

Domestic (Dis)Harmony and Alienation in Jhumpa Lahiri's " *The Lowland* "

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*, traces the fate of tender fraternal bonds torn asunder by violent politics. Lahiri's delineation of the narrative events purports to show how the absence of loved ones becomes covertly a portent haunting presence within the subconscious mind of the affected characters directing their own consequential ways of life through which they are goaded on. When their respective paths crisscross, Lahiri proves herself to be adept at depicting the unhappiness at the core of the intricate interpersonal relations that materializes. This paper attempts to grasp the import of this novel by situating the author's presence both in the post millennium Indian English fiction as well as in the fabric of the narrative. The trio of trauma, exile, and alienation pervades the entire novel.

Key words: plot – characterization – narrative technique – thematic discussion

1-Introduction:

Indian novelists are muscling into the ranks of top English-language writers, making their way onto the best-seller lists and the literary awards. Within the pantheon of literary achievers, the Indian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri fits comfortably whose name comes to the minds of the readers effortlessly. Lahiri first made her name with the quiet, meticulously observed stories about Indian immigrants trying to adjust to new lives in the United States, stories that had the hushed intimacy of chamber music. Navigating between the Indian traditions they have inherited and the battling new world, the characters in the first collection of short stories entitled *The Interpreter of Maladies*, (1999) which won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, seek love beyond the barriers of culture and generations. In her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) which was made into a popular film, Lahiri enriches the themes that made her first collection an international bestseller: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the conflicts of assimilation, and, most poignantly, the tangled ties between generations. Here again Lahiri displays her deft touch for the perfect detail-the fleeting moment-the turn of phase-that opens whole words of emotion. Then the eight stories which appeared in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand, as they explore the secrets at the heart of family life. Here they enter the worlds of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers. *The Lowland* is Lahiri's fourth book. It was short listed for the National Book Award in 2013, the Man Booker Prize 2013 and the Bailey's Women's Prize for fiction 2014. She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2012.

2-Literature Review:

Displacement in all the cases proves painful. It always bears smell of agony and anguish. In this way, any kind of break away from a unitary body happens always painfully. In the cases of diasporic and nomadic folks, the situation usually gets grim time to time. They painfully manage the emotional pendulum of their lives across the borders. They constantly try to negotiate with center of periphery (that is, where they stay) but occasional disturbances cause emotional breakdown rising up to the level of trauma. Displacement occurs due to some disturbances and it carries all the way the memories of things either seen or thought at the mind's level.

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Diaspora' is a word which is derived from Greek, which means 'to disperse'. The term diaspora means the movement of people or group to a country away from their own. Historically it means the movement of the Jewish people away from their own country to live and work in other countries, mainly exilement of Jews in Egypt. The literature of diaspora refers to the literature of any people who have moved away from their own country and settled elsewhere. The term diaspora immediately conjures up the image of a journey. But this journey is altogether different one. Diasporic journeys are about settling down and putting roots or 'staying put' elsewhere. (Brah 182)

The renowned diasporic writer Jhumpa Lahiri is best known for her novels and short stories about the immigrants experience. She was born in England and raised in America parents who emigrated in India. Lahiri's writing is characterized by her plain language and her characters, often Indian immigrants to America who must navigate between the cultural values of their homeland and their adopted home. Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behavior. *The Lowland* is a familiar territory in which she is back to her nature settings of Calcutta and Rhode Island, telling the sagas of generations of Indian American immigrants.

3-Discussion:

The Lowland is similar to the other works that Lahiri has written : beautiful, sparse accounts of people lost in new worlds. The reader is always struck by how she writes about the particulars of feeling strange : for instance, the bated breath of watching one's children grow up in a world so terribly different from one.

The Lowland revolves around a Bengali immigrant family in the United States (the Mitras) and the Indian sections serve as a background to the story as it develops. Yet, placing the book in the category of "immigrant fiction" does not sit well with Lahiri as she stated in an interview, "It just so happens that many writers originate from different parts of the world than the ones they end up living in, either by choice or by necessity or by circumstance, and therefore, write about those experiences (Mayfield) in literature and that many a native has written about the poles of alienation and assimilation. While she may set some of her scenes in India or elsewhere, her themes are universal.

