

**Being and Nothing: The Conflict of Essence and Existence in Jhumpa
Lehari's *The Low Land***

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Abstract

The paper attempts to existentially trace the facets of failure on the part of the government of the country and the way the fiasco has tried to shape and reshape the fate of the characters in the novel, *The Low Land*. The title can be a pun with *Low Land* referring to India metaphorically in terms of its lowness economically, socially and even politically. Lehari has her roots like how Udayan wanted to change the country and make it progressive only to find out at the end that he should have changed himself than trying to change the country.

Key Words: Governance, Revolution, Rebellion, Existence

Mikhail Bakhtin, an eminent philosopher and a critic from Russia began to read the hidden voices to decipher the hidden meanings in a novel. He established the idea and closely argued that there are unheard voices resonating in a text and they are the true narrators of a novel. There has been a conviction that a literary piece is a conversation between or even among the characters. They are the thoughts of an author who scripts them to be in synchrony with the plot progression. There is the other side of the coin where the milieu, the landscape and other sections which are largely left unnoticed begin to raise their concern in the novel. Bakhtin began to bring these muffled voices to the centre and left the conversations between the other characters to the periphery. He felt that these voices told the true story of the novel. Tolly Gunge, the locale of the novel *The Low Land*, is also a character in the novel. There have been a lot of historical references to the place but still these pieces of

information continue to tell the relationships between the places and the stories they offer to unfold.

William Tolly an English man had been behind the colonial and cultural developments of Bengal the place Tolly Gunge, an important locale of the novel is also a character that speaks less but expresses more in terms of the relationships the characters hold to the place. The Low Land, is also a very important part of the novel where the story begins to take off from there. The author tries to create two worlds for the two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, both were like the two ponds which flow across the low land to merge as one when it rains and Tolly Gunge gets flooded. Subhash and Udayan were fifteen months apart but their personalities were miles apart. This is to show that how two brothers, who have been born to same parents, brought up in the same manner, in the very same locality get different in terms of perceptions and outlook of life. There is a constant argument in psychology that debates over the traits of an individual in the framework of their genetic and the products of the society. Many theorists argue that genetics play a pivotal role in shaping an individual while there are others to say the role of society and the people around who shape the destiny of a person. In that case, one could conclude in the context of the brothers that it is the society that has had a tremendous influence on their lives. unemployment as a problem was acute across Calcutta during the 1960s and this was seen as a threat by Subhash while Udayan saw it as a governmental lapse in the nation's governance. The following is a report given by the World Bank in the context of unemployment in the years between 1959 and 1978 cited by Raj Krishna submitted to the International Monetary Fund.

Weekly status unemployment grew by 1.7 percent a year, computation DI shows that on account of labor force growth alone without any growth of employment, 38.3 percent a year. On the absorption side of capital growth alone unemployment 91 percent a year, but the increase in capital intensity offset more than half of the unemployment reducing effect of capital growth. (15)

Many scholars have eulogized the innate endeavors of the author in trying to research much material on the growth of unemployment and the decline of development in India after close to two decades of independence but there are others who call the novel a failure despite the New York Times Best Seller Award and other recognitions. One of the serious problems that the novel bears is the lack of realism in the events pertaining to the Naxal Movements. There is a general feeling that the sections of the novel lack much empathy and also the complete information about the struggles of

the naxals have not been recorded. The serious shortcoming is about the annihilation of the uniform personnel which is given with much reduced sympathy while Udayan is shown as a glorified individual. On the one side, it has to be accepted that Udayan was at the forefront when the police official Nirmal was done away with, but Udayan was made to feel right in the event because the naxals had felt that their real enemies were not the politicians but the police and army personnel who tried to reduce their rebellion and neutralize their struggles. All that the critics wanted was an objectivity in the narration and that Lahiri was much affected by the pathetic fallacy which can be seen at the detailed description of how his death and killing have been explained and the other deaths like the ones of the police men are concealed. This is the result of the shallow knowledge which the author has had on the tenets of Naxal outburst. Although, the author wanted to highlight the reason for migration as unrest in the home country, she did not take the novel from there. Subhash did make a decision to move to the Rhode Island and finish his degree in Chemical Engineering but the death of Udayan and the lack of contact with him makes the novel more dilute because the concerns of Diaspora are not clearly outlined. Almost all the characters, Subhash, Gauri, and Bela have been bombarded because of rootless existence. Their migration therefore becomes an escape from their problems both at home and the home country.

