and behavioural repercussions of an estranged marriage on the child and how the gender difference between a father and a daughter makes the matters worse. The paper concludes with the observation that mother's walking out of a marriage makes the daughter also distant from the father. And the daughter comes closer to him only when she herself is in the same shoes as him: becoming a single parent.

This novel is about two brothers, Udayan and Subhash, one of whom dies in the very beginning, leaving his pregnant wife Gauri whom his brother marries. Subhash carries her with him to Rhode Island where he is doing research on Oceanography.

Jhumpa Lahiri's first big novel was *The Namesake* and she gives due importance to names as very important trait of a personality. That's why it is pertinent that Subhash's taking charge of naming Gauri and Udayan's daughter is his deciding for himself that he has totally accepted his fate. He was the parent who first

thought of her name, rather than her mother. And his intuition was so strong that he could not even think of a boy's name. He was the first person to welcome Bela in this world, after she came out of her mother's womb.

"Already, she seemed to be recognising him. To accept him and to allow him to ignore the reality that he was an uncle, an imposter. He felt purposeful as he held her, essential to the life she'd begun." p146

Subhash was very close to his parents but he dithers going back to him when Bela was born only because he didn't want to be around people who could see the reality of Bela's birth.

"But his motivation was his own. He didn't want to be around the only other people in the world who knew that he was not Bela's father."p155

Inspite of his busy academic schedule, he preferred spending time with her, no matter he was not his biological father. "Every night, at Bela's insistence, he lay with her until she fell asleep. It was a reminder of their connection to each other, a connection at once false and true."p156

The biggest show of their love to each other takes place when she was not even five. Still very young, Bela has a language to tell him how deeply she loves him.

"Do you love me?

Yes, Bela.

I love you more.

More than what?

I love you more than you love me.

That's impossible. That's my job.

But I love you more than anybody loves anybody."p156

He was so deeply attached to her that "when she closed her eyes that cessation of activity felt as unsettling, as final, as death."p157

When Gauri sought his permission to hire someone to look after Bela, 'He told her no. Not for money it would cost but on principle, not wanting to pay a stranger to care for Bela.' 162

This is not to argue that Gauri's attachment with Bela was any less, at least in the beginning. Bela came as a fresh breeze in her new life in Rhode Island. "When she was with Bela, even if they were not interacting, it was as if they were one person, bound fast by a dependence that restricted her mentally, physically. At times it terrified her that she felt so entwined and also so alone."p163

But soon, she becomes exhausted with this incessant responsibility of bringing her up and devoting all her time on her. She started despising Subhash's luxury of working in his lab and spending time with their daughter at his own will. "Due to no fault of his own, when he did appear, sometimes she was barely able to stand the sight of him, or to tolerate the sound of the voice that, in the beginning, had drawn her to him."p163

The juncture when Gauri started getting alienated away from Subhash and gradually from Bela was when she started to go to attend her evening classes daily and Subhash and Bela would spend time together. "And so she felt antagonised by a man who did not even know the meaning of the word."p164

Her strong love for Udayan and his untimely death made it difficult for her to love anyone else with the same intensity, not even Bela. Though Gauri begrudged this lack of intimacy but she "feared she had already descended to a place where it was no longer possible to swim up to Bela, to hold on to her." p164

Lahiri tries to explain this change in Gauri by throwing some insight into the psychological pressure she had to handle with the drifting away of her love for Udayan too. "Anger was always mounted to it, zigzagging through her like some helplessly mating pair of insects. Anger at him for dying when he might have lived. For bringing her happiness, and then taking it away. For trusting her, only to betray her. For believing in sacrificing, only to be so selfish in the end." p164

Distancing away from India helped her forget Udayan. His presence in her life was only in the form of Bela, nothing more. Gauri could not come closer to Subhash because the happiness of Subhash kept juxtaposing against the misery of Udayan. Gauri thought of his pleasure Subhash when he spent a whole week making merry with Bela during the snowfall. And just then "she remembered another thing. How, at the height of the crackdown, the bodies of party members were left in streams, in fields close to Tollygunge. They were left by the police, to shock people, to revolt them." p169

Subhash was livid with anger when he caught Bela alone, and Gauri on her swashbuckling afternoon venturing down the building. He severed all his communication ties with her and lambasted her with these words, when he finally called the truce, "My mother was right. You don't deserve to be a parent. The privilege was wasted on you." p175. And this was the harbinger of a new twist in relationship dynamics: his aloofness with Gauri and proximity with Bela accelerated. "He no longer wanted to touch her in bed, he no longer brought up the possibility of a second child." p176

The second transformation was ushered in when Gauri finally leaves their life, in order to make some sense out of her life. Gauri writes a letter to Subhash, though it doesn't help ease his turmoil and shock. She abandons Bela on the pretext of doing a favour to him. She writes "In exchange for all you have done for me. I leave Bela to you."