Lahiri says the book is based on a tragic incident she first heard about in India, during one of her many visits while she was growing up. Two young brothers, who had become involved in a violent political movement, were executed just a few hundred yards from her grandparents' home in Calcutta. The young men's family was forced to watch as they were killed. "That was the scene that, when I first heard of it, when it was described to me, was so troubling and so haunted me-and ultimately inspired me to write the book," Lahiri says. (Neary) *The Lowland* has been considered as a story about two brothers, but it could easily be the story of ideology, and how it shapes the family. The descriptions of the world the boys were born into are vivid without catering to our thirst for the exotic. The characters here are middle-class, living in a quiet subdivision, focused on thick textbooks and transistor radios, on sneaking into the club for foreigners right outside their doors. As the boys grow older and their interests take different paths, changing the lives of everyone around them, we see India fade into the background and the bleak solitude of New England academia takes over.

The book begins with the description of lowland itself, lowland that was to be a monumental place for the Mitras in the future. The opening lines reads like the way one would guide a new traveller to reach the place : "East of the Tolly Club, after Deshapram Sashmal splits in two, there is a small mosque. A turn leads to a quiet enclave. A warren of narrow lanes and modest middle-class homes. Once within the enclave, there were two ponds, oblong, side by side. Behind them was the lowland spanning a few acres."

Jhumpa Lahiri in *The Lowland : A Fiction* (2013) takes readers right away to the 'lowland' to the East of Tolly Club located in Tollygunge, a suburb of Calcutta. Past the lowland there existed a open space where Mitra brothers used to go for playing football. Subhash and Udayan were two brothers of similar appearance, height and voice though born at the difference of right fifteen months. Subhash Mitra was thirteen years old. Though he was older brother yet he never felt anything without Udayan. They were sons to a simple clerk in Indian Railways department, and a seamstress named Bijoli (their mother). Both started their formal schooling from a Bengali medium school. Once, Udayan listened to Bismillah a caddy of the club telling that over the club field, so many golf balls lay simply that he used to sell off. Under the impression, Udayan took the initiative to enter the Tolly Club.

By the help of putting iron and kerosene tin both managed to climb over the fence. In wake of Partition, many Hindus from Dhaka, Rajshahi, and Chittagong came to Tollygunge looking for shelter here and there, many additional walls were erected and some were raised high to prevent any intrusion into the club. Having entered the club, their eyes surprised to see the dashing lush greenery. Though they were apprehensive of being caught, slowly they mustered courage to walk and look around. They stuffed their pockets with golf balls. On one evening they were caught by the policeman. He beat Subhash badly. Udayan could not bear his brother being beaten by someone. He blurt out not to beat and shielded him. Both boys were highly sharp and they proved their talent at their schools.

In 1967, they began to listen about Naxalbari movement to radio. Naxals were demanding ownership rights for sharecroppers. They were staging demonstrations, putting in hoardings, banners etc. at Presidency College and Jadavpur in support of Naxalbari. They once broke on a cop and killed with bows and arrows. Consequent upon, eleven people were shot dead by police. Eight of them were women. Udayan blamed the United Front, the ruling party led by Ajoy Mukherjee. The United Front came into power that it would abolish large-scale landholdings having with few people. Landowners were being abducted and killed. What have State and Central governments done in response?

In July the Central Government banned the carrying of bows and arrows in Naxalbari. The same week, authorized by the West Bengal cabinet, five hundred officers and men raided the region. They searched the mud huts of the poorest villagers. They captured unarmed insurgents, killing them if they refused to surrender. Ruthlessly, systematically, they brought the rebellion to its heels. **(Jhumpa23)**

Udayan and Subhash both took it altogether as a shock. But Udayan took it emotionally. He said, People are starving, and this is their solution....They turn victims into criminals. They aim guns at people who can't shoot back. **(Jhumpa23)**

Udayan approves of Naxalbari for its demand of the abolition of arbitrary ownership. He even criticizes central government's slackness and looking for solution and support from the United States of America, and USSR. Udayan felt India still in the bondage of the British slavery. Later on Udayan actively involved himself into the uprising against the government. He made many posters and affixed them here and there in the city. Subhash who was practical minded, applied for doctoral award in America. He first consulted and asked Udayan to go there. He also tried him make out that America is a land of opportunities. Udayan denied flatly and told Subhash that you would never come back if you went there. Udayan took a job of tutoring.

