

The Effects of Inescapable Memories in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract

The paper discusses the effects of disruptive memories in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland. The death of Udayan and the memories of it make the existence of three characters dysfunctional: Bijoli, Gauri, and Bela. Of them, the former two have witnessed the killing while the latter has vicariously felt its everlasting impact on her psychological upbringing. Bijoli, who is the mother of Udayan, is rooted to the time and place of her son's killing, and Gauri, the wife of Udayan, is crushed in between the remembering and the forgetting of her husband's existence. Gauri wants to but cannot forget the past she left behind; her attempts to forget, on the other hand, largely affect her daughter, Bela's life. The article focuses on the overwhelming and all-consuming power of unpleasant memories and concomitant psychosocial crisis of them.

Jhumpa Lahiri's recent novel *The Lowland* (2013) reverberates with memories of Udayan whose unexpected death brings a lasting effect upon his near ones. Throughout the novel, memory, accompanied by its perennial effects, seems impossible to escape. Memories, with their multifaceted form of happiness and sadness, are the essential keys for any human identity. It is the mental stimuli that reappear on the human mind even after the original consequences and images have ceased to exist. Sometimes the memories of unpleasant events disrupt the human lives. Lahiri sheds light on these dimensions of dark memories and their haunting aftermath. The characters—Bijoli, Gauri and Bela—who are directly and indirectly related to Udayan's life obviously suffer from the wound of losing him. In fact, the burden of his memories is ineluctable—so much so that it lingers and affects them for the rest of their lives.

Udayan Mitra's absence has an all-consuming power in his family. His convivial presence, interest, and enthusiastic involvement in politics are such that they make his personality much more charismatic than his brother, Subhash. The lively presence of Udayan at home is so powerful that even his brother's successful and safer career abroad cannot sound that impressive beside his nonconformist lifestyle. The Naxalite activism leads him to his untimely death. He became a revolutionary member of the Naxal movement and was trapped in the murder of a policeman. Even his wife, Gauri, not sure of his exact motives, assists him in that murder. Later, he was killed in a police encounter near his own house in Tollygunge. And the shocking part is that his family members witness the murder. After such a terrible experience, the family eventually faces a kind of adverse attitude from the society which also leads to an intra-family crisis. Udayan's mother and wife can neither nurture the memories of Udayan nor afford to remember the experience of such a terrifying death scene. It is an experience that is not translatable, so his family consciously avoids talking about his existence and death. However, the readers receive detailed information about the murder scene from the following narrative:

They saw one of the soldiers undoing the rope around his wrists. They saw Udayan walking across the field, away from the paramilitary. He was walking toward the lowland, back toward the house, arms raised over his head ... For a moment it was as if they were letting him go. But then a gun was fired, the bullet aimed at his back. The sound of the shot was brief, unambiguous ... She watched his arms flapping, his body leaping forward, seizing up before falling to the ground. (105)

Udayan's tragic end turns the family dysfunctional; nothing can possibly be rectified further. It magnifies the rift of mutual understanding between Gauri, Udayan's wife, and Bijoli, his mother. Then arise the questions of how they would come to terms with the death or what their approach would be in case Udayan's memory surfaces. In case of Bijoli, the mourning for her dead son is the only way she can find to cope, but for Gauri, the response is much more suppressed. Later on, this suppression leads to her inability to cope with the absence of Udayan. Larry Ray's comment is relevant regarding this situation: "death ... evoke[s] powerful responses and it is crucial whether these take the form of reconciliation with the past (mourning) or melancholic repression of grief followed by the repetition of trauma that cannot be expurgated" (145). The death of Udayan might be a form of mourning or a form of repressed trauma. There are twofold expressions in the novel: one is the integration of mourning in present life, which endures the tragic death, while the other rejects the dark memories through an evasive tendency, through the series of departure. The manifestation of grief here is psychosociological; for example, Bijoli's form of reconciliation is to mourn, to be attached to the wasteland of Tollygunge, while Gauri's apparently suppressed emotion is only to get a sort of temporal relief from her current identity crisis. The firsthand experience of watching Udayan die at the hands of the police has already created a deep scar on the psyche of both Gauri and Bijoli, and this image is inscribed permanently on their memories in a way that it goes with them wherever they choose to live, be it Tollygunge or Rhode Island.