Subhash had always been a very emotional and affectionate man but he was left with just one female in his life. His mother was losing sense of the world around her and Gauri had now chosen to leave him to a world that had just his research work and the responsibility of raising his brother's daughter. Though he could sense that the marriage had lost all the charm for Gauri but it never occurred to him that she could ever renounce their cosy world.

Initially, things were not smooth for both the father and daughter but gradually he trusted her inner instincts and let her take her own space and time. Bela moved to her mother's room and went into a shell of her own, just like Gauri used to negate his presence. Bela's fierce independence came as a shock to him and 'his confidence as a father shaken now that he was alone.' p214 But he acted with maturity and helped her set up her room.

The real irony in this whole scheme of things is catapulting of the relationship dynamics. As against the natural anticipation that Bela would come closer to her father, after her mother leaves them, she drifts apart. The real repercussion of Gauri's absence from their life proves to be the absence of closeness between Subhash and Bela. Bela shuts herself up in such a cocoon that Subhash's Birthday also loses all its importance to her. And not just Subhash, she sequesters herself from the rest of the class too, doesn't participate in any club. When he is informed of Bela's deteriorating performance at school, he wants to call Gauri and scream "You have left her with me and yet you have taken her away".

A psychological study conducted by the researchers of the University of Groningen observes that "The effects of divorce were adjusted for parental depression. In both self reported and parent-reported data, we found a three-way interaction of gender, age and parental divorce, indicating that with increasing age, parental divorce became more strongly associated with depressive symptoms among girls, but not boys. These results suggest that girls with divorced parents are at particularly high risk to develop depressive symptoms during adolescence."

Through a depressing chain of events, Subhash realises that Gauri had been punishing him as Udayan was not there to be punished, and now Bela was punishing him because Gauri was not there to be punished.

"It is a crucial part of a young girl's development to womanhood that she develops a stable relationship with her father. Girls are emotional beings who crave intimacy and closeness, and if their relationship with their father seems out of place, it could have profound effects on them psychologically and in their relationships with other people. Low levels of fatherly interactions with daughters can result in insecurity issues, along with promiscuity at an early age. Such behaviour interrupts the development of the child, and they can experience externalised and internalised turmoil for the rest of their life."

In due course of Bela's transforming into a grown up girl, Subhash realises that she was vehemently against the academic ideology of both Subhash and Gauri. "And he remembered Udayan, suddenly turning cold to his education, just as Bela had." p221 He comes to term with stark reality that no matter how hard he tried, no matter how deeply he loved Bela, she was turning out exactly like her biological parents, and totally rejecting subhash's traits. "She disappeared. As Gauri had disappeared, her vocation taking precedence. Defining her, directing her course." p223

Lahiri makes it very clear that when the mother leaves the child, she becomes elusive and introvert. Subhash tries very hard to know about any romantic partner Bela might be having but she always comes alone. Even the bunch of friends she comes home to was never introduced to him. But he is pleasantly surprised at

Bela's bouncing back to life, envisioning a meaningful world for herself. In spite of Bela's precarious negligence, he was possessive about her. Sometimes, he would be paranoid of Udayan's coming backing and reclaiming Bela back as her daughter. Showing her father's rebellious instincts, Bela becomes pregnant and is adamant to bring the baby to this world. Once again, Subhash is bewildered to look at the coincidence. "A pregnant woman, a fatherless child. Arriving in Rhode Island, needing him. It was re-enactment of Bela's origins. A version of what had brought Gauri to him, years ago." p264

The book traverses the journey of Subhash being a single father and in turn, Bela looks at this as her role model and decides to become a single mother. She is not at all bothered about the identity of the baby's father. Subhash finds it easy to replace Udayan as her father but "he could not become a grandfather in the same surreptitious way." p267

As the novel progresses, a certain shift in Bela and Subhash's relationship comes when he finally reveals the truth of her biological father. She feels betrayed that she had all along been lied about but she now gets an insight into the real behavioural pattern of her parents' relationship. She understands the unhappiness in Gauri's personality, she understands the compunction in her and she appreciates what Subhash did for her. Her deciding to live with him during the final days of her pregnancy come as a redemption to him and the birth of her daughter effaces all the distance between them. She "told Subhash it made her love him more, knowing what he'd done."

To conclude, Subhash's relationship with Bela takes a roller coaster ride, going up and down. From the initial inception of Bela till Gauri leaves her to him, they share a bonhomie that was very deep, but after that the relationship touched its nadir and Subhash is left with no choice but to bear the rejection of Bela. The final denouement comes when Subhash tells her the truth of her birth and she understands their responses to it. And things fall into proper place when she herself becomes a single parent and comes to terms with all the things Subhash had done for her.

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