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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DIASPORIC ESSENCE IN *THE LOWLAND*: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into Jhumpa Lahiri's 2013 novel, *The Lowland*, to analyze the diasporic experience of the Indian born characters. Lahiri demonstrates the characters' hopes and fears, certainties and dilemmas, along with their joys and grief. *The Lowland* reveals how the diasporic characters struggle with their new condition in the host country, and how they pass through the liminal stage to negotiate hybrid identities. 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. The novel presents the predicament of ruined hopes of parents left behind in India, problematic family ties in America and above all, contrast between an idealist frame of mind and a practical one.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel *The Lowland* is a deeply disturbing novel. It is an epic postcolonial story covering sixty years of four generations located in two continents. In addition, it is a saga of love that survives death of the beloved. Besides, the novel presents the predicament of ruined hopes of parents left behind in India, problematic family ties in America and above all, contrast between an idealist frame of mind and a practical one. It tries to capture the disordered propositions of mind of its principal characters. This study is aimed to uncover ambivalence in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, entitled *The Lowland*. In this study, Lahiri portrays how ambivalence occurs to Indian immigrants. These Indian immigrants are described as individuals who have spent many years in America. They come to America to continue their study. It implies that they are educated people. However, they are not able to adapt American culture well. At the same time, they also dismiss some of their origin culture. As a result, Lahiri argues that these Indian immigrants face irresolution of identity. *The Lowland* 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. Frequenting the campus where Subhash studies, 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 so late only to realize that the damage she had caused is irreversible. Lahiri demonstrates the characters' hopes and fears, certainties and dilemmas, along with their joys and grief. *The Lowland* reveals how the diasporic characters struggle with their new condition in the host country, and how they pass through the liminal stage to negotiate hybrid identities. The critical situation created in the life of Udayan and Subhash is the impact of problematic decolonization of India. After decolonization of the India, people expected that, they would get freedom, equity, and no social and religious discrimination. Nevertheless, in *The Lowland*, the characters deeply feel the marginality that haunts their lives. The marginality of the postcolonial characters is so important to Lahiri that she begins the novel with a thorough description of a British golf club in Calcutta called Tolly Club. The two brothers love to enter the club only to watch the people play, but since the British own it, Indians are never allowed to cross the threshold. Therefore, they find no choice for entering the club but to secretly sneak in.

Lahiri's characters are mostly expatriates who suffer from cultural conflicts, loneliness and alienation. They are recognized as an unsettled race and they struggle hard to face the strong cultural conflicts in the host country and the host land appears to them as a land of mystery. They try to assimilate themselves with the culture of the host land but in their effort they feel defeated and alienated. Lahiri's characters evolve in the midst of hybrid culture.

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Her characters live in two home lands with the cultural dilemmas incessantly present in them because of the conflicts created by the cultures of the two lands. The second generation expatriates suffer more than the first generation expatriates because they want to establish their identity in the host land, the place of their birth. All the stories in Lahiri's *The Lowland* set in America and India are knit together by the postcolonial aspects and search for identity. The second generation immigrants strive hard to keep a balance between their cultural roots and their American life style. They have the two cultures before them and they experience double alienation. They are both alienated from their root culture and host culture. Lahiri's writings present the evolution of both the immigrant and American culture. The lack of interest to learn their own culture and language is prevailing in all the second generation migrants and they think them as alien. They find it tedious to attend the class to know about their land of origin or acquire their root. Being born in the host land they never pay importance to their root and they like to be the citizens of the new land without disturbed by their origin. They don't even like to be identified as a foreigner for they need their root strong in the host land.

Immigrant communities have a temporal span of nostalgia which lasts up to the third generation but diaspora feeling can occur after several generations. There are three sets of actions in diaspora theory. They are the diaspora group, the host society and the homeland. The diaspora experiences can be traced in the novel. The diaspora retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland- its physical location, history and achievements. People from Eastern Europe and the developing countries migrated to developed countries in search of a better living standard and thus they became uprooted from their communities and they were neither fully part of their homelands nor their adopted communities. These people were separated from the mainstream society, felt segregated, and found a new community in their isolation and regarded themselves as kindred spirits. Alienation occurs as the corollary of modernity. The nostalgia in the characters reveals their sense of alienation in the host country and they are unable to escape the feeling of loss, longing and loneliness.

Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master's touch. Her stories bring out successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions one inherited and left behind and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated. Culture is based on the expectations of the members of the groups. Culture is idealistic and embodies the ideas and norms of the group. Culture fulfills the social and ethical needs of a group. Language is the chief aspect of culture and it transmits the customs and traditions to the generations to accumulate wisdom. Cultural theory is the discursive articulation of a set of characteristically modern social contradictions, which structure the lived experiences of characteristically modern kinds of intellectuals. In a society, such theories become the property of the collective lives of whole communities. Cultural phenomena are interconnected as human beings promote their cultural values through interpersonal and reciprocal activities. Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* narrates the story of middle class Bengali family in India and their straggle towards the Naxalite Maoist insurgency in India. Some people live in India and fight for the freedom where as others migrated to foreign country for better lives.

The title of the novel *The Lowland* refers to a marshy stretch of land between two ponds in a Calcutta neighbourhood where two very close brothers grow up. In monsoon season, the marsh floods and the ponds combine; in summer, the floodwater evaporates. The two ponds symbolize the two brothers at times separate; at other times inseparable. The two brothers are inseparable. They look so much alike that people often mistake them for twins, but their personalities are very different. Udayan is charismatic and adventurous. Subhash is more cautious the solid, dependable type. The text basically moves around the diasporic characters such as Gauri, Subhash, Udayan and Bela, who live in united states of America. They are isolated and alienated because they are facing identity crisis and cultural hybridity unable to cut off themselves completely from their link with India. Udayan dies in the revolution. A letter informing about his death compels Subhash to s brother's death and to be a part of the final rites. Everything has changed. Human encroachments and building of houses had almost occupied the Lowland, where he grew up playing with his brother Udayan. His first personal meeting with Gauri and the realization of how his parents had been ill treating her, saddened Subhash. In an attempt to persuade her parents, Subhash asks her to leave to US with him and so he does in the end. After the death of Udayan, Gauri became a widow. She had only alternative to marry Subash, the younger brother of Udayan. It was also Subash's duty to marry her, take his brother's place and raise his child. Both of them did not know what was right and what was wrong. About their relationship, the novelist says:

"Though their marriage had not been a solution, it had taken her away from Tollygunge. He had brought her to America and then, like an animal briefly observed, briefly caged, released her. He had protected her, he had attempted to love her. Every time she had to open a new jar of jam, she resorted to the trick he'd taught her, of banging the edge of the lid three or four times with a spoon, to break the seal." (*Lowland*:242). Although Gauri and Subhash had married after the death of Udhayan, They were away from their motherland. After their marriage, they had been living in America. Subhash had only protected her. Gauri changes her role according to the story of the novel. In the beginning, she was the wife of Udyan and sister -in- law of Subash and childless woman. After her husband's death she became a widow, and after sometime, she married Subash according to the Bengali Custom. After that she became the mother of Bela. At this point of his life, Subash has managed to break free from his traditional norms and values, by now he has already liberated himself from the culture he was brought from. The human process of adaptation and assimilation in the confused world of diaspora kicks off from this point. His assimilation with American culture seems to complete when he dreams of being Narasimhan, to have children like him from an American wife. He thinks of Holly would continue her extra marital affair with her. But within time, Holly stops this relationship after she realizes that she will be returning to husband sooner or later. The thought of their age difference and the reality that she is rearing a child with her husband compels her to break the ongoing relationship with Subash. During his short relationship with Holly, he does equate his state of alienation with her singlehood. A separated mother of a child, Holly becomes a source of happiness; a bonding both shares and loves without any restrictions. The novel reveals: "He remembered the short wave radio that he and Udayan had put together, drawing information from all over the world to another isolated place.

He realizes that in some sense Holly was more alone than he was. Her isolation, without a husband, without neighbor around her, seemed severe." (*Lowland*:45) After having relationship with Holly in America, Subhash feels himself isolated and alienated but Holly is more alienated than him. She is isolated as she is without her husband and without her neighbour. Gauri, on the other hand, revolts to transform herself and become something different she had never thought of becoming. In an attempt to adapt to the American society, she transforms herself both physically and mentally. A woman with strong will power, she does not hesitate to change the way she looked. In a single clip of scissor, she cuts her long hair short. She replaces her loose clothing with body tight tops and leggings that comfortably revealed the contortion of her breast and deep cut hips that had never been exposed before. When Subhash enquires about the reason behind her action,

"Why did you cut off your hair ?

I was tired of it.

And your clothes?

