

WHY IS NIGERIA ADICHIE'S *LOWLAND*? A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND* AND CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

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ABSTRACT

The two most promising, inspiring, well-marketed and popular women authors of the milieu of post-colonial/commonwealth transnational writings are Jhumpa Lahiri and Chimamanda Adichie. It is interesting to note that both women belong to nations which had the same imperial masters; however, they are more interested to depict the post-colonial conditions of their respective homelands. It is not the struggle of independence that the native people faced under their colonial lords that incites and excites their pens; it is the post-colonial internal politics and conflicts and complexities that sing the song for them. There is a typical blend of History and Fiction in both their works. The historiography used by both these writers gives an authentic catharsis which traces existential issues.

*One of Lahiri's recent works, *The Lowland* traces the development of characters through the troubled times of the Naxalite movement. She uses the historical setting which influenced the several youths of the country to engage in intellectual and armed battles with the existing government. However, Lahiri focuses on the effects it had on the people who were indirectly involved with the movement. The story is not only about Udayan, who was an active member of the Naxalite brigade working underground in Calcutta, it is about Subhas, Gauri, and Bela too.*

*Similarly, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* deals with the turmoil breathing in Nigeria during the Biafra war. The story relates the experience of five characters- two twin sisters, a professor of mathematics, a British citizen and a houseboy. It is interesting to note the similarities in the treatment of the post-colonial situation dealt by the two authors and no wonder we could see that Nigeria turns out to be Adichie's lowland as Calcutta is to Lahiri.*

Furthermore, the genre of young adult literature is not only about entertainment, it has its own perspectives. And one of them is a revolution. The seeds of revolution that grow best in the young mind have found a common niche in both Lahiri and Adichie. Hence, this article is meant to discuss their similarities and differences of approach towards their respective post-colonial situations.

KEYWORDS: *Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Adichie, Post-colonial Literature, Naxalite Movement, Biafra War, Transnationalism, Identity Politics*

“The revolution has always been in the hands of the young. The young always inherit the revolution.”

Huey P. Newton

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the fact that the genre of young adult literature is one of the most interesting and entertaining. However, one also needs to acknowledge the fact that entertainment is not its sole purpose. It has several perspectives of its own; and social awareness and the resultant revolution is one of them. As rightly cited by Steven Wolk, we have a civic responsibility to care for our democracy, and it is supposed to be one of the primary aims of our schools to help students learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to participate in the daily governance of our nation (Engle). We are living in the enlightenment of young adult literature. Never before teachers had so many remarkable books to bring to life in their classrooms and use to teach social responsibility (Wolk).

We have always needed and would always need a better and more human understanding of the politics involved, a better understanding of blood diamonds, landmines, child soldiers, torture, suicide bombings, conflict over minerals, fair wages, disease, shortages of food and water, problems with aid, global warming and the many issues of gender, age, race, and class. We need to know more about Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity (Vaughn).

The two most promising, inspiring, well-marketed and popular women authors of the milieu of post-colonial/commonwealth transnational writings are Jhumpa Lahiri and Chimamanda Adichie. It is interesting to note that both women belong to nations which had the same imperial masters; however, they are more interested to depict the post-colonial conditions of their respective homelands. It is not the struggle of independence that the native people faced under their colonial lords that incites and excites their pens; it is the post-colonial internal politics and conflicts and complexities that sing the song for them. There is a typical blend of History and Fiction in both their works. The historiography used by both these writers gives an authentic catharsis which traces existential issues.

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The Lowland is a coming-of-age novel. It is about growth, development and sacrifice. It is also about the contrasting perspectives of the two brothers, Subhas and Udayan. They are only fifteen months apart and share an inseparable bond. Lahiri writes, "Since childhood Subhash had been cautious. His mother never had to run after him. While Subhash stayed in clear view, Udayan was disappearing: even in their two-room house, when he was a boy, he hid compulsively, under the bed, behind the doors, in the crate where winter quilts were stored.