The lowland which could be a safeguard for Udayan is cluttered up with filth and unwanted things. The neighborhood often uses it as a place for wastage. It is so unproductive a land, a "muddle" of mourning that nobody cares to clean it except Bijoli. There is a memorial stone of Udayan's inside that marshland, and Bijoli loves to clean the place because this is how she actually keeps her son's memory intact. Perhaps, by doing so, Bijoli comes to terms with the intensity of her pain, and in one way or another, it gives her the strength to survive. Staying in Tollygunge and never thinking of leaving it, she always cherishes the idea of being attached to the lowland which might help her live and relive the past. For her, the memories of the lost son are not traumatic ones, rather she fixates herself on that particular past event because she finds it more bearable to accept and to live with. In a way, it reduces the burden of remembrance: "Remembering is thus conceived as an activity which takes place in and is fundamentally shaped by the present" (Whitehead 91). Throughout her life, she always expects to see her son Udayan again, coming out from the hyacinth, safe and sound: "She waits, certain that he is there, that he hears what she tells him. She talks to herself, to no one" (190-191). Grappling with that past event, she begins with a solitary journey that seems to deny even the existence of her other son. She feels the shame of "not only surviving one child

but losing another, still living” (186), and the reason of which, perhaps, is Gauri-Subhash’s marriage. Udayan’s death creates a void, an obvious “family of solitariness.” It becomes an unspoken convention in the family that no one will mention anything consciously about Udayan or his death, and this single death disperses the previous relationship pattern in the family, breaking strings of harmony and drastically shifting the status quo. Everything that is related to this death has been thereafter silenced.

However, Gauri’s situation is differently excruciating. Unlike Bijoli, she needs an escape from the lowland: an escape from the eternal dilemma of forgetting and remembering. The act of remembrance has, then, hinged her to the burden of past and present. And it is unbearable for Gauri in whatever status she belongs to: a widow or a remarried one. After Udayan’s death, therefore, she has neither any secure roots in Tollygunge nor the bondage of love, care and happiness. The “memory of past emotions,” in this regard, appears as a deadlock for her. If she stays in Tollygunge further along with the memories of Udayan, she would be a common and neglected widow in an unfavorable setting. What aggravates her crisis more is that “a piece of Udayan in her womb” (186) is growing inside her body; significantly, it forces her to take the responsibility of her child even though her unexpected pregnancy has been discovered after Udayan’s death:

She wished the days and months ahead of her would end. But the rest of her life continued to present itself, time ceaselessly proliferating. She was made to anticipate it against her will. There was the anxiety that one day would not follow the next, combined with the certainty it would. It was like holding her breath, as Udayan had tried to do in the lowland. (111)

So Gauri’s decision to accept Subhash’s marriage proposal is just a way to evade the coexistence with trauma she confronts in Tollygunge. Milan Kundera, in his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, states that “the heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become” (5). In one way, it can be said that accepting burdens is a compromising survival which is somehow real and bearable in the present. On the other hand, the denial of past memories or any crisis might aggravate the pain even more. In this way, the concept of existential heaviness and lightness can be observed here, in this novel, in two ways of survival: Bijoli is assimilated into her present existence where she seems to be much more expressive with her pain whereas Gauri tries to be evasive by not clinging to her remembrance. The act of accepting burdens makes one’s existence lighter, and the rejection of it might bring an overwhelming heaviness onto life. Whitehead says, “to remember may be a crushing and painful activity but it is also a ‘responsibility’” (88). Gauri’s remembrance is a kind of responsibility that she tries to escape in several ways. She attempts to merge her Indian identity with an American one when she cuts her long hair off and tears up “all of her saris, ... throwing the old things into garbage bags” (141). Gauri even tries to cross the cultural barrier of her Indian self, but it seems an apparently futile attempt to remove that particular part of life from the whole memory block. As a result, this tendency to hide past identities could not help abate her psychic wounds. Even the displacement could not alleviate the burden inside her mind. Kaul’s comment regarding this issue is illuminating: “Memory is, above all, a