I was tired of those, too." (*Lowland*:55)

Culture is the composition of integrated customs, traditions and current behavioural patterns of human group. In our society the individual is prepared for performing various functions for society at a very early age by a series of impressions deliberately developed in his mind. Man lives in a definite natural environment to which he must adapt himself. The first generation migrants try to assimilate both the cultures and accept their children adopting the western culture. Bela is born in Rhode Island. She has totally been bred up on foreign language, foreign learning and foreign cultural ethos. Her parents never compel her to follow her native cultural ethos. Since her seventh grade, she has been learning Spanish language. With her coming of teenage, she makes her own world. Even Subhash, hesitates to intrude in her private life. Bela adapts her American dressing code. She has a tattoo like an open cut off right above her ankle. She has bleached a section of her hair and hangs a loose hoop on her nose.

"Like Udayan, Bela is nowhere. Her name in the search engine leads to nothing. No university, no company, no social media site yields any information. Gauri finds no image, no trace of her. It is a conscious choice on Bela's part." (*Lowland*:277)

Gauri says that Bela does not have inherited any quality from her motherland of West Bengal. She isn't like her father any more. As she lives in America, She is leading her life according to western culture. Bela is a second generation of Indian immigrants in America. In her case, compared to what girls would normally wear in India, she has a more Americanized way of dress since her parents did not introduce her to Indian culture especially Indian dress or fashion items when she was little.

"She wore denim coveralls, heavy soiled boots, a cotton kerchief tied over her hair. She woke up at four in the morning. A man's undershirt with the sleeves pushed up to her shoulders, dark strips of leather knotted around her wrist in place of bangles." (*Lowland*: 270). When Subhash informs her details of her factual paternity, she refers her father by his name Udayan, like other American children who address their parents with names only. She does not acknowledge her mother's existence. She used to say to her friends that her mother has already died. When Bela visits her parents' homeland, West Bengal, she receives a lot of attention from

the neighbors because of her appearance, the language she speaks with and the fact that she lives abroad. In the US where most people are individualist and value privacy, she never gets such treatments from the people around her. In India however, she suddenly becomes a celebrity. The way people observing her makes her feels uncomfortable and she perceives it as the negative things from the Indians. Overtime, she accepts, Drew, a vegetable seller as her husband. Drew also does not have any fixed roots in US. Bela has always chosen rootless destiny in the United States. To live in diaspora is to experience the trauma of exile, migration, displacement, rootlessness and the life in a minority group haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back. Diasporas need to be grasped imagined communities which conceive of themselves, despite their dispersal, as sharing a collective past and common destiny, and hence also a simultaneity in time. Diaspora is not infertile space to occupy in spite of that diasporan people feel to be torn apart between root culture and adopt culture and the ground to be shifting and ambiguous. The revelation of diasporic notions starts with Subhash as he begins to experiences the American's way of life and culture in US. Strange it was for Udayan when he encounters the American way of life and the culture so alien to his native Indian culture. The revelation of diasporic notion starts with Subhash as he begins to experience the American in of life and culture in US. It was the moment when he observes a middle aged couple, old enough to his grandparent, the thought of his singlehood strikes him hard.

"For the first time, he thought of his own marriage. For the first time, perhaps because he felt in Rhode Island that some part of him was missing, he desired a companion." (*Lowland*:40) The conditions above lead the characters to have double consciousness where the world is broken into two. For a postcolonial individual for example, one part is of his origin culture while the other part is the colonizers'. This division of mind eventually affects the socio-cultural development of the individuals themselves. The postcolonial individual himself in the end, trapped in between these two cultures; he feels that he does not belong to any of them. How Subhash and Gauri raise their daughter, Bela, also exemplifies their action of Indian practices. Bela is allowed to live separately from her parents, and travels around the country, living the life of a homeless person. Although both her parents are successful scholars, she is given the liberty to leave her studies at B. A. level and make a living by farming instead. In addition, Subhash never interfered with Bela's marriage:

"If he'd raised her in Calcutta it would have been reasonable for him to bring up the subject of her. Here it was considered meddlesome, out-of-bounds. He had raised her in a place free from such stigmas" (*Lowland*:243). Gauri, unlike typical Indian mothers, dedicates all of her time to her studies and 'neglects her little daughter' (*Lowland*:186). She speaks of her Ph.D. dissertation as she might speak of an infant, telling (Subhash) that she worried about the pages being blown out an open window, or being destroyed by a fire. The harmonizing effect and the subversive effect of mimicry lead the characters to have double consciousness. The act of mimicking they done is suppressing their Indian cultural identity. However, the harmonizing effect of hybridity helps to form a resistance of it from being completely forgotten and erased. They feel comfortable living in the host country but also aware that they are not completely belong to that place.

