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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Diasporic Hybridity and Liminality in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract

Diasporic experiences of Indian characters have drawn a considerable attention of social thinkers, political leaders, literary scholars and critics. The experiences of immigrants have been explored by postmodern researchers and writers in an effort to understand the reasons behind their hopelessness, the breakdown of their families, and how they ultimately internalise the ideals of the host culture at the urging of the native culture. Greek word for dispersal is where the word “diaspora” originates. It speaks of the scattering and displacing of individuals from their place of origin. The authors of diaspora have tried to underpin the hidden underlying reasons of leaving one’s country and compensating for their periferal status in the adopted culture. While juxtaposing the past and present experiences, the diaspora writers critically analyse the nature of exile, homelessness, nostalgia, memory of native land, hybridity, liminality, marginality, culture shock and identity crisis. In this research article, Jhumpa Lahiri's representation of immigrants’ struggles with identity, self-formation, and cultural differences in her book *The Lowland* will be critically assessed. It attempts to throw light on the social and political insecurities, human rights and cultural challenges brought forth by their liminal status. Facing liminality the characters are hovering in a perpetual mental dilemma between Indian lifestyle and American advanced culture. The major themes of the novel are location, relocation, dislocation, displacement and alienation which are solely caused by characters’ personal choices and actions.

Keywords: Exile, Homelessness, Nostalgia, Hybridity, Liminality, Marginality, Culture shock, Identity, Immigration, Periferal, Displacement, Alienation

Indo-American diaspora has been one of the most important diasporas which has drawn considerable attention of literary world and has produced many more literary scholars and critics. Among them Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the recent authors who has vibrantly accounted her experiences into her literary works. Lahiri, a second generation expatriate writer, depicts the condition of second generation immigrants who bravely attempt to assert their identities in a multidimensional and multicultural environment.

The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri critically examines the lives and experiences of middle-class immigrants with Bengali ancestry. Subhash and Udayan Mitra, two brothers, are the main characters in it. Their careers only separate when Subhash travels to the United States to pursue a Ph.D. while Udayan, who has a rebellious temperament, stays in Kolkata and joins the Naxlite movement. The two were born only fifteen months apart and spent their childhoods together. Udayan is finally shot and killed by the police in the Lowland behind his house as the communist struggle reaches its pinnacle in Bengal. Subhash returns home from America on hearing his brother’s death in the hope of consoling the family members. Subhash marries Gauri, the widow of his brother, against the wishes of his parents out of a sense of duty and obligation despite the fact that Gauri is carrying Udayan’s kid.

The emotional crises of Lahiri's characters stuck between the diametrically opposed poles of love and apathy, obligation and escapism, are vividly depicted in her book. The

swampy area between two ponds on a parcel of property behind the parents' house is referenced in the title of the book. It represents the protagonists' existential suffering. The two ponds appear to be a metaphor for the two brothers, whose lives continuously overlap and diverge.

Subhash emigrates to America with Gauri after they get married to protect her from societal pressures and abuse. In the hopes of finding happiness together, Subhash marries Gauri, but his choice proves to be a tragic one as Gauri drifts away, leaving him alone himself as he ages. Gauri had a daughter named Bela after relocating to America. She doesn't take as much care of the child as a mother should since she is becoming increasingly fixated on the modern, segregated American lifestyle. Gauri develops an interest in western philosophy and becomes immersed in a field of study that is strongly related to philosophical and metaphysical issues including fate, god, and other such things. She leaves Subhash and her own little daughter Bela behind in order to pursue higher education because of her excessive obsession with western culture and lifestyle. She prefers to interact with the written world over the actual, physical world. She is cut off from reality and the human world due to her fascination with philosophy, and she has no feelings of affection for Subhash or Bela. The marriage disintegrates after 12 years of seclusion and abandonment when Subhash must go back to India to participate in his father's burial ceremonies. Subhash experiences alienation when attempting to accept western culture and beliefs while residing in the U.S.A. The following words are worth noting in this regard:

Sailing even slightly east reminded subhash of how far away he was from his family.

Isolated on the ship with the scientists and other students and crew, he felt doubly alone.

