

QUEST AND STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY IN GOURI AND SUBHASH AS DEPICTED IN 'THE LOWLAND'

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Abstract:

Quest and struggle for identity is a basic to the human world. With the decline of grandeur and dignity of human life in the post world war era, the crisis has intensified. Man faces unprecedented rootless, loneliness and alienation. His quest is to attend a personal view of life and world which makes the life meaningful and a sense of belonging to him. Quest for identity is the most common theme in Diasporic literature. Lahiri's works manifest the notion of being uprooted from homeland and also put emphasize on the quest for blending in the host country. Her characters try to find out new identities of their own in new world. Here in this paper I have tried to find out how the central characters in The Lowland struggle for identity in the journey of their lives. I have also tried to raise the basic questions related with the quest for identity and struggle of first generation. What they feel in the dislocated land, how they stand up in their life.

Keywords:- identity, quest for identity, struggle for identity, identity-crisis, immigrants, diaspora

Introduction:-

Jhumpa Lahiri had carved a secured niche for herself in the chaotic blooming of literature. Her works contain the themes of conflict in relationships between couples, families, and friends. Through these relationships she explores ideas of isolation and identity, both personal and cultural. The characters in her works frequently encounter crises of identity, which are tied to their inability to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity.

The Lowland is Lahiri's second novel, after The Namesake, published in 2013. The theme of quest for identity, identity formation and crisis, and continual search for identity colours Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel "The Lowland" with the nostalgic note in the host land. In The Lowland we are introduced to a middle class family of Calcutta, set in late 1960's and early 1970's. Two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, close to one another- almost incomplete with the other. They are not only brothers but friends and support each other, very industrious and intelligent who always secured good position in their

academics. Subhash was the elder brother of the two. They were very close to each other. Subhash was thirteen, older by fifteen months. But he had no sense of himself without Udayan. Subhash had been cautious since childhood on the contrary Udayan was charismatic and impulsive. The two brothers were quite different in their attitude but very similar in their physical appearance and their voices. The similarities and difference between them is more evident in the words of Gauri as:-

“The same height, a similar build. Counterparts, companions, though she’d never seen them together. Subhash was a milder version. Almost the exact pitch and manner of speaking. This was the deepest and most startling proof of their fraternity.”¹

There is a vast difference in their nature also. Gauri realize this, she feels it as reflected by the novelist,

“She was thankful for his independence, and at the same time she was bewildered, 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.”²

Subhash and Udayan both followed different ideologies. So Udayan remained in India but Subhash moved Rhode Island – America. They have difference in their outlook- as Subhash want to go abroad and wish to have successful career; Udayan who is a socialist, on other hand, wants to do something for the people while living in Calcutta. Udayan always had anger when his brother Subhash and he were not allowed to enter the golf club in their childhood. He dislikes the notion that rich has privileges over poor in every aspect of life. He is against the idea that the rich have large ground to play golf while the poor is living in congested place. He asks his brother to stay in India and to do something for the common man who is trodden by rich and powerful. But Subhash has high aspiration to do something great in his life. He is able to secure his admission in a Jadhavpur University to study chemical engineering. And Udayan, the younger one, goes to Presidency University, one of the best universities in Calcutta to study physics. From this point, they take up different roads to achieve their goals in life and own identity in society. After completing his master degree, Subhash enrolled for Ph.D. in Princeton Rhode Island, USA to work on chemical engineering and got busy in his research. On other hand, Udayan, while studying physics in Calcutta, got involved into politics. Accompanied by his friends, Udayan goes against Governmental policies which his friends and he considered as harsh for the betterment of poor common men. Udayan came in contact with Kanu Sanyal, and Charu Mujumdar, famous leaders under whose influence he joins them and became comrade.

At college Udayan meets Gauri who is a scholar of political science. He falls in love with Gauri and soon marries her in spite of the refusal of both parents. Only after marriage, Udayan informs his brother Subhash about his marriage and sends Gauri’s photograph. On the other, Subhash is all alone in America. The sense of

rootlessness and alienation is vibrant throughout the narrative. He misses his family, even their voices. When he is surrounded by scientists and other students he felt alone.