Subhash decided to apply for a few Ph.D. programmes in the United States while Udayan thought that by such a decision Subhash was being quite irresponsible to the issues of people. He said quite thoughtfully, "How can you walk away from what's happening? There, of all places?" **(Jhumpa30)** It is quite characteristic of him to impose his notion of social ethics on others particularly on Subhash. Here the reader will find Subhash retaliating in the same coin posing a few questions to Udayan : "This isn't a game you're playing. What if the police come to the house? What if you get arrested? What would Ma and Baba think?.....They're people who raised you. Who continue to feed and clothe you? You amount to nothing, if it weren't for them." **(Jhumpa30)** Though Udayan got flared up initially, he comes to acknowledge the worth of his gracious presence for the first time in his life. "You're the other side of me, Subhash. It's without you that I'm nothing. Don't go. It was the only time he'd admitted such a thing. He'd said it with love in his voice. With need." **(Jhumpa31)**

Subhash's dream of doing Ph.D. in America is soon materialized when he gets a scholarship to settle in Rhode Island (where Lahiri grew up) for his research. He thus steps out of Tollygunge "as he had stepped so many mornings out of dream, its reality and its particular logic rendered meaningless in the light of day." **(Jhumpa34)** Life in Rhode Island was entirely different. He breathed a sense of freedom because unlike his days in Tollygunge, life ceased to obstruct or assault him. "Here was a place where humanity was not always pushing, rushing, running as if with a fire at its back." **(Jhumpa34)** He lived at the top of a house, sharing a kitchen and bathroom with another Ph.D student named Richard Grifalconi, a student of sociology. Subhash learned to settle down quietly without joining in any of the student protests against the government's policies on Vietnam. He knew "he'd been invited to America as Nixon's guest...He knew that the door could close just as arbitrarily as it had opened. He knew that he could be sent back to where he'd come from, and that there would be plenty to take his place." **(Jhumpa36)** For a couple of lonely years in a student boarding house, he learns to live without the voices of his family. He was in a sense proud to have come to America alone to study oceanography. Soon he learned to live here "as he once must have learned to stand and walk and speak.

He'd wanted so much to leave Calcutta, not only for the sake of education but also-he could admit this to himself now--to take a step Udayan never would."(**Jhumpa40**) Yet his motivation had done little to prepare him. He felt quite uncertain though he was happy to escape from a city he sees disorganized and violent. "Here in this place surrounded by sea, he was drifting far from his point of origin. Here, detached from Udayan, he was ignorant of so many things."(**Jhumpa40**) He found in the beaches of Rhode Island a resemblance to the delta lowlands surrounding Calcutta and he learned to live by this association with his homeland.

Subhash soon receives a letter from Udayan. He felt their loyalty to one another once more, their affection stretched half way across the world. Yet, "stretched to the breaking point by all that now stood between them."(**Jhumpa43**) Udayan hoped that Subhash, after his studies would come back to "an altered country, a more just society."(**Jhumpa43**) The final lines of the letter was almost melodramatic and indicated the place of Subhash in his life. "The days are dull without you. And although I refuse to forgive you for not supporting a movement that will only improve the lives of millions of people, I hope you can forgive me for giving you a hard time. Will you hurry up with whatever you are doing? An embrace from your brother."(**Jhumpa42-3**) The second letter informed him of his marriage to Gauri, who was doing a degree in Philosophy at Presidency. She was a girl from North Calcutta, Cornwallis street, whose parents were dead and who lives with her only brother Manas. And Manas had befriended Udayan at Calcutta University, where they were both graduate students in the Physics Department. To Subhash, this was another instance of Udayan forging ahead of him and of getting on his way. "Not only had Udayan married before Subhash, he'd married a woman of his choosing. On his own he'd taken a step that Subhash believed was their parents place to decide."(**Jhumpa47**) Udayan had sent him a photograph of Gauri as a proof of what he had done. Once more Subhash felt "defeated by Udayan" for having found a girl all by him.

