

MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA IN THE CHARACTERS OF *THE LOWLAND* BY JHUMPA LAHIRI

V. Shantha* and B. Cauveri**

Abstract: Sigmund Freud began his discussion on the ‘mourning’ concept in 1915 in his paper “Mourning and Melancholia”, and this topic is addressed by many other psychoanalysts as well. The modern concept of psychoanalytic mourning, models it as a process of transformation. When there is a continuing attachment to the lost object, it is viewed as a sign of unresolved mourning. When the loss is accepted, the ego is said to accommodate the loss enabling the bereaved to search for new relationships and new activities.

This paper focuses on the Psychoanalytic study of ‘mourning’ in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Lowland*. It studies how the death of one character Udayan affects the lives of the other characters who are associated with him.

Keywords: Mourning, Melancholy, Ego Loss, Narcissism, Betrayal, Cathexes.

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”. Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*

INTRODUCTION

The pioneering study of Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud followed by the other psychoanalysts (Abraham, 1927; Benjamin, 1928; Fenichel, 1945; Pollock, 1961; Kohut, 1972; Hagman, 1995;) has been of great help in interpreting a literary text to understand the actions and behaviours of the characters. The objective of the paper is to analyse the psychic processes that transpire in the characters of *The Lowland*. It is a contemporary novel wherein the narrative moves back and forth at different points of time across different places.

The psychoanalytic theory of Mourning began with the work of Sigmund Freud and Karl Abraham in the early 1900s. In Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”, he states, “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Freud p. 243). And his theory of ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ underwent a dramatic change during his career.

Generally, mourning in the adults proceeds for a year or two. The act of mourning (an intra-psychic process) begins with the loss of an object or an individual that has been the libidinal attachment. With the death of a person the libido is left hanging with no object to place on. The libidinal attachment is narcissistic and ambivalent in nature that it cannot be readily withdrawn from the object and displaced onto another, especially when the object is lost. The libido is withdrawn into the ego and

* Research Scholar, Dept of EFL, SRM University, Kattankolathur, India

** Assistant Professor (S.G), Dept of EFL, SRM University, Kattankolathur, India

it serves to identify with the lost object which empties the ego thus the object loss becomes the ego loss. A sense of profound mourning contains the painful frame of mind, the loss of interest in the outside world – the loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him) and turning away from any activity that is not connected with the thoughts of him (Freud p.243).

Freud distinguishes between Mourning and Melancholy (pathological) whereas this division is absent in Walter Benjamin's Trauerspiel (Mourning). In explaining what is mourning, Benjamin differs from Freud when he says that the mourner works through it and is engaged with the loss itself, and the presentation of this loss. The mourner does not overcome the object loss as he does not mourn, and he calls for the understanding and the acknowledgement of that loss, together with a strong commitment and the work it requires to overcome it. According to him, at the point of utmost loss, a philosophical expression works. In this paper these concepts are used to study how different characters mourn differently over the loss of one person in *The Lowland*.

THE LOWLAND

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is a multigenerational family story, and it is centered on the lives of two brothers and their wife Gauri. On one of the visits to Calcutta, Lahiri heard the story of the death of two brothers (who were unknown to her) due to their involvement in the radical political movement, and she was impelled to write the novel *The Lowland*. However, she decided to emphasise and to portray the fraternal relationship of two brothers who were raised side by side and who were extremely close as well as extremely different: the fate of one versus the fate of the other, but deeply intertwined. (Lahiri's interview)

Two brothers Subhash and Udayan, close to each other get separated due to their different ideologies. Subhash, who is composed and submissive by nature, heads to the U.S. for his studies whereas Udayan, an adventurous and demanding person, gets fascinated by the Naxalite movement and drifts towards it. He is killed in the presence of his family members and Subhash gets married to Udayan's pregnant wife, Gauri and takes her to the U.S. only to be deserted by her. But he finds comfort in the presence of Udayan's daughter Bela and the novel tells us the course of their lives.