*“For a year and a half he had not seen his family. Not sat down with them, at the end of the day... In Tollygunge his family did not have a phone line. He'd sent a telegram to let them know he'd arrived. He was learning to live without hearing their voices, to receive news of them only in writing.”*³

Life was going easy till the day when Subhash, all of sudden, received a letter informing him the killing of Udayan. Much grieved and shocked by the news, Subhash at once leaves USA for Calcutta where he meets Gauri who was a widow and isolated in the house due to Indian tradition just after two years of marriage. According to Indian customs, Gauri is not allowed to eat fish and dine with the other family members. Under the harsh custom and traditions, she is not entitled to have pleasure of foods, clothes and other joys. Subhash does not like the customs and feels injustice for her. He thought of Gauri living with his parents according to their whims. His mother's coldness towards Gauri was insulting, but his father's passivity was just as cruel. Their treatment to Gauri was deliberate, intended to drive her out. Subhash imagined her as becoming mother only to lose control over child. He thought of the child being raised in a joyless house. Therefore he decides to marry Gauri, his brother's widow and shares his feeling and desire with the family. His parents disapproved it by informing him –

*“To take his brother's place, to raise his child, to come to love Gauri as Udayan had. To follow him in a way perverse, that felt ordained. That felt both right and wrong.”*⁴

Subhash comes to conclusion that the only way to prevent injustice to Gauri is to marry her and take her away. It was all he could do to help her. So he takes Gauri to US and both of them start a new journey of life. Gauri, in due course of time, is blessed with a cute daughter Bela. Subhash considers her as her own daughter. He asks Gauri not to disclose secret of her father and past to her. Though Gauri accepts Subhash as her husband, there is somewhere in her mind she is haunted by the past and the memories of Udayan.

*“Even now the part of Gauri continued to expect some news from Udayan. For him to acknowledge Bela, and the family they might have been. At the very last to acknowledge that their lives, aware of him, unaware of him, had gone on.”*⁵

She remembers her past now and then as how Udayan used to talk to her, how they used to dine and how they used to make love by preparing a chart as when to make love and when not to. Such memories of her past disturb her happy married life.

As a father Subhash is a perfect one. He spends days and night with Bela and fulfills her wishes. But Bela is not a dear daughter of Gauri because Udayan and Gauri were not in fact prepared for a baby but somehow she got pregnant and was forced to give birth. This fact made her restless and her interest in Bela began to decrease with the passage of time when she wants to study philosophy. As Bela was not a planned child, a kind

of burden that Gauri carries after the death of Udayan. She considers her daughter as a hurdle in her way to goal.

Quest for identity in Gauri is more evident when Subhash, after returning home, finds out Bela alone unattended by Gauri. He did not talk to Gauri for a week. Gauri took it positively and wished to create her own identity. Gauri shifts into another room where she used to study and takes rest. Gauri wants to stand on her own feet. She needs a space for herself where she should be able to nurture her dreams. In some way or other, Bela becomes an obstacle in fulfilling her dreams and making her identity. It is interesting to the difference between Ashima from *The Namesake* and Gauri here. Unlike Ashima, Gauri does not want to be a perfect Indian housewife doing all the chores of household from morning till evening, whose priority remains her family and husband.

The quest for identity on the part of Subhash reached up to the point of leading professor in US. Subhash leaves India in quest for his own identity. He adopts the new culture as if he has been a part of it. He does not want to remember his past and refuses to go back. He adopts new practices, assumption, tradition and morals. The identity is a process of continual construction, perpetually open to change. This openness can be found in Subhash when he feels free of any social and ethical constraints of the old world in the new culture. It is interesting to note that the characters like Gauri, Subhash, Ashima, Moushmi, Ashoke, Ruma perceives displacement as an opportunity to start a new life on the other side of the world by rejecting or balancing the values of the old world. When he arrives at Calcutta University for delivering lectures, he was accompanied by his daughter Bela. Gauri does not want to come back in India due to the haunting memories of Udayan and their past married life. So she remains in US. In India, Bela was treated with great dignity by her grandmother. When he returned to US after conference, he found his house locked; he unlocked it with its keys and further found that Gauri is not there.