restless, energetic, troubling power, the price, and the limitation, of freedom; the abettor, and the interrogator” (269). It has a sort of “troubling power” to remind her of the roots she has left behind. Gauri does not return to Tollygunge after she leaves the place, but its memories always coexist within her, vacillating in the paradox of remembering and forgetting the past. Thus, the dispossession of culture or dislocation might give her a transitory relief from this crisis, but it draws a parallel line with her reality as well.

Eventually the reenactment of the past in Gauri’s life is more visible with the presence of her daughter, Bela. In terms of the Proustian memory concept, Bela’s role may be served as an “involuntary memory.” Udayan appears through Bela, causing a new crisis in Gauri’s American life. Actually, the involuntary memory is what takes out the “buried memories” in reality, and it is Bela who becomes a reminder of that buried reality. According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* involuntary memory “emerges unanticipated, unplanned, and unintended.” It is unintentional, but the presence of Bela also ensures the absence of Udayan in Rhode Island. Gauri’s relentless efforts to forget the past and Bela’s appearance are opposing factors. Gauri seems to be oblivious of her past, but the moments she is accompanied by Bela turns into “the madeleine moment” recapturing Tollygunge and Udayan. In this way, the recurrence of the past has such an enervating force that it causes discomfiture in Gauri’s life again. The consequence is no less severe: “The past is no longer inert and passive, but is powerfully reshaped in and through the concerns of the present. The delayed action of remembering, in other words, allows the past to develop, to evolve along with changing circumstances over time” (Whitehead 91). Although there is a possibility that Subhash and Bela might naturally develop a filial attachment in the USA, the missing role of Udayan comes forth strongly because of Bela’s presence. And it points out the fact that Udayan’s due responsibility is now performed by his own brother. In Rhode Island, just before the birth of Bela, Gauri even mentions it to Subhash: “‘Your brother was supposed to be here,’ she added. ‘This child should have been his responsibility, whether he wanted it or not’” (137). Rhode Island is far away from Tollygunge, but it stores an “essence of past” for Gauri. It seems to be a ceaseless traumatic time: “with Bela she [is] aware of time not passing ... of perfect silence in the apartment, replete with the isolation she and Bela shared” (163). She discovers gradually the dysfunctional relationship with Subhash, a relation that is more based on gratitude than on love. As a matter of fact, she is unable to form a perfect family without Udayan who holds the strings to love, and with his death, it falls apart. Then what remains with Gauri, at the end of the day, is Bela, along with involuntary, scattered and intermittent memories of her past. The family concept starts to disperse again in the USA just because of the haunting past, because of the shared memories. For this reason, Gauri starts to spend less time with her daughter and engrosses herself in her PhD dissertation. She feels like engaging herself in something where she does not have to feel the burden of the secrets of her previous life; she will be free from Subhash’s false parenthood too. However, Bela, unaware of her paternal origin, in her childhood, lacks the warmth of parental bondage. Upon her ignorance, she becomes an alter image of Udayan who has been dead for long, but his alter image such as Bela proliferates the present and justifies an essence of the past. This transformation clearly echoes what Maja Zefuss in one of

his articles comments: “the past happens before the present, whilst memory is situated firmly within the present” (178).

