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‘TAMAS’ IN JHUMPA LAHIRI’S *THE LOWLAND*

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Abstract

Through this paper I intend to bring to the fore the darkness that lies in the novel *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri thereby, establishing a relation with the mythological concepts providing them a meaning. Though this concept is not new but has been the very core of the human existence. The very day human soul came into existence, so with it came to the existence the very core human values. What can lead from darkness to enlightenment is the practice of self-realization and sermons are quoted since ages that reveal the categorization of identity and intellectual being that deviate the humanity from their own kin and path that they are inclined to. The novel *The Lowland*, though delineates with the immigrant experiences that they come across and the Naxalite movement that scatters the lives of the characters but the impact of the series of incidents could be seen on the characters as well.

Key-Words

Tamas, Darkness, Good, Evil, Self-Realization, Human Values, Shrimadbhagwadgita.



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In Hindu scriptures, the importance of human gunas had gained impetus from time to time in order to define humanity and at times have been linked up with various activities viz., demoniac or angelic. Indian partition was one reason of demonic acts and so were the Mahabharata and Shrimadbhagwadgita whereby, Lord Krishna sermonized Arjuna to go against his own brothers when he was in a confused state to act accordingly. Lord Krishna explains the three modes of material nature pertaining to goodness, passion and nescience. Partition cannot be only of the land but can be of the soul as well, not of goodness and evil but also of the right and wrong and various other attributes of human predicament.

According to the Samkhya School of philosophy, *Tamas* is considered as one of the qualities of human nature, *Rajas* and *Sattva* being the other two qualities. There are 18 chapters in the Bhagawat Gita which comprises of several verses. It is in the “Gunatraya-Vibhaga Yoga” (Religion from the qualities that contains 27 verses that explains the three modes of life alongwith their characteristics, causes and influence in a living entity). In chapter fourteen of *The Shrimadbhagavadgita*, one finds the mention of the three modes of material nature under the control of which the embodied souls are entangled; goodness, passion and ignorance. Lord Krishna explains what these modes are, how they act upon us, how one transcends them, and the symptoms of one who has attained the transcendental state. “Material nature consists of three modes – goodness and ignorance. When the eternal living entity comes in contact with nature, O mighty-armed Arjuna, he becomes conditioned by these modes.” (Bhagavad-Gita As It Is 14.6) *Tamas* in Sanskrit refers to ‘darkness’. At the moment of translation from Sanskrit, the term ‘indifference’ was induced to its meaning which refers to the indifference in the

attitude of the human behavior. Tamas is a value that is also required to counter evil. For example, the reincarnated form of Bhairava, i.e. Lord Shiva is a Tasmic avatar amongst the trinity as believed in the mythological concepts. In order to get rid of the sin, Lord Shiva consumed the poison of his devotees, thereby absorbing the Tamo-guna. In Indian mythology, there is believed to be many goddesses who incarnate within the Hinduism. Accordingly, goddesses are offered animal sacrifice and Devi worship holds an important place. The first three days of Navratras, the nine auspicious days, is believed to be tamasic in nature whereby the female deities are fierce i.e., goddess Durga and Goddess Kali. The nature of the earth can be described as tamasic. Also, the gestation period in the mother's womb is referred to as tamas. The hibernation period is also tamasic. Bhagwat Gita says regarding the occurrence of Tamas that once a man having Sattva as his main behavior, feels that it is not easy to live in this world by the means of Sattva, he will start being Rajasic. As per Rajas, the man starts habitual working thinking what he wants. It becomes hard for him to think about his Karmic actions as good (satkarmi) or bad (akarmi). Then he feels good in giving harm to any of bad feeling to other peoples. He then thinks that how can I provide harm to others and attain my goal. This behavior is under control of a power in this nature called mohamaya and brings asakti (Asakti refers to selfishness in Sanskrit). The three qualities Tamo-guna, rajo-guna and sattva-guna are defined in detail in the scriptures. Every quality has their own characteristics and it is a universal belief that everything in this world is bound to be made up of these three qualities. Tamas, is considered to be the lowest, the heaviest, the slowest and the most dull attribute as that of a stone or a lump of the earth that cannot move by itself, until and unless an action is applied to it, no resistance nothing. Tamas cannot be counteracted with 'tamas' as for that purpose, Rajas the means of action is required as one cannot jump directly from Tamas to Sattva. "Sometimes the mode of goodness becomes prominent, defeating the modes of passion and ignorance, O son of Bharata. Sometimes the modes of passion defeats goodness and ignorance and at other times ignorance defeats goodness and passion. In this way there is always competition for supremacy." (Bhagavad-Gita As It Is 14:10) Lord Krishna sermonizes in Bhagwat Gita, "You should know 'O Arjun, Tamas as a cause of delusion enslaving all embodied beings born of nescience; by negligence, listlessness and somnolence.'" (BG, 14:8) In common parlance, Tamas refers to the inertia or resistance from action. A single word might have different connotations and at times it's up to us as to how do we interpret it. In the novel *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri the meaning that aptly suits is the indifference in attitude, ignorance and darkness at times in the character of Gauri that exemplifies the Tamasic effect to a great extent. Tamas, itself is a force that leads to darkness, dissolution, death, destruction, resistance and sloth. "O Arjuna, nescience, inertness, neglectfulness and illusion; when these arise tamas predominates." (BG 14:13)