The quest for identity in Gauri is more prominent when she comes to US. It is interesting to note that the role of Subhash and Udayan's family is of immense value in the identity formation of Gauri. The family curbs her wishes which ultimately find their way when Subhash takes Gauri with him to US. One day in US, when Subhash came back home, he did not find Gauri. He was upset and searched her everywhere. In home he finds-

*"In one corner of the floor, all her saris, and her petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scraps of various sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws. He opened her drawers and saw they were empty. She had destroyed everything."*⁶

And few minutes later when she came back, he found her with new hair cut. But he could not do anything.

"Her hair hung bluntly along her jawbone, dramatically altering her face. She was wearing slacks and gray sweater.....where are you? I took a bus from union, into

town. I bought few things. Why did you cutoff your hair? I was tired of it. And your clothes? I was tired of those too."⁷

She has not only shed her saris, petticoats blouses but also has freed herself from the shackles of traditional duties of household, family and traditional clothes. Her hair cut is a symbol of her individuality and her acceptance of new world. This incident of hair cutting and going outside without accompanied by Subhash and throwing off the traditional clothes can be interpreted as her first step for searching her identity. The incident for leaving home for higher studies can be seen as her culmination point of quest for self-identification. Her love for studies makes her so restless that she left the home at once. She does not bother about her husband, her daughter, the family and not even about society. She becomes more American in her manner and living style than a Bengali woman when she crosses the boundaries. This strong determination leads her to her true identification. She wants to establish herself as a good teacher. Being a voracious reader and a good learner, Gauri joined teaching profession. Her new life is described as-

*"She entered a new dimension, a place where a fresh life was given to her. The three hours on her watch that separated her from Bela and Subhash were like a physical barrier, as massive as the mountains she'd flown over to get here. She'd done it, the worst thing that she could think of doing."*⁸

Professor Weiss had helped Gauri get into the doctoral program in Boston, and then get her first teaching job, in California. After her first job, she moves to teach in Santa Cruz, and then in San Francisco. But she had come back to Southern California to live out her life. She establishes her area of interest and specialization in German Idealism and the philosophy of Frankfurt School. She becomes a good teacher of which she had dreamt. In the classroom she introduces her students to the great books of philosophy, to the unanswerable questions, to centuries of contention and debate. She taught a survey of political philosophy, a course on metaphysics, a senior seminar on the hermeneutics of time. She broke her larger classes into discussion groups, sometimes inviting small batches of students to her apartment, making tea for them on Sunday afternoons. She is not only teacher but mentor too and highly respected by her students and colleagues. This can be cleared with the following lines-

*"Her colleagues welcomed her. Her students admired her, were loyal. For three or four months they depended on her, they accompanied her, they grew fond of her, and then they went away. She came to miss the measured contact, once the classes ended. She became an alternate guardian to a few..... Certain former students sent her notes at the holidays, invited her to their weddings. She made time for them, because she came to have the time, because she saw to the needs of no one else"*⁹

Apart from the teaching, her research output was steady and esteemed by a handful of peers. She had published three books in her life: a feminist appraisal of Hegel, an analysis of interpretive methods in Horkheimer, and the book that had been based on her dissertation, that had grown out of a blundering essay she'd written for Professor Weiss: "The Epistemology of Expectation in Schopenhauer". In her forties, she becomes a visiting scholar

at Heidelberg University. But her ideology was isolated from practice, neutered by its long tenure in the academy.

It is interesting to note that in spite of her Western clothes, her Western academic interests, her Indian identification does not change. She remained a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and, against the backdrop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had wed. Her appearance and accent caused American people to continue to ask her where she came from, and some to form certain assumptions. She had remained a citizen of her birthplace i.e. India. She was still a green-card holder, renewing her Indian passport when it expired.

Work cited

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