

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 5. Issue.2., 2018 (April-June)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH GEOGRAPHY: DISPLACEMENT AND
ALIENATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian-American author who won international acclaim following the publication of her short-story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. Her first novel *The Namesake* was adapted into a popular film and in 2013 she was short listed for the Man Booker Prize for her second novel *The Lowland* which is a fine testament to her creative powers and the depth of her engagement with the problems faced by the diasporic community. Her *The Lowland* is a novel that examines how one's identity is constructed by the historic-cultural situation in which one lives. It is a highly sensitive analysis of the troubled lives of two brothers and the connecting link between them, Gauri, as their identities collide and clash against each other against the backdrop of Kolkata and then Rhode Island, causing ruptures in the belief-systems that hold them together and forging newer relations that challenge both their personal and cultural legacies. *The Lowland* is different from other writings of Jhumpa Lahiri in the sense that displacement and alienation of characters are not caused solely by their diasporic dilemma, but also they as a result of their personal choices and actions

Introduction

The present study focuses on Lahiri's portrayal of the struggle for identity and the cultural dynamic that underpins self-formation in *The Lowland*. It analyses the characters of Subhash, Udayan and Gauri from a cultural point of view and undertakes an enquiry of themes like the creation and transfiguration of identity, the difficulties of finding true love and the importance of familial ties—themes that span Lahiri's entire output. Finally it examines how Lahiri juxtaposes diverse customs so as to present the clash of cultures, developing her characters and circumstances in greater depth than ever before.

In her first novel *The Namesake*, Lahiri covers the first generation of Indian-American immigrants and their desperate struggle for survival in a country quite different from their own. Whereas *The Namesake* is built around the unflagging efforts of expatriate parents to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and tradition, *The Lowland* is centered on characters who move beyond the pain of parting and longing as they try to forge new destinies on an alien soil.

The Lowland tells the story of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, who are born only fifteen months apart and grow up together. Subhash, who is more ambitious, leaves the city of Calcutta which is in a state of ferment following the Naxalite movement, in order to follow an educational career in the United States and his younger brother Udayan, who is of a rebellious nature, joins the Naxalite movement, bent on delivering justice and equality to the people. As the communist movement comes to a crescendo in West

Bengal, Udayan is finally shot dead by the police in the lowland behind his parental house. Subash returns home on hearing the news of Udayan's death, hoping to pick up the pieces of the broken family, and marries his brother's widow Gauri out of a sense of duty and obligation. He takes Gauri to Rhode Island with him even as she is pregnant with his brother's baby. The novel then goes on to unravel a wrenching story of guilt in which memories of an idyllic past haunt the family for successive generations.

Discussion

The first part of *The Lowland* deals with the Naxalite movement and provides a detailed analysis of its motivations and consequences. The Naxalite movement, which was one of the most significant socio-political movements that took place in post-independence India sent shock waves through West Bengal in the 1960s. Its name is borrowed from a peasant rebellion which took place in May 1967 at Naxalbari. Led by Communist revolutionaries under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar, the movement aimed to seize power through an agrarian revolution. The movement, which sought to substitute the old order with an alternative one, built on the ideals of fraternity and equality, prepared the peasantry for guerrilla conflict against the landlords. The vaunted objective of the agitations was the abolition of the feudal order in Indian villages and the emancipation of the poor and the oppressed from the tyranny of landlords. The novel, which is set against the backdrop the Naxalite movement, thus highlights the effects of communal and political turmoil on the Mitra family as its members struggle to deal with problems that crop up within the family circle, in turn a microcosm of the larger upheavals happening around.

Lahiri's prose is at once poignant and brief; it captures the emotional crises of her characters caught between antithetical poles of love and indifference, duty and escapism. The title of the novel is itself a pun: it is at once a reference to the swampy area of land between two ponds on a tract of land behind Udayan and Subash's paternal home and an allusion to the existential misery the characters have to go through. During the monsoon, the swamp floods and the ponds overflow their boundaries and in the summer, the floodwater evaporates. The geography also conceals complex layers of meaning. The two ponds represent the two brothers — Subhash and Udayan—who are constantly overflowing the lines that demarcate them and are yet miles apart.