Udayan's (the giver of life, receiving nothing in return) presence is felt in his absence throughout the novel. He is the pivotal figure around whom all the other characters are interwoven and his death strikes the balance of the other characters and emotionally upsets them and this forms the plot of the novel *The Lowland*.

BIJOLI

Udayan's mother, Bijoli is close to Udayan for he feels secure to be in her constant company during his childhood. She believes that he is endowed with humanity and

is helpful not only to her but also to others in his life. She even assumes that Deepa (who is her constant companion when she is alone in her house) has been arranged by Udayan though he is no longer alive. Mourning the death of her rebellious and aggressive son, Bijoli cannot love Subhash in the absence of Udayan. She feels that “He had only added to the loss” (p.186). She is angry at Subhash for strongly reminding her of Udayan. She will “never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to” her (Freud p.243). The combination of a mother’s inherent ambivalence and her unresolved grief make it impossible for her to turn her affection on Subhash.

She is furious at Gauri as her presence in Udayan’s life has not prevented him from his involvement in the Naxalite movement and she is jealous of Gauri for she has shared more of Udayan’s life (“...it was Gauri, not Bijoli, who contained a piece of Udayan in her” p.186). Therefore she does not want Subhash to get married to Gauri who will become her daughter-in-law twice over. After some years, when Subhash visits her along with Bela, Udayan’s daughter, she is able to entertain them in the absence of Gauri. Later, Bijoli makes it a part of her routine to wash the memorial tablet, erected by the party members in honour of Udayan’s martyrdom, and places flowers on it every day. Eventually she suffers a stroke and falls into dementia. Though Subhash visits her every year subsequently for three years, (as she is emotionally detached from him) she cannot recover from the loss of her son Udayan and thus dies in the hospital. Her mourning can be interpreted in Freudian term, as melancholic mourning, as it turns out to be pathological.

GAURI

Udayan’s wife Gauri, “the gravitational centre of the book”, is an enigmatic character even to Jhumpa Lahiri who created her. She is an intelligent and audacious woman haunted by her past and love that endures her long past death in the novel.

Gauri falls in love with Udayan, an activist and marries him despite her knowledge of his involvement in the Naxalite movement. She loves him so much that she is not disturbed by the treatment of her mother-in-law and ignores it. She is even ready to run errand for him without trying to know the reason behind such an assignment and does not reveal her true feelings to him for the fear of losing him. She thinks, “...he would lose respect if she turned sentimental” (p. 59).

Gauri is brought up by her grandparents and is close to her brother, Manash. Being the youngest of all her siblings, she feels that she is not being recognized at home. She feels that she got a clear identity in the presence of Udayan, a friend of Manash. The sudden death of her husband, Udayan leads her to “the double disappointment” (Sandor p.420) which deprives her of the capacity for love. Her trauma shatters her ability to experience emotion and to connect to others. But when Subhash wants to relieve her of the difficulties by marrying her, she utilizes that

opportunity. Gauri's Narcissistic love is related to extreme subjectivity. She marries Subhash to get away from the unwelcome people and to "forget everything that her life had been" (p.127) at Tollygunge. Nevertheless she lives in the memory of Udayan even after she leaves India to live with Subhash in the U.S.

As the plane lands in Boston, she fears that the child might dissolve and abandon her. Yet, she believes that "she contained a ghost, as Udayan was" (p.124) with her in her memory all the time even after his death. When she gets to know that the baby is a girl, she senses a relief "that a young version of Udayan had not come back to her" (p.144). While Subhash suggests that the baby be named Bela, she does not object to it though she feels that Udayan must have named the child, "whether he wanted it or not" (p.137). Though she is grateful to Subhash for having taken up the responsibility of bringing up the child, she cannot bring herself to accept him as the father of Udayan's daughter.