At the same time, they sometimes recall their homeland but do not feel attachment to it anymore. In *The Lowland*, cultural exchange is demonstrated through cultural adoption. There are three main points that Lahiri takes into account to impart the idea of cultural exchange the dress code of the Indian immigrants, their refusal of arranged marriage, and their negligence of the Indian rituals and traditions. When Gauri paid a visit to her hometown after decades of living in the United States, the people in the neighborhood,

"were glancing at her now that she was out of the car. Taking in her sunglasses, her American clothing and shoes. Unaware that once she, too, had lived here." (*Lowland*:294). Different, eye-catching, Western clothes that Gauri was wearing draws attention of the people in Tollygunge. Even those Indians who never travel to the West are influenced by how the Westerners dress. Subhash's younger brother, Udayan, never takes a trip abroad and has never seen people from the West; nevertheless, his "clothing hung on him loosely. He wore kurtas but also European-style shirts." (*Lowland*:53)

He puts on the Indian clothing along with Western clothes, choosing from them whatever he prefers. In addition to the adoption of dress code, refusal of arranged marriage is a significant manifestation of culture adoption in Lahiri's work. In *The Lowland*, Lahiri delineates the so-called Asian value of arranged marriage and portrays the young Indian boys and girls who tend to reject their parents' interfering with their choice of spouse. One of the postcolonial facets reflected in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel is identity crisis. Almost all her characters live in a dilemma of their identity. The self - identity encompasses the elements like physical, mental and sexual properties that differentiate individuals from one another. Identity is created by the actions of the individuals in the society and these actions are recognized on the basis of social structure. The self is oriented in the mind of the person and this self characterizes an individual identity because the self is both individual and social in character. An individual occupies different positions within the society and each position is based on this self. Thus 'self' plays multiple roles and each role may act as different identities. Identities are important for they associate people with one another and differentiate from one another. Identity refers to who people think they are, either individually or collectively, and the ways that this is culturally constructed. Identity is seen as a signifier in the cultural fields rather than as a biological or psychological quality of individuals. Identity crisis is a psychological condition of disorientation and role confusion occurring especially in adolescents as a result of conflicting internal and external experiences, pressure and expectations often producing acute anxiety.

The important issues that the Diaspora studies are concerned about which include the exploration of the new areas of heterogeneity and cultural polarity that are rising continuously with the span of time are carried forward in *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri, tries to examine the various issues that has led to transform itself from the colonial, the postcolonial including the subaltern to the globalised contemporary era Diversified culture, hybridity, identity, and marginalization on the various aspects of race, class, gender, social and cultural. These have always the core issues of concern in the study of post colonialism. Her works raise not only the sensitive issues of the Indian aspects but globalised in nature but also tantalize the transformation that took place in Indian culture which may include the hybrid identities, the cultural dashes, the social taboos lying in a conservative society, the gender oppression or class struggle and a lot more. She, herself being an immigrant has depicted vividly the issues in her work in a very plain language as to how she felt herself to be divided in two parts.

The Lowland is different in that the isolation comes not from American culture, from Subhash, Gauri, and Bela are equally displaced in Calcutta and Tollygunge, where everyone knows of Udayan and his fate. In America there is and a blank anonymity allowing a certain mental Americans know of Naxalites, guerrilla actions, police roundups, shootings. In the vast space of America, Gauri and Subhash can inhabit separate edges of the continent and allow the past to quietly go dark. Yet all is not completely there is stillroom for love, for hope, even in the smallest fraction. Lahiri has symbolically quoted in regard of the lives of Bela and Gauri :

"It was the restlessness of birds, rearranging themselves". (*Lowland*: 246). Lahiri portrays the first-generation immigrant characters in transition from liminality to the hybrid state. As a consequence of being a member of the diaspora, Lahiri's characters initially find themselves in the liminal space, caught between the two cultures. They appear to be troubled with sheer culture shock and the loss of familiar signs of social communication. What Lahiri offers as the solution to this temporary trouble is for the characters to assimilate the Western way of life and to conform to the American culture and traditions. Gradually, the characters enter the hybrid state in which they less frequently feel that they do not belong to the American community. They partially adopt the modern American culture and traditions; as a result, their family disintegrates irremediably.

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