

Gender And Politics in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Low Land*

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Abstract:

Gender and politics from the late twentieth century has become an important topic of discussion at the global level due to effort taken by feminist movements, which strived for women's participation in different sectors including politics. "Although 'the woman question' has often figured as a political issue since the middle of the nineteenth century, the question of the political significance of gender only became an issue in the study of politics in the 1970s" (Lovenduski 635). The setting of *The Lowland* is partly placed in the political background of 1960's and 70's Naxalite movement in Calcutta and partly in the Rhode Island of America. The crux of the novel revolves around the main character Udhayan and how the political tumult in which he participated has bitter consequences within the family and reverberates in the lives of upcoming generations as well. This paper interprets how Lahiri subtly comments on the difference in attitude through which the characters react and take part in the political movement and how gender plays an important role.

Introduction:

Gender and politics can be analysed in the novel with the aid of two main characters: Udhayan and Gauri, with reference to their political participation in the Naxalite movement. "Anthony M.Orum defines political participation as the variety of ways in which people try to

influence the political process” (Pandey 4). Though the major chunk of the novel is based in America, each instance happening abroad has some connection with Udhayan and the Naxalite movement. Therefore, the Naxalite movement in Calcutta is of constant presence in the novel.

Contrast within the characters in the novel:

From the beginning of the novel, Lahiri contrasts Udhayan’s character with Subhash’s. Both brothers are inseparable but Udhayan is the one who take risks to fulfill what he wants. “Should I stand guard on this side while you explore? Subhash asked him. What fun would that be?” (6). Through this instance which happens near the Technician’s Studio, Udhayan’s adventurous character is revealed and hints Subhash as an introvert character. When they get caught by a policeman, Udhayan tries to protect his brother. “He crouched next to Subhash, throwing an arm across his shoulders, attempting to shield him. Together they pressed against one another, they braced themselves” (9). This is the first incident in the novel which involves the childhood incident of these two brothers through which Lahiri comments on the extreme contrasting characteristics of both the brothers which will replicate itself at a higher level through the course of the novel.

Udhayan’s interest in politics:

Lahiri’s use of Subhash as a counterfoil to Udhayan has helped the readers to understand more about Udhayan and the reasons behind his active participation in the political movement. In the novel, in the setting of Calcutta, the radio which Udhayan made acts as a window to the outside world. Udhayan gets to know about the Cold War politics, Civil Rights Movement in U.S, Maoism in China and many others from the radio and books. He gets emotionally attached

with the instances happening in the different parts of the world which triggered his consciousness when it came to the plight of his own country.

For instance, in Naxalbari, the ruling party did not do what they promised and so the peasants protested against the government to abolish large-scale landholdings. Udhayan and Subhash heard from the radio that the Central Government retracted the peasants by raiding their region, searching their huts and captured them. “Udhayan sprang up from the chair where he’d been sitting, pushing a pile of books and papers away from him in disgust. He switched off the radio. . . The report had shocked them both, but Udhayan was reacting as if it were a personal affront, a physical blow” (22). Through this instance it is evident how Udhayan was well aware of the happenings around him and across the globe and his inherent character further influenced him to work for striking a change in the country.

Gauri’s pursuit:

On the other hand, if the character of Gauri is considered, her experiences from childhood are also explained in the novel in detail. But, if we compare both the characters and analyse how much knowledge and influence they have in politics, we can find a drastic difference. Gauri was Udhayan’s friend and Manash’s sister. She lived most of her childhood days with her maternal grandparents, her days were spent with books and she was not compelled by her family in anyway. She’s very much interested in philosophy, so much that later in her life she left Subhash and Bela in Rhode Island to concentrate and pursue her career without any interruptions from the family. In addition to this, she did not have any contact with the outside world but observed the events happening in her street from her balcony. “She observed the world, she told him, all of life, from this balcony. Political processions, government parades, visiting dignitaries. The

momentous stream of vehicles that started each day at dawn. The city's poets and writers passing by after death, their corpses concealed by flowers. Pedestrians wading knee-deep through the streets, during the monsoon" (53-54).

Intermingling of gender and politics in the novel:

With the above explanation of both the characters, one can witness how gender plays an important role in building up a person's interest towards politics and political participation. Lahiri also subtly comments that in addition to the gender aspect, even though it gives explicit privilege to one gender, it also requires one's individual passion to pursue in a political movement. Udhayan was adventurous while Gauri was not. Udhayan had exposure to the outside world through the radio while Gauri experienced everything happening around by sitting in the balcony of her house and observing it. Both were interested in books, but, one had interest in politics other in philosophy. Later in the novel, Udhayan gave up his life for what he was striving for and on the other hand Gauri too left Subhash and Bela to continue her career in philosophy. But, throughout Gauri's life the guilt of her past and Udhayan's death during the Naxalite movement has always been haunting her in later years.