In the second year of his Ph.D. Subhash lived on his own because Richard had found a teaching job in Chicago. Though he used to receive a few letters from Udayan, he no longer referred to Naxalbari or to his political activities.

He wondered what was happening in Calcutta and what Udayan might be masking. He also wondered if Gauri had replaced him in his house. During this time, he had a short relationship with a thirty-six year old American woman named Holly who lived with her son Joshua, separated from her husband, Keith. When Holly suddenly decided to get back to a life with her estranged husband, his life with her ended abruptly. Subhash began his third autumn in Rhode Island and he was reminded of the days of pooja in Calcutta. But quite unlike the other two years, he did not receive any parcel; instead he received a telegram which said, "Udayan killed, come back if you can."(**Jhumpa83**)

When Subhash managed to reach Calcutta, he expected his present at the station to welcome him. There was only the younger cousin of his father's, Biren Kaka and his wife who had come to receive him at the station. Subhash recalled how Udayan had bid him farewell at the same station when he left for Rhode Island and the promise of his mother that he would receive a "hero's welcome"(**Jhumpa88**) when he would return from the US. During the train journey from Delhi to Calcutta, he had learned about the atrocious crimes of the Naxalites which were sadistic, gruesome and intended to shock. The old law which had been created by the British, to counter independence had been reinstated by the government. These laws authorized the police to enter homes without warrant, and to arrest young men without charges.

On reaching home, Subhash met his parents. Their faces conveyed disappointment, "calloused by grief, blunted by what no parent should have seen."(**Jhumpa91**) Subhash stood before the image of Udayan and wept. Soon he came to understand that his parents received Gauri coldly and treated her badly because the marriage was not an arranged one. He also learned that she was expecting Udayan's child. His parents refused to talk to her or acknowledge her presence in the house. After lunch he went out, walking past the two ponds. He noticed a small stone marker on which was written Udayan's name with the years of his birth and death, 1945-1971, inscribed on it. It was a memorial tablet, erected for political martyrs. His efforts to make his parents talk resulted in a bare few broken phrases. They did not ask him any news about Rhode Island nor asked him to stay back in Calcutta and abandon his studies abroad. They were in no position to plan his wedding or to think about his future.

His parents felt uneasy to talk about Udayan's death. It was from Gauri that he could gather what actually took place on that fateful day. She described to him briefly how "she and his parents had watched Udayan die."(**Jhumpa113**) It happened a week before Durga Pujo in the month of Ashvin. Gauri and his mother were returning from a day of shopping with packets containing gifts for the extended family.

When they reached their house, they found that policeman and soldiers were stationed in and around the house. Gauri saw her father-in-law descending the stairs, his hands raised over his head with a policeman pointing a rifle at his back.

Then Gauri and his parents were ordered to exit the house, forming a row. The police told them they were under orders to locate and arrest Udayan Mitra. Soon they spotted Udayan hiding behind the water hyacinth, in the flooded water of the lowland. The police announced over the megaphone that they were prepared to eliminate the family members if he did not surrender. Presently Udayan surrendered. His hands were bound; he was pushed into the police van. They look him to the damp grass that edged the lowland and shot him dead. They dragged his body by the legs and tossed him into the back of the van and drove away. The body was not returned to their parents. The police had discovered a diary in their bedroom which contained all the proof they needed.