He played this game without announcing it, spontaneously vanishing, sneaking into the back garden, climbing into a tree, forcing their mother, when she called and he did not answer, to stop what she was doing. As she looked for him, as she humored him and called his name, Subhash saw the momentary panic in her face, that perhaps she would not find him" (Lahiri).

The first and second part of Lahiri's novel is embedded in the world politics of the sixties and seventies. The constant struggle and revolution happening all around the world was influential in shaping the sensibilities of Udayan. On one hand he had Mao Zedong and on the other, Che Guevara to look up to. He grew up to be Charu Mazumdar's 'New Man', full of zeal and revolutionary ideas.

Lahiri depicts The Naxalite movement of the 1970s in West Bengal which threatened to overhaul the existing political and ideological framework of the Bengali 'bhadrolok' society. Front-ranking leaders of the movement such as Charu Mazumdar wrote extensively to exhort the public to participate in a violent rejection of the status quo modeled on the Chinese Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong. According to Mazumdar, for the Naxalite movement to be successful, the revolutionary classes had to undergo a transformation of character in order to realize their revolutionary potential. Mazumdar carefully delineated the steps towards the formation of the revolutionary personality, in Charu Mazumdar's words, "the new man" This new man was one who would be able to conquer all thoughts of self and engage in unconditional self-sacrifice. Integral to the formation of the "new man" was a dedicated study of the writings of Mao Zedong, which would lead to an ideological awakening on the part of the revolutionary classes. For Mazumdar, youth and students, un-

burdened by a "revisionist" past, and - being educated - would be most able to grasp the thought of Mao Zedong, and thus, were best suited to achieve this revolutionary personality (Dasgupta). In the article entitled, 'A Few Words to the Revolutionary Students and Youth', published in *Deshabrati* on March 5, 1970, Mazumdar wrote: "in a man's life the age between eighteen and twenty-four is the period when he can work hardest and be most vigorous, most courageous and most loyal to his ideas."

It was perhaps, this passion that made Udayan blind to the dreadful and long lasting consequences that fell on him, his family and his newlywed wife, Gauri. Udayan was brutally hunted and shot dead in front of his family by the police, in a way which was very prevalent during that time in the streets of Kolkata. The ideals of the revolution were truly romantic, authentic and at times were too good to be true. The high sound rhetoric of Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal moved the youth; students from the elite institutions like Presidency and Jadavpur engaged in public demonstrations and armed battles against the government were killed in fake encounters by the police. Even those who surrendered met the same fate.

Udayan's attempt at creating and supporting a revolution was very explicit. However, Subhas was no less a revolutionary than Udayan. Although he does not support the extravagant stance of Udayan, he was there beside him in his life and death. He carried his brother's burden for the rest of his life. Seeing the implicit onslaught on Gauri by her in-laws after Udayan's death, he decides to marry her and takes her to the US. Lahiri writes, "He was there, standing behind a rope at the airport, waiting for her. Her brother-in-law, her husband. The second man she had married in two years". His decision to do this is perhaps, no less a revolution in itself. The time he marries Gauri, she was pregnant with Udayan's child. Although Subhas knew that the past and the unsaid presence of Udayan would never let him have a normal

relationship with Gauri, he tried his best to be a convenient husband and a caring father. Likewise, spending most his life trying to understand where he went wrong.

The novels of Adichie bring a similar flavor. There are conflicts, separations and an inherent identity crisis that the Africans have faced during their colonial and postcolonial times. One such novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, circles around the lives of five people. It is their views and experience during the Nigerian civil wars that constitutes the majority of the plot. The Nigerians were similar victims of the 'divide and rule' policy that devastated India and Pakistan. Although the British withdrew their claims over Nigeria in 1960, the West made their neo-colonial presence felt through the mistake made by the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and the Igbo people. Biafra, mainly consisting of the Igbo people, declared itself an independent country after an act of secession, but ultimately after a short rule of three years surrendered to the Nigerian Federal Military Government (FMG). The clash of these major ethnic groups resulting in the military coup is the background and the most dictating force of Adichie's novel.

