

Finding an Original Home: A Study of Diasporic Element in Jhumpa Lahiri's Lowland

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Abstract

Man moves from one place to other in search for the comfort and prosperity. Often they leave their homelands to create a better future. Diaspora writing deals with this type of movements, revealing certain features that are similar to the experience. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the acclaimed Indian American authors and is known as a much-admired chronicler of the Bengali immigrant experience. Her works portray the migrants' experiences and their attachment to their homeland along with their urge to belong in the settled land for the betterment of their economic and social life. This paper delves into Jhumpa Lahiri's 2013 novel, *The Lowland*, to analyze the diasporic experience of the Indian-born characters. Homi Bhabha's postcolonial approach is utilized to demonstrate the ways in which the characters perceive the immigration experience, and to unravel the causes of their despair, the disintegration of their family, and the underlying reasons behind the decisions they make to compensate for their marginal status in the adopted land. It is attempted to shed light on the characters' insecurities and mental challenges brought forth by their 'liminal' condition, in which they find themselves caught in a dilemma between the Indian lifestyle on the one hand, and the American dominant culture, on the other. This research concludes that in spite of the disturbing aspects of diasporic life including uncertainty, marginality, and unbelonging over which the characters possess no control, they are capable of surviving and even flourishing in the foreign social milieu. Diaspora is all about creating new identities in a new cultural space. The condition of people living in diaspora is a perpetual state of duality. Her characters try to become a "new- self" without letting go of the "old – self" and thus creates stories with universal appeal. Lahiri pursues contradictory ways in handling the issues of diasporic life which makes her writing a delicate and poised voice. The *lowland* (2013) tells the story of two brothers whose paths diverge when Subhash goes to the United States to obtain a Ph.D. degree while Udayan stays behind to join a political movement, which ultimately results in his mysterious murder. Despite his parents' will, Subhash marries his brother's widow, Gauri, who is pregnant with Udayan's child. Gauri becomes interested and absorbed in the western academia and abandons Subhash and her own little daughter, Bela, to pursue academic success. She returns to her family late enough to realize the damage she has inflicted is irreversible. Lahiri demonstrates the characters' hopes and fears, certainties and dilemmas, contrastingly with their joys and grief.

Introduction

"All diaspora are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diaspora refers to people who do not feel comfortable with their hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport... They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self imposed sense of exile, they are haunted by specters, by ghost arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements."

- Vijay Mishra, the literature of Indian diaspora: theorizing the diasporic imaginary

Diaspora means "to scatter" in Greek but today we use this term to describe a community of people who live outside their country of origin or ancestry but maintain a strong connection with their homeland. Some emigrants remain in full alliance with their homeland while others lack the connection. This lack of connection is generally seen among second generation and third generation diaspora who are unaware of their homeland.

People often pay price for the relocation and in Lahiri's fictions we are told such stories of dislocation, assimilation, in betweenness and moments of happiness and prosperity. Diaspora literature not only sings stories of heartbreak and inferiority but it also tells us about the moments of pride, honour and prosperity. This is why Lahiri's work is significant and a detailed medium of exploring diaspora writing. The dislocated people living in exile know that this exile does not come with the reward of homecoming rather it's a different kind of banishment and it often projects positivity rather than negativity.

Diaspora refers to home away from home; it can generally be chosen or can be a result of inheritance. It might involve being thrown out of homeland, but might equally be a state of stability and settled life. It

might involve loss of identity, but it might simply imply a 'different' identity from a dominant, host culture. Diaspora according to the oxford dictionaries online is closely related to the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel and it also is defined as "the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland". But in the twentieth century the term diaspora is used for globally scattered people mostly the first ones were the Americans and African descents. Since the Second World War the idea of diaspora has become larger and because of the decolonization of the groups of people from their native lands this idea has got a significant usage among the migrated people like Asian, Africans etc.

Indian diaspora is divided into three kinds of phases with differences in these movements. In the nineteenth century native Indian left their homeland to work in different British colonies as laborers and thus the first phase of migration began. In the mid-twentieth century they left their homeland for good education and economic development. And the last phase of migration began during the late twentieth century when people left their country for better living, lifestyle, education and better opportunities.

Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to the second generation diaspora community. Nilanjana Sudheshna Lahiri was born on July 11, 1967, in London, England, to mother Tapati and father Amar, a Bengali couple who immigrated to the United Kingdom from Calcutta, India. Her family moved to the United States when she was two; Lahiri considered herself an American, stating, "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been." Lahiri grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Amar Lahiri worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Her stories address sensitive dilemmas with themes such as marital difficulties, the bereavement over a stillborn child, and the disconnection between first and second generation.

This paper is based on diasporic element present in Jhumpa Lahiri's work of fiction and is a textual analysis of Lahiri's work through the lens of diasporic discourse. This shows how the balanced and elegant voice of the Indian-American author has put on a diversity and authenticity on diasporic-literature.

Methodology:

The Lowland as a primary source has been studied and quoted. Critical materials from secondary sources on the author and the novel have been referred. Collected data from print and e-sources are evaluated

and interpreted according to research methodologies. To interpret texts and data, interpretation of scholars and critics are cited with the help of MLA Handbooks for Writers of Research Papers seventh edition.

Literary Review:

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri (1967-) is a Pulitzer Prize winning author known for works of fiction like *Interpreter of Maldives*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Lowland*. The Times Magazine comments on *The Lowland* as "a slow burn--thrillwise, Lahiri is pretty much the anti-Crichton--but it gains tremendous power as it goes on. Language takes on the role of time itself. The *Lowland* feels less like a story being told than a tide slowly going out, gradually, inevitably revealing the shape of what was there all along." While the Guardian says that Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel is suffused with sadness. *The Lowland* is a sweeping, ambitious story that examines in intimate detail the intersection of the political and the personal, encompassing nearly 50 years of Indian and American history through the lives of one family.

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"But he was no longer in Tollygunge. He had stepped out of it as he had stepped so many mornings out of his dreams, its reality and its particular logic rendered meaningless in the light of the day. The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them, he was the sole link. Here, life ceased to obstruct or assault him. Here was a place where humanity was not always, pushing, rushing, and running as if with a fire at its back."

- The Lowland

Plot:

The lowland is a tale of two Bengali brothers Subhash and Udayan Mitra, close in their youth, but forge different paths for themselves as they grew up. They look and sound alike but are polar opposites. When the novel begins, "Subhash was thirteen, older by fifteen months. But he had no sense of himself without Udayan. From his early memories, at every point, his brother was there." Subhash stayed in clear

view, Udayan was disappearing: even in their two-room house". (10) As a kid, Udayan 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; forcing their mother, to stop what she was doing to seek him out. When they were old enough, they were permitted to leave the house but were asked "not to lose sight of one another". (10) They were also taught to honour their parents and observe the old customs. While Subhash jelled wonderfully with his ambience, Udayan, the more daredevil brother, was always in search of new pastures. Subhash, in contrast, dutifully dedicated himself to personal, rather than collective, improvement. The readers are shown much mundane details about their day-to-day lives to let them conclude that the two brothers, close in age, were very different - one, angry, restless, protesting corruption, but also selfish, impulsive; the other, static, taking the easier road, detached, settled in his own loneliness - and that they remained different; they didn't change or learn or grow or develop as human beings, and their motivations for doing anything was felt thrice-removed.

Subhash and Udayan are contrasting characters. Subhash was a conformist while Udayan was adventurous, unconventional, and took risks. Subhash's conduct is contrary to that of Udayan's, compared to whom Subhash considers himself inferior. "Subhash wondered if his placid nature was regarded as a lack of inventiveness, perhaps even a failing, in his parents' eyes. His parents did not have to worry about him and yet they did not favour him. It became his mission to obey them, given that it wasn't possible to surprise or impress them. That was what Udayan did".

When they were admitted to the two best colleges—Udayan went to Presidency to pursue physics while Subhash went to Jadavpur University to study chemical engineering. When asked by their parents what they wanted as gift, Subhash asked for a marble chess set while Udayan asked for a shortwave radio. Udayan was interested in various incidents that were taking place around them. Udayan slowly got attracted towards the repression towards the poor farmers and the injustice government was doing and slowly got involved in the Naxalbari. While Subhash kept himself far from all these incidents and wanted to go Rhode Island for further studies.