The participation of both the characters in the Naxalite movement can be seen vividly in the novel. In addition to the characters' conversation about the movement, it is the authorial voice which mostly comments on the co-ordination of the movement which in turn led to its failure and the loss of many people. Throughout the novel, Udhayan's participation in the political tumult is projected one to one with the readers or sometimes through the nostalgic thoughts of Subhash and Gauri. He went to the extent of being the cause of killing a person in the name of the country. "After the party was declared he began living two lives . . . In one world he

was married to Gauri, living with his parents . . . But in the world of the party it had also been expected for him to help kill a policeman. They were symbols of brutality, trained by foreigners” (337). So, we can explicitly view Udhayan’s active participation in the Naxalite movement.

Personal is political:

If one considers the character of Gauri, largely due to her gender she is given passive roles of participation. She was not directly involved but helps Udhayan in his encounters. In the major part of the novel, Gauri is seen only as a philosophy student and as a professor. Only in the end of the novel the author reveals Gauri ‘s passive involvement in the Naxalite movement with Udhayan.

He began to ask her do certain things. And so, in order to help him, in order to feel a part of it, she agreed. . . These missions were small joints in a larger structure. No detail overlooked. She’d been linked into a chain she could not see.

It was like performing in a brief play, with fellow actors who never identified themselves, simple lines that were scripted, controlled. (292)

Later she realizes of how she was part of this invisible chain which was responsible for many killings of government officials and felt guilt within her. So, contrasting this attitude to Udhayan’s, one can witness the contradictory views of active and passive participation in the political movement.

The above analyses can be connected with what Carol Hanisch writes in her essay “The Personal is Political”. The word “political” here in the broad sense of the word has to do with power relationships and not in the narrow sense of electoral politics. So, with the above analyses of the characters Udhayan and Gauri, and their participation in the Naxalite movement, this can

also be analysed in depth with this statement. Though both the characters participate in the movement one can understand the power relationship that works between Udhayan and Gauri. Though Gauri wants to be a part of the movement and asks questions about the help that she is doing, she is denied the right of knowing it. “. . . in order to feel a part of it, she agreed. . . She asked Udhayan but he would not tell her, saying this was how she was being most useful. Saying it was better for her not to know” (292). Through this quote one can comprehend how Gauri was silenced by Udhayan in terms of political knowledge in which she took part.

Hegemonical relations:

In this hierarchical power relationship, men take the upper hand and dictate women of what to do and what not to do. The best example for this is the relationship between Gauri and Udhayan not socially but politically. Due to this many feminist movements challenged the “sex role theory” of women’s oppression that categorized women separately because it is how they are taught in the society. They also recognized the need to fight the male supremacy as a movement instead of blaming an individual woman. This was called pro-woman line by Hanisch. “This is part of one of the most important theories we are beginning to articulate. We call it “the pro-woman line. . . Women as oppressed people act out of necessity not out of choice” (Hanisch 4). Lahiri in this novel subtly comments on this power structure when it comes to political participation though Gauri does things not only because Udhayan wants to but with her full consent.

Hanisch in her essay projects the reasons and argues why women are considered weak in politics. She puts forth the common view of how a woman who takes part in any movement has to show herself as a strong woman and she proves this notion wrong.

As a movement woman, I've been pressured to be strong, selfless, other oriented, sacrificing, and in general pretty much in control of my own life. To admit to the problems in my life is to be deemed weak. So I want to be a strong woman, in movement terms, and not admit I have any real problems that I can't find a personal solution to (except those directly related to the capitalist system). It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say. (Hanisch 4)

In the cultural context of Indian society, especially considering the scenario in the 1970's, a woman was not considered to be made for politics but for social and domestic work. If she had to break this shackle and identify herself as a politically active woman then as Hanisch also projects, they have certain expectation in their attitude. So, it was very difficult for women to involve in both social and political endeavors. Lahiri comments on this aspect of the society by projecting Gauri as a passive woman politically, who wants to help her husband in the Naxalite movement but cannot explicitly do so due to cultural constrains and societal stereotypes.

Knowledge is power:

Another reason for this power structure in politics based on gender can be argued in terms of Foucault's idea where he says, power comes through knowledge. As Udhayan had more knowledge about what's happening in the world through his radio and has read many political books and journals, the power ultimately lies in him when compared with Gauri. So, Udhayan decides for Gauri in the political aspect and filters information on what she wants to know. This can also be linked with political socialization. It is the developmental process by which people acquire political cognition, attitudes and behaviors. This socialization is incorporated through

agents like family, media, peers, education and many other aspects. “In case of manifest political socialization the initiative lies within the socializing agencies. Introduction in politics is given by the family, the school, the Government and other political agencies and organization in different ways. Political socialization can also result from experiences” (Shukla 46). Udhayan was influenced by these agents from childhood through radio, books and his friends, while Gauri was not.

Conclusion:

Through the two characters Udhayan and Gauri, Lahiri incorporates the major theme of gender and politics in the novel and blends it neatly with a vivid social setting. Through these characters, Lahiri comments on how it is not only an individual’s decision to involve in what one wants to but everything is constrained by power structures. In specific to politics, the difference between Udhayan and Gauri’s involvement in political participation was initiated from their childhood, influenced by the peers and it also depends on how much they are revealed to the happenings of the world.

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