In her novel, *The Lowland* Jhumpa Lahiri has described the character of Gauri as the one who lives a life as ignorant, irrisistant to life, inactivity etc. The term 'Lowland' literally means an area of land that is low in relation to the surrounding and also it does mean, "Relating to or characteristic of being low". Here in the novel, Gauri in relation to the other characters seem to be 'low' comparatively in terms of social values and thoughts. She is someone who has chosen for herself a path of ir-resistance, delusion, ignorance and isolation.

Isolation offered its own kind of companionship: the reliance silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings. The promise that she would find things where she put them, that there would be no surprise. It greeted her at the end of each day and lay still at each night. She had no wish to overcome it. Rather, it was something upon which she'd come to depend, with she'd entered by now into a relationship, more satisfying and more enduring than the relationships she'd experienced in either of her marriages.(Lahiri 237)

The inclination towards something that cannot be changed is tamasic in nature, the past is something that is stagnant and if a person is stuck there, nothing can take them into positive direction, in fact that leads to deterioration of the human kind. Night is synonymous to darkness and on the contrary, morning is synonymous to hope. 'Bela' also means time, and different forms of day. Tamas is the lowest quality no doubt but still the hope lingers on that any activity can lead to the purity of the soul. Gauri, no doubt has led her life in the darkness of her past and it is alongwith her that the lives of others connected to her also get affected but towards the sun as she realizes and introspects herself, her nature seems to transform to tamasic to Rajasic or in other words, from darkness to light and she decides to divorce Subhash and after meeting she goes back to her past , to live in the memories of Udayan who was always a part of her life from the moment they met till the last breath of Gauri's life. "With her own hand she'd painted herself in the corner, and then out of that picture altogether." (Lahiri 232) It was her ignorance and her willingness to be away from everyone, but at times it was quite difficult for her answer her daughter's queries, Subhash's thoughts. "She'd told Bela that the feeling would ebb but never fully go away. It would form part of her landscape, wherever she went she said that her mother's absence would always be present in her thoughts. She told Bela that there would never be an answer why she'd gone" (Lahiri 259). The darkness in one's life suffocates and somewhere or the other the hope still breathes, "The effort flops like a just-caught fish inside her. A brief burst of possibility as the name is typed onto the screen, she clicks to activate the search. Hope thrashing in the process of turning cold" (Lahiri 277). It is always a concoction between the mind and the heart that one gets lost and there seems to be no way for a person to decide although they want to. On the other side it was the impact of the

relationship that has made their child, Bela to have a notion about the pious institution of marriage. As is said, a child inherits all from the parents, “Then again, how could he expect Bela to be interested in marriage, given the example he and Gauri had given? They were a family of solidarities. They had collided and dispersed. This was her legacy. If nothing else, she had inherited that impulse from them.” (Lahiri 262). Not only did the traces of impulsive nature came from Gauri to Bela but from his Biological father Udayan as well. She was a bond for three persons to stay connected. It was the presence of Bela that reminded Gauri of Udayan, “Everything in Bela’s life has been a reaction. I am who I am, she would say, I live as I do because of you.” (Lahiri 259) Impulsiveness, isolation, darkness, arrogance, impurity of the soul, lingering in the past and not heading to accept the future are the dark facets of life rendered to be the *tamas* attribute of life. “Each day she removes a small portion of the unwanted things in people’s lives, though all of it, she thinks, was previously wanted, once useful. She feels the sunscorching the back of her neck. The heat is at its worst now, the rains still a few months away. The task satisfies her. It passes the time.” (Lahiri 189)

