

**THE STRUGGLE WITHIN: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY  
OF THE MAJOR CHARACTERS IN  
JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND***

**Meenu**

Department of English  
Maharshi Dayanand University,  
Rohtak, Haryana,

**Abstract**

Understanding human mind has been a constant endeavour of the artists. Literature, too, is replete with works that focus on human psychological make-up. The complexities of human mind are difficult to understand. Freudian technique of psychoanalysis provided a new path to unravel the inner recesses of mind and explain human behaviour. The present paper deals with Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* and uses psychoanalytic theory to understand the behaviour of the major characters. Subhash and Udayan are brothers but they are quite different from each other. Their psychological make-up leads them in different directions. Udayan's impulsiveness makes him a radical and takes him away from his family. Socially concerned Subhash tries to set things right. He struggles within himself before he settles down the storm in his life. Gauri who is traumatized by her husband's death goes through upheavals in her mind and hence her life. Her daughter, Bela, deprived of mother's love is equally disturbed. This paper explains this psychological struggle that each character undergoes.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, struggle, behaviour, disturbed, trauma.

Literary works try to understand human life and behavior. Human psychological make-up has been an area of interest in literature since ages. Aristotle discussed the effect of a tragedy on the audience but it was Sigmund Freud who made the groundbreaking contribution in psychoanalysis by emphasizing on the unconscious part of the mind as the major source of all our actions. It gave an altogether different way of thinking about human mind. He also gave literary allusions to elucidate his point. In literature, psychoanalytic literary theory adopts the principles of psychoanalysis given by Freud to interpret a literary work. It maintains that a literary work is like a dream in which the real matter is not directly expressed. The hidden material can be discovered by making use of this theory as it goes beyond the obvious and locates other potentials contained in the text. It can be used to understand a literary work as a writer's own neurosis as well as to understand the characters in any literary work. It provides a window to the mind of the characters and gives insights about the mental processes going on in them. This paper is an attempt to look at the major characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* by applying Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Most of the critical works on Jhumpa

Lahiri's works explore the themes of rootlessness, alienation or study of the women characters. This paper deviates from these themes and tries to explore the psychological make-up of the characters using the psychoanalytic theory.

*The Lowland* is about the lives of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan. Although they resemble each other, both are poles apart in their attitude towards life. Subhash is reserved and responsible whereas Udayan is radical, dominant and daring. His behaviour is instinctual and governed by id as the writer says "He was blind to self restraints" (Lahiri 11). According to Freud id strives to bring about satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle. In spite of being asked not to set a foot on the new pathway Udayan walks on it just for the sake of fun "forming impressions of the soles of his feet" (Lahiri 12). He does not shy away from flouting rules. He joins the Naxalite movement which leads him to his death. Like the impressions of his feet, his death also leaves a permanent mark on the lives of all those related to him. Though he loves his brother but there exists sibling rivalry between them. In Freudian terminology "sibling rivalry" is "the competition between siblings to win parental favour" (Barry 97). Even as a child Udayan tries to win his mother's attention by hiding himself and then his mother has to leave her work and search him. After his death his mother religiously visits his memorial stone in the lowland.

On the other hand, Subhash is introvert and studious. He goes to the U.S. for graduate school. This journey of Subhash is not just physical but also psychological one. India is symbolic of the world of rules and restrictions. Subhash is bound by societal and familial rules. These rules internalized as his superego repress his desires. But movement to the U.S. means freedom from these rules and hence his libidinal force suppresses the superego and takes id to the forefront. This is exemplified in his physical relationship with Holly. But his overpowering superego will not let him go against his parents' wishes. Unlike Udayan, he is unable to marry a girl of his own choice. Unfortunately this, too, does not help him win his parents' love. Yet again he feels defeated in winning his mother's love. He finds his parents more inclined towards Udayan even after his death. The return of the prodigal son was not celebrated as his parents do not come to the station to receive him when he arrives in Calcutta after his brother's death. He is aggrieved by this behavior of his parents: "He understood this diminished welcome but he could not understand why, after he'd travelled for more than two days, after he'd been away more than two years, his parents were unwilling to come even this far to acknowledge his return" (Lahiri 88).