Subhash was careful and pragmatic, so he left the troubled city of Calcutta to pursue an academic

career on the East Coast. Simultaneously, Udayan gets himself involved in the Naxalite movement in 1960s. Caught in the midst of the communist movement taking place in west Bengal, Udayan eventually gets executed by police in the lowland behind his house. Udayan's death brings Subhash home, to gather the shards of their shattered family, and marries Udayan's widow out of a sense of duty. He takes Gauri to Rhode Island with him, although she is pregnant with his brother's baby. As the story unveils we learn how the choices of the two brothers affect the whole family.

Analysis

Published in 2013, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Lowland*, was shortlisted for the *Man Booker Prize* and was in the final list of the national book award for fiction. It talks much about the whirlwind of political chaos, family ties and lastly immigrant issues i.e. Gauri's and Subhash experience in a whole new world. It is about Gauri's traumatic experience to find her new identity and Subhas seeking to find his native identity as well as the new identity in this new adopted country. Permanently scarred by feeling of nostalgia and guilt, Gauri and Subhash are not able to concentrate on their present. *The Lowland* can thus be summarized as: two characters who leave their roots behind physically but are mentally rooted.

Gauri a revolutionary herself, studying philosophy and passionately identifying with her beloved Udayan's ideology, physically leaves behind her native land but actually continues to be a prisoner of the past. She is the most feminist of Lahiri's women and achieves astonishing professional success by becoming a philosophy professor at a college in California. Immigration is empowering her in her career, yet Gauri abandons her daughter and chooses an individualistic life path which initially gave her happiness, but later it did not. Gauri and Subhash tried to give their relationship a chance but their past never let it blossom.

Jhumpa Lahiri's women characters are different from other diasporic writers. Most of the woman characters in her work belong to diasporic communities facing cultural dilemma. Lahiri presents the ramification of patriarchy on the lives of Indian women. Gauri is the book's most vivid character. A woman born ahead of her time, unsuited both by temperament and intellect to the conventions demanded by her cultures, she reinvents herself most fully in a more liberated climates of the states, but this forging of a new self comes at a terrible cost to

her family. In *the Lowland* we find Gauri in constant search of her identity, her life is not governed by a divine agency. She struggles and fights for her individual freedom and liberty. Feminine identity is much more affected than male identity because of strong cultural and emotional ties with their homeland. Lahiri presents the divided psyche of women torn between two cultures.

Gauri is grateful to Subhash for bringing her away from prying neighbours, their family and government but Gauri's gratitude to Subhash cannot coax her to love him. Though she physically gives in to Subhash out of kindness, but she finds it impossible to feel the kind of love she felt for Udayan. She is perennially haunted by Udayan's memories and his ultimate death fills Gauri with anguish at Udayan for leaving her alone in the world. Her anguish dries up the tender motherly affection for her daughter, Bela. There is struggle, though she loves Bela but she lacked the connection and with time hollowness increased. Gauri is trained to play her subservient role in the family but she fails miserably in her job. She abandons Subhash and Bela to seek individual freedom and happiness. She refuses to sacrifice her individuality for the sake of upholding the traditional role. Gauri represents the new woman, liberated and emancipated.

Gauri symbolises the woman of new generation who doesn't brood over what's right or wrong. She rises from conventional life, leaves behind her family to pursue her career. She cuts her hair short, tears her traditional clothes conveying the symbolic reference of transformation from a conventional woman to a new woman. Her casting away sarees and slipping into tights and tunics symbolically represent her psyche expressing a sense of liberation from suffocating and constricting elements in her life. She does not hold onto the concept of sacrificing mother and accepts Subhash as a better parent makes her a new woman. Jhumpa Lahiri traces a women's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation.