Gauri isolates herself by pouring all the energy manifested in her by pursuing her Doctorate in Philosophy. She specializes in the Neo-marxist social theory of the Marxist school. She hardly believes in taking up arms in order to take revenge from the landlords, instead what she did was quite the opposite. She diverted herself from the path of violence to begin present her papers in the conferences. “Long ago she’d wanted her work to be in deference to Udayan. Anger at him for dying when he might have lived. For bringing her happiness, and then taking it away. For trusting her, only to betray her. For believing in sacrifice, only to be selfish in the end.” (J.H.Azzaam, October 20, 2013). The reason for her leaving the family seems to be unknown but her presence made an impact in her family’s lives, no matter even for a while of stay, her angry and indifferent attitude, “she understood now what it meant to walk away from her child. It had been her own act of killing – it was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed.” (J.H.Azzam, October 20, 2013). Ironically one can find that loss and angerpave a way for rejection of politics. For Gauri we observe quite aptly that “anger was mounted to her love for Udayan. Anger at him for dying when he might have lived. For bringing her happiness, and then taking it away. For trusting her only to betray her. For believing in sacrifice, only to be selfish in the end.” (J.H.Azzam, October 20, 2013). No matter what might have happened in the life of Gauri, Bela and Subhash, it is a series of incidents that give life to another, be it the dark forces or the positive one. Udayan died in relation to the Political conflict, a naxalite movement that took place in Calcutta, “Udayan had given his life to a movement that has been misguided, that had only caused damage that had already been dismantled.” (J.H.Azzam, October 20, 2013). There is a sense of justice when she finally realizes that what she has lost in her life. In

order to mend the things she decides to head back to her birthplace, the place where she took birth, not only as a child but as Udayan's wife, a mother to Bela and wife to Subhash. She hoped to make things better that were all messed up. Transformations do come but at the cost of loss of certain things, certain relations. "It was Durga Pujo, the city's most anticipated days. The stores, the sidewalks were overflowing. At the ends of a certain alleys, or in gaps among buildings she saw the pandals. Durga armed with her weapons, flanked by her four children, depicted and worshipped in so many versions. Made of plaster, made of clay. She was respondent, formidable. A lion helped to conquer the demon at her feet. She was a daughter visiting her family, visiting the city, transforming it for a time." (Lahiri 315). After landing herself in India, she visits all those places that were a link to her past, especially the place where she has witnessed the presence of Udayan but unfortunately it were the residue of the memories that were there. "She was unprepared for the landscape to be so altered. For there to be no trace of that evening, forty autumns ago." (Lahiri 320). Everything that followed after the death of Udayan were a darkened alliance of her life in lieu with the emptiness of her soul and no one around her. "Scarcely two years of her life, begun as a wife, concluded as a widow, an expectant mother. An accomplice in crime." (Lahiri 320). She was quite aware of her accomplishments and her deeds that led her to this destination where she had nothing, only solidarity, darkness and awareness of the fact that no incidents could be reversed back to normal. It was her own choice to embrace the darkness in her life, "Standing there, unable to find him, she felt a new solidarity with him. The bond of not existing." (Lahiri 320)

Mahatma Gandhiji called Gita "The Gospel of Selfless action". In order to achieve true liberation of the soul, it is important for an individual to control all mental desires and tendencies to enjoy sense pleasures. To illustrate, "When a man dwells in his mind on the object of sense, attachment to them is produced. From attachment springs desire and from desire come anger. From anger arises bewilderment, from bewilderment loss of memory and from the destruction of intelligence he perishes." (2.62 –3).

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