It is perhaps because of this rivalry that Subhash never tries wholeheartedly to stop Udayan from taking part in the Naxalite movement which ultimately leads to his death. His unconscious wish to do away with his brother is thus fulfilled. He then marries his wife and accepts his unborn child. In this way his desire for revenge gets sublimated. According to Freud, "sublimation is the transforming of an unacceptable impulse . . . into a socially acceptable . . . form" (qtd. in "Sigmund Freud"). His superego does not let him do anything immoral. So instead of becoming a murderer he becomes a saviour. He does his best to look after Gauri, his wife and Bela, his daughter. Later he discovers that Gauri leaves Bela alone at home. He feels infuriated but does not give vent to his anger. He does not shun Gauri for Bela's sake and also because she is not financially independent. So his superego makes him internalize the anger. He, at once, identifies with Bela. Freud explains identification as "perception of a common quality which is shared with some other person" (qtd. in "Sigmund Freud"). This common quality is Subhash's own failure to win his mother's love. He always had a sense of insecurity because of Udayan. He still fears that "Udayan would come back, claiming Bela from the grave as his own" (Lahiri 225). Eventually Bela, too, withdraws from him once her mother leaves home.

Subhash struggles to deal with the commotion created in his life by the death of his parents and brother, Gauri's betrayal, Bela's indifference and his friend Richard's death. He has no one to belong to. He sees some birds trying to get food from a tree, "an act of survival that now offended him" (Lahiri 246). This feeling of offence for their desire to survive is symbolic of his own desire to die, that is, his "death instinct" which Freud describes as "an urge in organic life to return to an earlier stage of things" (qtd. in "Sigmund Freud"). But his guilt free conscience makes his life instinct stronger than death instinct which does not let him think of suicide as a way out. He does not isolate himself from others. He meets Elise Silva, Bela's teacher. In one of their meetings she asks him the reason for his disturbed state of mind. He confides the upheaval created in his life to her. It is only after he verbalizes his anxieties that his mental health is restored and he finally moves on in life. He divorces Gauri and marries Elise Silva. Bela also comes back to him. So, his conflict abates only when he is able to overcome the crisis in his life.

The inner struggle is most prominent in Gauri's character. Her personality is marked by conflict between id and superego. As Nancy Chodorow puts it:

According to psychoanalytic theory, personality is a result of a boy's or girl's social-relational experience since earliest infancy. These social relations are appropriated, internalized and organized to constitute his/ her personality, adding to the total structural organization. At the same time, these are important determinants of any person's behaviour, both which is culturally expected and that which is idiosyncratic or unique to the individual.

Gauri grows up away from her parents with her brother Manash, in their uncle's home. By the age of sixteen she has lost her parents and grandparents. On the conscious level she pretends to be happy to be a loner but her desire to have a support system makes her marry Udayan. Unconsciously she fears loneliness and hence finds "the constant din more soothing than silence would have been" (54). She observes others from the balcony. "She'd observed the world . . . all of life from this balcony. Political processions, government parades, visiting dignitaries . . ." (Lahiri 54). After marrying Udayan she feels that she can divulge her feelings to him. Her hopes are dashed when he gets preoccupied with the Naxalite movement. She realizes that she has been prepared by her husband to live alone. Then his untimely death leaves her unaided to face the silent hostility of her in-laws. These familial and social norms make her repress her desire of living a happily married life. She internalizes these norms and becomes an introvert. She feels isolated in a hostile world and lives a melancholic life with her second husband, Subhash. Repression makes Gauri behave abnormally. She is always irritated: "She felt antagonized by a man [Subhash] who did nothing to antagonize her, and by Bela who did not even know the meaning of the word" (Lahiri 164).

She also fails to become a good mother. She thinks she will discover the mother in her with time. She assures herself that it is like "a favourite pen that would turn up a few weeks later, wedged between the sofa cushions" (Lahiri 164). Her choice of words implicitly expresses her repressed sexual desire. Freud famously said: "unconscious wishes are always active and ready for expression whenever they find an opportunity to unite themselves with an emotion from conscious life" (Interpretation of Dreams ch. 7). This desire is again manifested in one of her dreams in which she finds Udayan much younger than her. It also explains that she is stuck in the moment of Udayan's death and cannot move on in life. She feels traumatized by this tragedy and in absence of any psychological help, she becomes an introvert and alone she tolerates the burdensome life with Subhash. She is traumatized by Udayan's death as well as by the horrors of the Naxalite movement. This experience throws her into isolation even when she is surrounded

by people. She struggles to come out of it but fails utterly. Even remarriage and migration to the U.S. cannot help her. Time and again she is reminded of Udayan and feels him watching her. She even expects to get some news from him. Also, she is reminded of the bloodshed caused during the movement: “She dreamed of gulls on the beach . . . screeching and attacking one another, blood feathers, dismembered wings on the sand” (Lahiri 144). While dropping Bela to the school bus she sees “a carnage of earthworms” which brings back to her memory the bodies of party members which “were left by the police, to shock people” (Lahiri 169). She never fully recovers from this trauma and struggles with it all her life.