In *the Lowland*, India remains in the spotlight throughout the novel. The novel begins with India and ends in lowland of India, the place where it all began. Lahiri reminds us that even though we now live in a new homeland but there always remains a connection with our lowland, our origin. There are numerous other chronotopic references and flashbacks to Calcutta, the communist party, and the Tolly club. In fact, the whole plot hinges on some

incidents that had taken place in India. There is a constant reminder of their origin. Subhash arrives in Rhode Island in 1969 to pursue a PhD in marine chemistry. In the beginning, he has to make a huge effort to translate between Indian and American culture. He finds himself torn between the past and present. He finds himself at a new place and he is the sole link between the new and the old. Despite the discrepancies, Subhash sees the positive side of immigration: nobody knows him in the United States, so he thinks it as his new beginning. Soon he manages to find some common points between the two places initially impossible to compare: both Rhode Island and Calcutta have "[m]ountains to the north, an ocean to the east, the majority of land to the south and west" (34). Both places are close to sea level, with estuaries where fresh and salt water combine. Tollygunge had been flooded by the sea, and all of Rhode Island had once been covered with sheets of ice. Subhash needs an imaginary geographical juxtaposition between homeland and adoptive land so that he can relate to the unfamiliar place. He has no roots here, so he refers to the land's age-old past in order to imagine a present. The Oceanography campus overlooks Narragansett Bay. There is a small beach nearby where Subhash enjoys eating his meals alone, looking at the two bridges (Jamestown and Newport) leading to islands offshore. He has learned from one of his professors that the wires of all the suspended cables used in the construction of Newport Bridge "would span just over eight thousand miles. It was the distance between America and India; the distance that now separated him from his family" (65).

Lahiri in *Lowland* also tries to show how the second generation i.e. Bela is able to get acculturate in the new country, embracing its socio-cultural values, at the same time experience a sense of nostalgia for Indian culture and sensibilities, experiencing alienation and uprootedness.

The lowland is quite similar to the other works of Lahiri, it speaks about people lost in a new world. Lahiri writes about a particular strange feeling that one feels watching one's child grow up in a world so terribly different from their homeland. We find a similarity of this book with Gary Sheteyngar's 'Little Failure'; a memoir, published 35 years after Gary immigrated to the USA. In the same way Lahiri's books are an outflow of her own personal experience of being born to a Bengali family, that later moved to USA. Lahiri's book scene though set in India and USA, have universal themes.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's writing bring together the world of east and west. She is one of the diasporic writers that comes with her the Indian sensibility abroad manifesting it through her fiction in an impressive form. Her novel brilliantly portrays both worlds, comparing their culture, background, people and lifestyle. Her characters are portrayed both in light of native and alien culture. Lahiri has experienced the trauma of failing to find her identity in the new land where she could never have a sense of belonging. In the *Lowland*, Lahiri has portrayed this search for identity in a new land.

Lahiri's writings are filled with details of traditional Indian names, food descriptions, attires, and rituals. Lahiri through her novels acts as the ambassador of the Indian diaspora. Her themes such as assimilation, broken relationships, home, exile, dual identity, rootlessness, and hybridity give us a better understanding of Lahiri as a diasporic writer. Her stories tell us about the inter-continental journey in which she gets herself accustomed.

Lahiri wanted to construct different kind of picture of the diasporic life in her novels. We as readers are compelled to give a second thought to the state of 'in-betweenness' of the immigrant population. The characters in the *lowland* find themselves in a unique marginal position between two cultures. They keep themselves in both the sides of the culture, two traditions and two ideologies which cause identity crisis, rootlessness and conflicts. Lahiri tells us how some immigrants free themselves from their old bondage, culture and values and start living in this new world accepting their new lifestyle while some others are so entwined with their past that they fail to adjust themselves to this new environment. Forgetting one's native land is as much harmful as clinging unto it. Only negotiating between these two spaces can keep positivity in the lives of the immigrants.

To conclude, diaspora not only leads to the crossing of borders. It denotes the journey across the less visible boundaries of time, space, ethnicity, traditional values, language etc. The diasporic subjects relocate into a new landscape and create something afresh. They cannot simply abandon their old lifestyles and traditions and gradually get shifted to the host land also the interplay between the good and bad should be acknowledged in the diasporic space.

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