They observed a mourning period of eleven days, at the end of which, a priest came for the final rites and a cook to prepare the ceremonial meal. Gauri was given a white sari to wear in place of coloured ones, so that she resembled the other widows who were three times her age in the family. She knew that "in less than nine months a baby would come. But its life had already been started, its heart already beating, represented by a separate line creeping forward. She saw Udayan's life, no longer accompanying her own as she'd assumed it would, but ceasing in October 1971. This formed a grave in her mind's eye....She wished the days and months ahead of her would end....And yet somehow she was breathing. Just as time stood still but was also passing, some other part of her body that she was unaware of was now drawing oxygen, forcing her to stay alive."(**Jhumpa111**) Subhash's parents did not want her, they only wanted her child. They often repeated to her, "You won't be of help"(**Jhumpa110**) His mother said she could choose to go somewhere to continue her studies. Subhash pleaded for her saying, "You can't separate them. For Udayan's sake, accept her."(**Jhumpa114**) His mother was very angry and she spoke in an insulting tone : "Don't tell me how to honour my own son."(**Jhumpa114**)

Piecing together the various data he had garnered, he soon came to the conclusion that Udayan had given his life to a misguided movement that had already been dismantled. The only thing he had altered was what their family had been. His parents had been lenient regarding Udayan, as they had always been. He had kept Subhash deliberately in the dark as he went on clandestinely, putting together bombs, blowing up things. Gauri was the only one he had trusted. He had inducted her into their lives only to strand her there. There was nothing Subhash could do to console his parents. It had mattered little if he had come all the way from Rhode Island at all. His mother's deliberate coldness toward Gauri, reinforced by his father's passivity was intended to drive her away from the house. All he could do to help Gauri from the cruelties of his parents and the frequent police inquiries was to take her away legally by marrying her : "To take his brother's place, to raise his child, to come to love Gauri as Udayan had."(**Jhumpa115**) Subhash knew only too well that even if the police were to leave her alone, his parents would not. Subhash tried to convince her of the most obvious facts : that in America no one knew about the movement, no one would bother her. She could go on with her studies. It would be an opportunity to begin again. Giving due consideration to what Subhash suggested to her, Gauri decides to accompany Subhash to Rhode Island, not the least out of any love she felt for Subhash, but it offered an alternative for change and academic prospects which she longed for.

Gauri kept using her Indian clothes and ways of life. Subhash as a dear and dutiful husband helped her lot feel happy and comfortable. He even suggested a name Bela for would-be baby. Although they formally live a married life, Subhash often feels guilty of inheriting younger brother's wife. He never dared approach her amorously. In due course, Gauri bore a female baby whom they named Bela. Few days later, Subhash wished to have a baby of his own with her. But she never allowed him except mechanically. She has little emotion for him. Slowly time passed, Bela began learning language and admitted into a school located nearby, having an identity card bearing the names of Subhash Mitra and Gauri Mitra. Subhash has a dream of his own baby with Gauri which to the lost remained merely dream. Gradually, gap between them began increasing. None prefer to tease anyway. No doubt, their relation was not based on emotion. It was "a connection at once false and true."(**Jhumpa156**) Meanwhile, Gauri got a chance for doctoral programme in Boston. Subhash did not oppose her anyway. Few months later, information came to Subhash that his father passed away. This way or that he was cremated. After his death, Bijoli soon lost her balance of mind. She turned into a beggar often went to the lowland where Udayan was shot dead. There , she used to talk to herself. Three months later to her husband's death, a letter from Subhash came to Tollygunge mentioning his possible visit to Calcutta to deliver few lectures alongwith Udayan's child named Bela. Gauri was not in condition to accompany him for some necessary work. Deepa simply stored the information.

Subhash along with Bela arrived at the start of monsoon season. Bijoli offered Bela few precious gifts. She also taught her few tips for eating daal (cereal), rice, and lentils. Bela learnt from her making braids, wearing mirrored bangles so on and so forth. After a week, Subhash began to stay outside in the name of few lectures. Deepa took Bela to market for shopping and moreover for a walk. She even wanted to stay for more time and walk around the club.