Unable to fathom his future, severed from his past (Lahiri 50)

Subhash's isolation and alienation gets intensified on India's Independence Day as he recalls the pious day in India and tries to compare it with his present situation in U.S.A: "The following day was August 15, Indian Independence Day. A holiday in the country lights on government buildings, flag hoisting, and parades. An ordinary day here" (61). All the disturbances and upheavals in the lives of Bengali family seem to be the result of Udayan's death which leaves a long lasting impression on the psyche of characters. Regarding this Meera Bharvani comments: "By representing the responses of the first and second generation diasporas and people, Jhumpa Lahiri shows how the conditions in their homelands have an effect on them in the alien land" (45).

The novel successfully portrays the isolation and dislocation which all the characters go through. Being unable to forget her past, Gauri clings to it that causes her to retreat into silence and isolation: "Isolation offered its own form of companionship, the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings" (165). While roaming in campus and interacting with other American girls she wants to look like the other American women and tries to transcend national boundaries. Both Subhash and Gauri closely observe how the customs and rituals of America differ from those in India. Everything in America strikes them as strange new, different and awkward. For example, while observing his mother in India, he observes that her dark hair is adorned with a bright vermilion braid to indicate that she has a husband, which is extremely unusual in America. In addition to Subhash and Gauri, Udayan

was also aware of and respected the western norms of marriage: “Like chairman Mao, I respect the idea of an arranged marriage. It is one thing, I admit, that I admire about the west” (Lahiri 49).

Bela, who was raised according to American tradition and ceremony, is an example of how they rejected Indian customs. She is allowed to live a life of homeless person separately from Gauri and Subhash. Subhash never thought to interfere in Bela’s life, academic career and marriage. In India it would have been problematic but in America it was considered meddling. Bela's identity and originality are highly valued by Subhash, whilst Gauri views Bela as a burden, an unwelcome presence on earth, and an unintentional error. Bela is an American cultural daughter rather than an Indian descendant. Due to Bela's strong sense of individualism, Subhash learns that she is pregnant: “She wanted to become a mother but the father was not a part of her life” (263). Her inclination to become a mother without having husband is a revolutionary act in Indian continent. In Indian and many other civilizations, Bela's child might be viewed as a sin, but in the American context, it is meant to be personal freedom that an individual enjoys, and the American land has granted it to its residents. Bela is determined to carry her child alone and will herself prove to be “a different mother than Gauri” (265).

It is obvious that Jhumpa Lahiri tries to vent her own thoughts and experiences of Indian and American settings. All the settings and cultural undertones of the novel indicates towards the auto-biographical undercurrents. Lahiri successfully sketches the feelings of exile, loneliness and alienation in striking narrative voice. While analysing Lahiri’s works, Professor Robert Gnanamony (2006) considers that:

Lahiri’s stories do document the characters’ trauma of cultural displacement and the feeling of cultural nostalgia. But there is no ill will and malice against the host country and no clash between Indianness and Americanness unlike her fellow litterateurs. This is not to deny that her stories are also documentation of exiled souls chained in muted boundaries of space and time. (104)

The characters’ entangling in the multi-cultural environment is due to self choice or the disturbing social conditions of post-Independence India. Subhash tries to remain Indian by heart provided that he subscribes himself to american cultural values and ethoes. But his outward subscription seems to satisfy the social and cultural norms of America. Remembering the Indian Independence Day, Indian marriage tradition, family culture and his usual journies to India on special occasions such as to perform the cultural rites after the death of his brother and father confirm the Indianness in Subhash’s character. Apart from this he also tries to look like American when he gives liberty to his wife and does not interfere into the personal lives of Gauri and Bela. He feels less like an Indian and more like an American after completing all of things. Subhash begins an illicit connection with Holly, an American woman, after years of living alone. They connected, went on several dates, and slept together. She was a nurse at a local hospital and was older than him. They talked a lot about Indian lifestyle. Subhash wants to marry Holly but her child, her age and being the wife of another person prevents him from marrying.

The choice for cultural resettlement is clearly visible in the personality of Gauri. After leaving India she settles with Subhash as his wife in America. As soon as she comes into the contact of American people she gets enthralled into the limelight of American culture which fosters the absolute personal liberty into personality of an individual. In India she was controlled by ethical, moral and social norms and standards. She felt dominated by social codes and conducts. In India she feels like a caged bird whereas while arriving in America she starts flying in the open air of American liberty. She tries very hard to look like American woman “putting on her winter coat over her Sari”. This proves to be a humorous attire for a person in America because American women wear leather coats and typical Indian women wear saris. No woman wear both of them at the same time. Subscribing to American lifestyle Gauri thinks that she is simplifying her life and identity which would have been very complex in Indian scenario. She keeps her hair short without letting her daughter know about Indian custom of having longhair.