The novel's structure is ambitious and even voluminous for there are eight chapters and each chapter is further divided into eight sections covering three generations with the narrative vacillating between the past and the present. There is not much coherence between the narrative chain because it is as temporal as the mindscape of the three main characters. Udayan's interest in physics stems from the college he chooses to study, the Presidency College and as a preparatory his father had arranged for a home tutor to make sure both the sons get through the entrance examination so that they could choose the course of their choice. Udayan had been interested in trying new methods to get himself connected with the world around. One of the greatest endeavors was to make sure he emulated the ways of Marconi in transferring electromagnetic waves to sound waves through proper signs to get hold of the signals. This had been an arduous task but Udayan had tried his hand at the smallest of the repairs at home beginning with the fixing of light bulbs to having a calling bell at home so that at a later point of time in the novel, he could reach farthest heights to the extent of preparing hand grenades and other ammunitions that would help him fight the government as well as the capitalists as an armed rebellion. It is true that Mao in China had called for a people's movement to fight for the rights but

still the means to achieve the end and the way Udayan handled it is something that is out of question.

The Naxalbari with his geographical planes and the lines of narration with Charu Mazumdar shortly and fondly called C.M and Kanu Senyal, whose close kinship at the prison house had made them collaborative to form the preliminary structures of naxal movement by integrating it with Marxist Leninist ideas at the larger scale. Udayan was drawn to the movement not by chance but by choice. There is a dearth of information as many scholars point out about the eight documents he had authored about how the naxal movement had to progress to reach their ideals and the methods which it had to channelize so that the revolution could become more successful. On the flip side, Lahiri did not intend to make the novel more oriented towards the politics of communism but still, there could have been a judicious balance of history and politics to give a large proportion of the struggles than the love life of Udayan with Gauri or the falling apart between Subhash and Gauri when she decides to take up a job at California unable to bear the loss of Udayan and raise Bela. The quote below is an excerpt from one of the eight documents of Charu Mazumdar with the title, "Carry on the Struggle Against Modern Revisionism", the second of the eight documents in total.

At the present stage of the revolution, the entire peasantry is the ally of the working class, and this peasantry is the biggest force of People's Democratic Revolution of India and it is by keeping this in mind that we have to march forward in the movement of peasantry. But all peasants do not belong to the same class. There are differences in their revolutionary consciousness and the ability to work according to the conditions. (1)

Lehari cannot be called a writer of diasporic disintegration in the realm of migrant literature because she has almost always moved away from the writing of Salman Rushdie or Bharati Mukherjee. She is the second generation migrant writer who shuttled between the U.K and the U.S stopping in snatches during her trip to India. This could be one of the reasons as to why Lehari could not have been able to collect much material to research on the problems India encountered during the pre and the post independent struggles. The Low Land occupies a pivotal position in the novel where Udayan, Subhash and Gauri revisit to get their pangs of nostalgia and this could therefore be seen as a character in the novel, which had its own voice of concerns as well as guilt. When the novel ends, one is not clear as to what the writer intends to say with regard to the revolution and the way Udayan's life was turned

topsy-turvy after he wanted to contribute his mite to the struggling landless agricultural laborers. It is true that he went on a long filed trip that ran over a hundred days to practically sit with these workers at Silliguri, to understand their hardships and problems but there was nothing he could do about it rather than taking a minimal role in excommunicating the uniform officials and venting his anger over them.

When one tries to analyze the fate of all the three key characters, Subhash, Udayan and Gauri, one finds that this revolution had made them fall apart from one another. Gauri at the end of the novel contemplates suicide and gets back to the Low Land to think about the events of the past but ironically the place is not as same as it used to be. Even moments before the shoot out of Udayan, he is dejected about his choice, he wanted to live a peaceful life with Gauri but he had to die as a failure, for he could not be a dutiful son, a caring husband and a celebrated rebel. The novel alludes him to someone who is more of a cog in the wheel. That is one of the reasons as to why his body was never handed over to his parents. All that Gauri could remember was how she had been blackmailed by keeping a pistol on her temple and get Udayan come out of his hideout. The novel closes with a sense of existence where one feels that the problem did not abate and the conditions of India and the Indians still remains the very same.

Their subsistence was contingent on arrangements with landowners, money lenders. On people who took advantage of them. On forces beyond their control, he saw how the system coerced them, how it humiliated them. How it had stripped their dignity away. He ate what he was given, water that never quenched his thirst. He seldom bathed and he had to defecate on the fields. (410)

Lahiri had to give it to the world as a person, as a writer to explicate the causes, consequences and struggles to migrate. It was no instant coffee to relocate to another country far from one's roots and cultural displacements. India is hostile to its own people and that is one of the reasons as to why the country is not progressive and all talents are let out of the country in various professions. The bottom line of the novel that spans three generations beginning with the second World War, and ending with the mysterious death of Kanu Senyal and the enigmatic and endless search of Udayan's dead body. The novel comes to conclude that the ones who adapt to the system of governance survive while the rest perish and end their lives with much futility like Udayan.

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