Time was over. Finally, they returned to Rholde Island finding Gauri absent. Bela found a letter which was telling about Gauri's departure for California where she was hired to teach students of a college. She there, settled with least remorse. About her address she just mentioned that you can reach on the care of university. Gauri's departure not only baffled but also broken them emotionally. He received such a deep emotional injury that was never to be recovered. Gauri so far seems a bloody opportunist, heartless, and ultra modern for no reasons. She in this way adapted American pattern of life. She by nature was not family loving lady. She had saved and shaped the life of Subhash if she would have decided seriously. To her, life was not more than a game to be played fair or foul. She left even her daughter Bela on the ground that she was old enough to forget her. And Subhash loves Bela not her. These were her foolish excuses. Bela and Subhash anyhow live together. Gradually, the emotional rift between them widened. "Isolation offered its own form of companionship : the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings." (Jhumpa237) Here in California, Gauri recalls her haunting past relation with Udayan. "Without that there would be nothing to haunt her. No grief." (Jhumpa231) She takes California her home. Ironically, she still carries her green card that proves her Indian citizenship. She could not overcome her Indianness altogether:

And yet she remained, in spite of her Western clothes, her Western academic interests, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and against the backdrop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had wed. (Jhumpa236)

Gauri admits that Subhash "had done nothing wrong. He had let her go, never bothering her, never blaming her, at least to her face. She hoped he'd found some happiness. He deserved it, not she." (Jhumpa242)

After many years gap, one day he came to know Richard Grifalconi his university friend, passed away. Like him, he would also leave everything except one thing as a secret which he should reveal immediately. The secret that Bela was daughter of Udayan not his was like a heavy stone put on his chest. Subhash began thinking about his property to be handed to or sold off. He was the master of two abandoned homes, one in Tollygunge where he had not returned since his mother's death another in Rholde Island in which Gauri had left him. Home in Tollygunge still bears names of Subhash Mitra and Gauri Mitra. It was managed by their relatives and the rent was deposited into a bank account. Bela later on conceived with someone about whom she did not intend to tell. Subhash thought it another version of Gauri. In due course, she bore a female baby whom she named Meghna. In this way "the past is there, appended to the present." (Jhumpa275)

Subhash via web searched Gauri's address and sent a letter asking for few signatures. Gauri thought that he was asking for divorce. Actually he was planning to sell off his Tollygunge home which still bore Subhash and Gauri. Meghna so far turned four began her school. Subhash in the morning used to drop her to the school. In the evening, Bela used to bring her home. She even told whoever asked about her mother that she was dead. Later on Bela also left Subhash for supporting the poor people.

The Lowland is a timeless tale of emotions, people's beliefs, their vulnerabilities, their needs and struggles all woven together and brought to life by the simplicity of expression, a fluid pace of narrative and multi-dimensional perspective. All in all, this ambitious book warrants a serious reading, considering the economy of detailing that has been put into the narrative. The richness of the emotional complexities involved make for a rewarding reading experience. With a sweeping, addictive plot, *The Lowland* still peels naked the identities brother, lover, father, and mother, often with just a small, simple gesture. It challenges the politics of nationality with both pathetic desperation and revolutionary zeal. It makes you want and hope and despair with devastating stories of passion and indifference. Lahiri's sense of history and its consequences is as insightful as her grasp of the human heart. She weaves her tale with a sure hand around the threads of the two brother's intersecting lives, moving swiftly back and forth from one continent to the other and ranging across the seven decades from Subhash's birth in 1943 to the present day. It sounds epic in sweep, especially when combined with the laden, potent themes, the intertwining of politics and sexuality, the cauterizing of emotional wounds and grievances and the repetition of places and personalities. Although it plays with secrets and emotional turning points (whether Bela will find out about her biological father, whether

Udayan was a victim of police brutality or a deluded, violent man), it seems to possess no singular trajectory and no dominant idea beyond that of generational drift.

4-Conclusion:

To the conclusion, it can be said that Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is a narration of the agony and anguish her characters undergo. Alienation is focal point in the development of her themes. She breathlessly recounted three generation's alienating history. In fact she directed alienation into her character's veins. Alienation runs along with their blood circulation. Subhash Mitra is a more sinned than sinning. His parents were obliged to live emotionally fractured life. Gauri appears sheer selfish and opportunist. She tried hard to shun all her Indian ethnicity but failed largely. Bela is just victim to her parents unhappiness and estrangement. Vijay Mishra's hypothesis that all diasporas are unhappy (1) is one hundred percent correct. Her all characters are emotionally broken. It seems that alienation is part and parcel of their lives. It circulates into their values constantly. The trio of trauma, exile, and alienation pervades the entire novel.

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