Gauri’s deepest wish to live with Udayan still lurks in her unconscious. This fixation takes a toll on her life as a mother. She neglects Bela, her daughter, and communicates very little with her. She rather prefers her work to spending time with Bela. Michiko Kakutani calls her a “cold, selfish witch who’s fulfilling her nasty mother-in-law’s worst predictions.” This “maternal ambivalence” (Barrett) makes her guilt stricken. She leaves Bela in Subhash’s care and goes to California where she takes up a job. Gauri unconsciously punishes herself by separating Bela from herself. The act of unknowingly helping Udayan in killing a policeman and thus orphaning his son gives rise to a feeling of guilt which she could not get rid of even after moving to the U.S. Gauri appears to be a projection of Jhumpa Lahiri’s own psyche. She projects her own fears and anxieties as a working mother through the character of Gauri. The guilt feeling in Gauri for destroying Subhash’s and Bela’s life does not let her live a peaceful life in California also. This guilt stops her from making friends and thus she punishes herself with loneliness. She feels doubly alienated. First, as an immigrant and secondly as rejected by her own family. Sense of belonging is a basic need and in its absence she loses her desire to live. Like Mrs. Dalloway she feels “there was an emptiness about the heart of it” (Woolf 33). This makes her lose her Eros. She holds the desire to end her life. Loneliness and rejection make her feel “an embrace in death” (Woolf 202). Gauri’s death wish is reflected in the “Para praxis” i.e. slip of tongue: “She had wanted California to swallow her” (Lahiri 233). Her liking for “the rich fog of certain afternoons” is symbolic of her death instinct (Lahiri 235). She, indeed, tries to commit suicide but her life instinct stops her. At the end of the novel Gauri is left alone whereas Subhash and Bela move on. She even ceases to exist for them. The lowland appears to be a metaphor for Gauri’s life. It is drowned by the two ponds during monsoon every year. In the end, the lowland also vanishes. It is populated with houses. Gauri’s life is also shattered by the two brothers who never fully understand her.

The person most adversely affected by Gauri’s actions is Bela, her own daughter. She craves for mother’s love which she never gets. She fears that her mother will leave her for the sake of her work. This fear is manifested in her dream in which she finds “their house burned down to a skeletal frame . . . with only the file cabinet, intact . . .” (Lahiri 202). In the dream, Gauri’s work has been displaced by the image of the ‘file cabinet.’ Whenever Bela tries to reach to her mother she finds the door shut. The door is symbolic of the barrier between Gauri and Bela. Bela’s fear comes true and Gauri leaves her. The impressionable mind of the child is scarred forever by this decision of her mother. She loses interest in everything. Kumari Shail Bala says, “Neurology approves this fact that man/ woman becomes crazy or eccentric because of the constant pressure of nerve caused by suffering and suffocation” (123). Suffering in Bela’s case is separation from her mother. She cries but never discusses anything with her father. This repression mentally disturbs her. She stops mingling with her classmates and wanders aimlessly. Judith Herman maintains,

Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. (qtd. in Blake)

But timely psychological help saves her from slipping into neurosis. She leaves home once she comes to know that Subhash is not her biological father. Savita Iyer Ahrestani says, she “becomes something of a nomad, wandering the country, surviving job to job”. Though Bela isolates herself from her parents, her isolation is productive. Unlike her mother she does not undergo self-destructive mode rather she helps others through her work. She is also not a blind optimist like her biological father. Her psychological conflict subsides when she decides to be a mother herself. Thus, her desire to get motherly love gets sublimated, just like that of Subhash, when she chooses motherhood for herself.

A literary work does not directly express the psychological material. Just like dreams it makes use of symbols. In *The Lowland* the fragmented lives of the characters are presented by an equally disunified narrative which shifts in time and place. The characters are not able to live in the present as they are always disturbed by the past events. The narrative, thus, aptly presents their unconscious mind which, according to Freud, is chaotic. Symbol like creatures “burying themselves in mud” for survival, subtly represents the struggle of the characters themselves (Lahiri 1).

Thus, in *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s focus shifts from immigrants’ experience to their psychological landscape. This landscape can be discovered by using psychoanalytic theory which attempts to fathom into the psychological makeup of the characters. This paper is an effort to show how the characters battle within themselves with their deep fears and repressed feelings. It mentally disturbs them and makes their lives a struggle, both physically and mentally. Subhash and Bela are able to overcome their repressed fears and desires. Their conflict is lessened through sublimation of their desires. Migration to the U.S. proves to be psychologically beneficial for Subhash but not for Gauri. She is unable to strike such a balance. Her unfulfilled desires and sense of betrayal haunt her all her life.

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