The work of mourning is an egotistic one and it gives up the external world as a source for the construction of the self. It restricts one to the earthly and material world. It directs the mourner to detach himself from the human world. The voice of Subhash reminds Gauri of Udayan. Her 'libidinal attachment' for Udayan does not let her move close with other human beings. Her attachment to Udayan is not displaced on to another. She is overwhelmed by the presence of the baby. She finds it difficult to be close to her daughter, Bela, and is not able to develop a motherly bond with her. Even, Subhash observes the absence of the motherly tenderness in Gauri and her indifference towards Bela. "Rarely did he see Gauri kissing Bela spontaneously. Instead from the beginning, it is as if she'd reversed their roles, as if Bela were a relative's child and not her own" (p.159). She hopes that this hiatus would be short living but even after five years of her time with Bela, "the love she'd once felt for Udayan refused to reconstitute itself" (p.164).

Even the physical relationship which Gauri has with Subhash is an attempt to forget her longing for Udayan, "to extinguish Udayan's ghost. To smother what haunted her" (p.161). Her psychical split and bereavement precipitate in cathexes. She starts focusing on her studies which helps her to untangle the attachment with the other beings. And yet she continues to live with Subhash as she is not financially independent.

Gauri's loyalty to Udayan is entangled with betrayal. Soon after the death of Udayan, she tries to gradually tear away from everything and everyone who are related to Udayan. She changes her costume, "like a woman Udayan had never seen" (p.134). Her detachment goes to the extent of not only neglecting the letters from Manash, but also abandoning Subhash and her daughter Bela to fend for themselves.

Gauri is not afflicted with the painful and sad experience of mourning. Her deep tenacious attachment towards Udayan, and her commitment and devotion towards

the loss of him does not embody an ethical relation (Ilit Ferber p.35). When she finds an opportunity to work in a college, she deserts her newfound family and starts living in California. Yet, she has the constant fear of encountering Subhash or Bela. Now, having taken over by the reality principle (in the process of mourning), she starts living once again. By cutting the strands of familial attachment, she remains half-alive trying to still exist in one way or the other. She is interested in reading the news about the comrades of Udayan and thus she “continued to expect some news from Udayan” (p.154). She sees him in her dream as a young person even when she attains the age of sixty. Thus her mourning replaces “an actual absence with an imaginary presence” ((Fenichel 1945; Hendin 1991)). As Freud says, here mourning is a psychically transformative activity that enables her to move on to the next level.

A fundamental argument of the new psychoanalytic model of mourning insists on the need to preserve the attachment to the lost person, and the importance of securing a sense of meaningful relationship, which transcends loss (Hagman p.15). True to this statement, when Gauri receives a letter from Subhash suggesting a legal separation, she wishes to meet him in person to know about Bela and also goes with an expectation to find in him “a version of Udayan as an old man” (p.307). Fortuitously, she meets Bela alone in the house (as Subhash has gone out) but is dismayed to find that Bela is aware of her biological parents. On hearing Udayan’s name from Bela, and on her retaliation to her, Gauri gets disillusioned and leaves the place with desolation. Her damaged ego gets strengthened to deal effectively with the new traumatic situation. (Blum p. 418)

On an impulse, she returns to Calcutta, and visits the house where she lived with Udayan. She is impelled to commit suicide. Her persistent trauma goads her to embrace death. “Suicide may represent a fantasised narcissistic reunion (re-fusion) with a lost love object, serving to undo the loss or separation” ((Fenichel 1945; Hendin 1991)). When Udayan is killed, she too wants to follow him in death, but she does not have the courage to take her life as she is pregnant. At this point, when she visits the house, she wants to release the things (the guilty feeling of having deserted Bela, and being an accomplice in the crime) that fetter her. When, she wants to fall down from the balcony, she gets the thrill of meeting Udayan. The fury of being implicated by Udayan and the pain of bringing Bela into the world bring her to her senses. She is angry at Udayan, “For bringing her happiness, and then taking it away” (p.164). She feels that he died prematurely, when he could have lived and she thinks that he had been selfish in sacrificing his life for a cause. This feeling of ambivalence gives us a sign of her detachment from the loss. She seems to have come to terms with the ongoing relationship of the memory of Udayan.

She returns to California. Eventually she receives a letter from Bela stating her willingness to facilitate a meeting in future, in case her daughter Meghna requires it. This letter seems to suggest that the novel ends in an optimistic note for Gauri’s

mourning as it indicates that she is likely to wait for Meghna in the course of her life.