Another disruption of memory happens when Gauri abandons her daughter. She decides to enter “a new dimension, a place where a fresh life was given to her” (232). While Subhash, along with Bela, is away for a few days in Tollygunge to attend his father’s funeral, Gauri leaves Rhode Island for good. The sudden desertion of Gauri would be inexplicable and unforgivable to Bela. Such an incident in her adolescent age has indelibly been etched on her mind. Bela has to even consult a psychiatrist since she suffers from a psychic disorder and irregularity in her behavior. Bela takes the “periphery” of her mother’s memories, and it never fades away. And Gauri’s apparent plan of running away can be called self-denial. If she accepted the weight of responsibility, it would rather give her a sense of comfort, and Bela would not grow up as a mother-abandoned-child. That means Bela is the indirect sufferer of Udayan’s death. At the same time she forms an image of the past which sounds contradictory, and she unwittingly appears as the future form of Udayan, embellishing the memories of her father to Gauri, accelerating the scope of sufferings to others in the present. The more pathetic part is that Bela is not aware of this fact. She does not have any memories with Udayan; she does not know who her father is and what crime he has committed in the past. Her memory is only with Subhash, the apparent responsible father figure, and with the mother who betrays her by her sudden departure. There is no dead person’s memory in Bela’s life. For Bela, the living images of her mother are a matter of great heaviness, the cause behind the changes in her life, and the fixed portrayal of a betrayal she hates most. Memory has its retentive force which denies spatiality as it is “knowledge from the past ... not necessarily knowledge about the past” (Margalit 14). It is not the place, the lowland, which generates the crisis among Subhash-Bela-Gauri; rather, it is the all-consuming power of their memories that connects them to the past. As long as consciousness prevails in the human mind, it has to come across with memories—it is not an oblivious or forgiving matter.

It is a perennial truth that the past seems permanent, the future remains altogether uncertain, and the present goes parallel with inevitable memories. In *The Lowland*, the concurrence of similar existences has resulted in the tripartite relation of Bijoli-Gauri-Bela whose haunting memories remain ever inescapable. Even physical and psychological distances will not reduce the effects of such painful experiences. Memory is something which cannot be eluded so easily by leaving people and places repeatedly. If it were so, then Bijoli would not hold on to the past, and her survival would not depend on the burden of grief from which Gauri escapes. Gauri has a cathartic feeling when she meets Bela after many years in Rhode Island. The realization forces her to revisit Kolkata, the old abandoned place in Tollygunge. While struggling with her ineluctable memories, she discovers that Tollygunge itself has changed drastically, and “she is [was] unprepared for the landscape to be so altered” (320) but she still can remember it or how it looked even “forty autumns” ago. She is alone in her old city with her own formed past identity, with Udayan’s memories. To compromise with such a rush of feeling, she attempts to commit suicide:

She recalled the thrill of meeting him [Udayan], of being adored by him. The moment of losing him. The fury of learning how he'd implicated her. The ache of bringing Bela into world, after he was gone. She opened her eyes. He was not there. (323)

It is the revival of her old self, a revival of memories she abandons long ago, a joy of meeting Udayan. And the disappearance of the lowland is a kind of half-truth for Gauri because she cannot dispose of its mark from her memory. It is alive in the same way it was years ago in Kolkata. So the physical detachment from the lowland or displacement could not heal the loss of person and place. Gauri's mind is still adorned with Udayan's memories, with the injustice and negligence she has imposed on Bela as a mother. Her evasiveness ultimately increases the "heaviness" of the irresponsibility. By accepting this heaviness, the burden of memories that occupy an inevitable space in the mind, she comes to terms with "no home but memory."

The cause of all dispersed lives in the novel is not only the death incident, but also the decisions of the characters which ultimately take them down memory lane. They do not realize and accept the inevitability of unpleasant memories that are "the cement that holds thick relations together, and communities of memory are the obvious habitat for thick relations and thus for ethics" (Margalit 8). *The Lowland* generates the fact that living in the past and living totally without it are consequentially the same. When the characters accept grief and acculturate it into their current existence, it would reduce the pain of carrying it for long, less severe to bear and more compromising in the state of being. Therefore, to compromise is to reduce the pain and to attain a kind of normality essential for existence. And like Whitehead said, "the weight of memory ... may embroil us but it also connects us both to others and to reality itself." The tragic lives of Bijoli-Gauri-Bela are interwoven with some everlasting effects of memories which are not to be relinquished in this novel; rather, the weight of them needs to be fully understood and located.

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