Adichie writes, "...I did not choose Biafra, it chose me. I cannot honestly intellectualize my interest in the war. It is a subject I have known for very long that I would write about. I was born seven years after the Nigeria-Biafra war ended, and the war is not mere history for me, it is also memory, for I grew up in the shadow of Biafra... I am still known to cry stupidly about some stories, about some tiny losses that so many people endured, about this trail of physical and metaphysical losses. If anything, learning of the war left me with great respect for a generation of people who had the courage to believe so fervently in something, something I find sadly lacking in the Nigeria of today. But I wanted to write a novel. I had no interest in writing a polemic. I was aware that the book would in the end reflect my worldview -it would be a book concerned with the ordinary person, a book with unapologetic Biafran sympathies, but also a book that would absolutely refuse to romanticize the war. I was very aware, as I wrote, of the problem that often comes with being a defeated people -and the Igbo are in many ways a defeated people" (Adichie, African "Authenticity" and the Biafran Experience).

Furthermore, her novel is about change. The perspectives of her characters constantly change. The novel opens and ends with the narratives of Ogwu, a normal uneducated houseboy who goes through a series of lifechanging experiences. Firstly he shares a close bond with Olanna, who teaches him to read and write. Then he is forcefully drafted into the Biafran army and witness death and rape at close quarters. His master, Odenigbo, was a professor of Mathematics at the University of Nsukka and was known for his revolutionary fervor and ideas. He is a symbol of the intellectuals who criticises the world, slammed his ideas over his friend's circle and yet did nothing other than surviving troubled times. On the other hand, Olanna, the daughter of a rich businessman proves to be very brave to leave the security of her family and enters into the relationship with Odenigbo. She also forgives him for cheating her and accepts the child of Amala and Odenigbo. The other important characters in the novel are Richard Churchill and his wife and Olanna's twin sister, Kainene. Richard is an English writer who is doing research on the Igbo-Ukwu art forms. In an interview with Robert Birnbaum, she admits that Richard's character is somewhat modeled on Frederick Forsyth for his long involvement with the Biafran culture and people. She says, "Richard isn't at all like him, of course, but just the sense of an Englishman who became more Biafran than Biafrans themselves, was really an idea that came from him, Forsyth" (Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie). Kainene is perhaps the most interesting of all the characters. She is a strong independent woman with strict ideals. In the beginning, we find her to be a strong businesswoman, socialite and a part of the African elite who profited from the war. However, seeing the evils of the war, she is highly motivated and runs refugee camps and helps the

distressed. However, the novel ends in uncertainty as Kainene goes missing and Richard dives in the quest to find her (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*). The way the novel ends, leaves the readers questioning the actual motif of the novel. To this Adichie answers, "...Half of a Yellow Sun is for me more a love story than a war story; it is a book about love, about the human complexity of our flawed and rich African world" (Adichie, African "Authenticity" and the Biafran Experience).

Therefore we notice certain evident similarities between the two authors. Both of them depicted a time of civil unrest in their respective countries which take place during the end years of the 1960s. The so-called Naxalites revolutionaries who fought for the liberation of people against the atrocities of the government had similar ideals to those who supported Biafra. Udayan and Kainene have the similar self-sacrificing nature and had to face almost similar consequences. One is shot dead and the other goes missing. We also find common aspects of passive revolution in both Richard and Subhas. Although one might consider Adichie's expression to be more authentic than Lahiri's, we have to give credit to Lahiri on her research and groundwork to recreate history with her fiction. Hence we see that fiction has a stake in the state's future, which it demonstrates by treating civil war as a setting for literary experimentation. Recent novelistic experiments largely complement political science research in defining the "failed state" as a more or less normative condition in much of the world (Marx).

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