SUBHASH

Subhash is very close to his younger brother Udayan. Although he is elder to him by seventeen months he looks up to him and he feels confident in the presence of his brother. Though their Characteristics are extremely different (an impulsive Udayan and a dutiful Subhash) they grow up together and Subhash feels “each day of his life began and ended with Udayan beside him” (p.18). In the course of life, Subhash applies for PhD in the United States and Udayan gets himself involved in the Naxalbari movement, and thus their relationship becomes spaced out.

When the loss is accepted, the ego is said to accommodate the loss enabling the bereaved to search for new attachments (Humphrey & Zimpfer, 1998; Susillo, 2005). Subhash is a self-reliant adult capable of taking care of himself and the people around him. After Udayan’s death, he marries his sister-in-law against the wishes of his mother. He believes that Gauri is the only person whom Udayan trusted and the way to be connected to Udayan is to marry her. After the birth of Bela, Udayan’s daughter, Subhash takes up the parenting task and becomes close to her. He even decides on her name and does not want to take her to Calcutta for the fear that the people of his place would regard him as her Uncle. At times, he feels that “Udayan had marked her leaving behind an exuberant replica of himself” (p.157). In her presence, he gets the same comfort which he received from Udayan. Therefore, he is distressed when Gauri wants to tell Bela about Udayan.

The loneliness he feels in his life has been filled by Bela. When his parents and Gauri are not ready to substitute him for Udayan, he is happy to hold on to the illusion of being Bela’s father. When Gauri leaves them for California, he is shocked to find Bela “establishing her existence apart from him” (p.214). The truth of her parentage is a weight he carries, knowing he must somehow tell her, even as she grows into adulthood and a lifestyle he does not understand. Of course Bela reminds him of Udayan at every stage of her growth. She joins a small liberal arts school in Midwest but she turns cold to education, as Udayan was. She is independent and rebellious. Though he is concerned about her activities he lets her free as he realises the futility of restricting her. When he is in his fifties, he is neither interested in other women nor in a relationship, “The only company he longed for is Bela’s” (p.223). But her activities remind him that she is as self-righteous as Udayan was and his influence is greater in her.

Subhash’s college roommate, Richard’s death reinforces in Subhash’s mind, the terrible need to tell Bela what she only deserves to know, which is to lay bare the story of Udayan. This, he feels, is the “unfinished business of his life” (p.252).

Bela is now old and strong enough to handle it. Since she is all he loved, he cannot muster the strength to divulge to her. A series of jobs across the country becomes her routine. Subhash feels a little threatened and is convinced that Udayan's influence is greater on Bela and at times he believes "Udayan would come back, claiming his place, claiming Bela from the grave as his own" (p.225). He always longs for Bela. He thinks, "She would stir up the staid atmosphere of his life" (p.261). Her visits are unpredictable and he knows that he cannot raise the subject of marriage as she has been brought up in Rhode Island (and not in India) and in a "family of solitaires" (p.262). When Bela announces that she is pregnant and wants to bring up the child alone as he has done, he decides to reveal her the facts of her paternity. And on listening to his confession, she leaves him impulsively, but sometime later "...she thanked him for telling her about Udayan" (p.271). After the birth of her daughter, Meghna, she seems to love him more and spends more time with him. And we understand that Subhash has dealt with the loss of Udayan by internalising the affection for Bela.

CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri ends *The Lowland*, with the description of the death of Udayan which signifies how his absence has dictated the lives of people associated with him including the life of Bela, his daughter whose presence was unknown to him. Here, Lahiri's focus shifts from the immigrants' experience to their psychological landscape. The characters reveal their predicament for themselves. On the first reading of the novel, one is likely to assess the character of Gauri as unfaithful and selfish. However, repeated readings of the novel reveal the inner trauma which splits her personality. As discussed above, a psychoanalytical study of this novel helps one to arrive at a deeper understanding of the characters' psyche and their behaviour.

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