One day, she scissored her sarees, petticoats and blouses, while doing this she rapidly starts switching to the American dresses and hairstyles. When she gives birth to a child daughter Bela she starts seeking baby sitter for her without the consent of Subhash. She wants to bring up the child in the typical American way while Subhash wants to bring up the child in typical Indian way. This shows the clear difference in their attitudes towards Indian and American lifestyle. Gauri has internalised the American craze for individuality.

While living on her own, Gauri starts developing a homosexual relationship with an American girl named Lorna; a Ph.D student of Gauri. This relationship would have been taboo in India which is very common in America. She fully enjoys the individual liberty of choosing a lover of the same sex crossing the peripheral line of sexual relationship. Gauri has changed herself so drastically that she slightly looks like the mainstream woman in India yet she cannot definitely turn into an American woman: “in spite of her jeans and boots and belted cardigan, or perhaps because of them, Gauri knew she stood out” (161).

She realises that there exist unremovable obstacles in the path of becoming an American only by changing her outfit. By outfit she may be an American but internally she can not fully wipe out her Indianness. Her demeanour, manner, and accent compel the onlookers to inquire as to her country of birth. For instance, when she accepts an invitation to give a lecture in San Diego, the car driver the University assigned for her does not recognise her at the gate. He believes she is the one hired to open doors for her lord; “Tell her, whenever she’s ready, he is said” (217). Lahiri portrays her character in striking terms:

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, 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. (217)

In a similar vein, Narsimhan, an Indian professor at the American University, has accepted English as the primary language of communication for everyday interactions as well as for business and office purposes. He has been internalising the foreign language for so long

that he has lost most of his home language's vocabulary. Regarding the very sense of adoption of foreign language and culture A. Roy marvelously comments:

Adoption of master language for the purpose of self-expression may be a sign of loyalty of fear, although that loyalty is also shown to conflict with his own middle. Class aspiration of freedom, aspirations set in place by the introduction of western learning. (Roy 07)

Lahiri has successfully portrayed not only the first-generation immigrant characters but also second generation immigrants. The first generation characters face the dilemma of liminality and hybridization. In their first interaction with the foreign they feel culture shock. They try very hard to absorb the foreign codes and conducts. After a long period of time they assimilate the American values and try to become a mosaic in the cultural spectrum of the U.S.A.

The second generation immigrants, the offsprings of the first generation, are born in the saturated context of America. They have not to face the culture shock faced by their parents. They grow with the foreign values and cultural beliefs and English becomes their mother tongue. Their speech and interactions in daily life are natural. The host nation becomes their native land. The native land of their parents becomes foreign for the second generation immigrants.

Lahiri's characters are first locked in a liminal region between the two cultures during their interactions. Their social communication is hampered by culture shock. The characters thoroughly adapt western ways of life in an effort to overcome this transitory culture shock and feel a sense of unity. The characters' further cultural amalgamation leads them to the state of hybridity in which they feel less stranded in the American community. The first generation immigrants Subhash and Gauri in spite of facing various difficulties, live successful lives doing better in education and profession. The second generation immigrant such as Bela does not face any difficulty in assimilating the American culture because she is born in the same soil and does not feel culture shock.

Whereas other works of Lahiri are based entirely on diasporic experiences, *The Lowland* is set against the backdrop of Naxlite movement which gives the novel a political twist. Lahiri's detailed analysis and observation are poignant and powerful decked with striking narrative. Lahiri's simple and straightforward narrative peeps deep into the psychological state of characters. Lahiri masterfully delineates contrasting environments of America and India. She lets the reader experience the contrasting cultural values.

In conclusion it may be asserted that *The Lowland* is first and foremost quest for identity, culture shock and assimilation. The reader may find himself/herself sympathizing with each character because of their human motives, struggles and happiness. It may be said that the novel intermingles political and historical events set against the personal lives of characters. It can be concluded that *The Lowland* is a masterpiece in diasporic literature. Hovering in the realm of diasporic dilemma, the characters are involved in multiple relationship playing various roles with their personal choices and decisions paving the way for their destiny. The plot of the

novel, dealing with diasporic dilemma, alternate between India and the United States over the course of five decades.

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