The cultural ambiguities that arise from the question of displacement are played out under the banner of Diasporic Literature in *The Lowland*. The term 'diaspora' is taken from the Greek language and means 'scattering.' It also refers to the dispersion of people from their homeland. As the Indian American writer Bharati Mukherjee says in "Two Ways to Belong in America", "The price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation" (8-9). Here the character of Gauri, in a manner similar to Moushumi, the academic in *The Namesake*, alienates herself from the rest of the world. This tendency of hers results in her identity crisis that reaches its climax in a diasporic environment. Unlike the other characters, Gauri is troubled by her past. She never attempts to wear the garb of the ideal wife or mother. Instead of donning traditional roles, she tries to discover her own identity and choices, without waiting for any patriarchal authority anyone to validate them. The male characters in this novel are shown as torn between two mutually opposed spheres. They move between familial and societal roles, unable to reconcile themselves to either.

Subhash feels a sense of alienation and loneliness as he has to adapt to Western culture and ideals:

Sailing even slightly east reminded Subhash of how far away he was from his family. He thought of the time it took to cross even a tiny portion of the earth's surface. 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.' (Lahiri50)

Subhash's loneliness intensifies on India's Independence Day as he observes and compares it with his present situation: "The following day was August 15, Indian Independence. A holiday in the country, lights on government buildings, flag hoisting, and parades. An ordinary day here" (61).

After the tragic death of his brother, Subhash decides to marry Gauri and take her with him to America to save her from the torments of widowhood. As time elapses, Subhash's decision to marry Gauri proves to be a fatal error as Gauri drifts away from him, causing him to feel lonely as he nears old age. He is temporarily able to seek solace in the company of Bela's teacher, but life flings him from one mishap to another

and he ends up feeling disillusioned with his life— a dotard in a country that does not reckon his existence. He loses “that intrepid sense of direction. He felt only aware now that he was alone, that he was over sixty years old, and that he did not know where he stood” (172).

Dislocation is not something only Subhash feels in the novel. Udayan, Gauri, and Bela are equally dislocated in Calcutta and Tollygunge. The marital life of Subhash and Gauri becomes uneasy in Kolkata where everyone knows about her widowhood. The reader expects this condition to evaporate into thin air after the couple move to America. But once they get there, they find that they cannot turn over a new leaf; the secret of Bela’s parenthood haunts their lives forever and they become psychologically displaced in the new surroundings.

The novel portrays Gauri as a woman who is not able to forget her past. Her clinging to the past causes her to retreat into silence and causes a layer of indifference to develop around her behaviour. She is aloof and cold to Udayan and her own daughter. In an attempt to bury the past, she cuts her hair in American style, throws away her saris and immerses herself in the study of philosophy. Quite ironically, she finds comfort in her aloofness: “Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings” (165).

Udayan is also depicted as living in isolation from mainstream society. He always remains under the threat of the police and even has trouble hearing as a result of the damage caused to one of his eardrums from an explosion. He complains in the novel of dizziness and a high-pitched buzzing that would not go away. Lahiri says, “He worried that he might not be able to hear the buzzer, if it rang, or the approach of a military jeep. He complained of feeling alone even though they were together. Feeling isolated in the most basic way” (78).

Udayan's death is the result of his involvement in the killing of a police officer called NirmalDey. It is not really Udayan who killed him. He just happened to be among those who plotted the murder. Gauri also becomes part of the conspiracy when she spies on Dey and keeps track of his daily schedule. Gauri has no affiliation to the movement. She acts out of a sense of love and duty towards her husband. She does not comprehend the consequences of her actions or question Udayan’s motives when he enlists her support.

Udayan’s death changes the course of the Mitra family and haunts the characters even when they reach Rhode Island. The novel is a good example of how shows how involvements in socio-political incidents on the home turf can leave indelible marks on one’s psyche. In this regard Meera Bharwani comments:

By presenting the responses of the first and second generation diasporas and people on temporary and more permanent settlements from India and Pakistan, now Bangladesh Jhumpa Lahiri shows how the conditions in their homelands have an effect on them in the alien land. (145)

After their arrival in America, Subhash stays away from Gauri, giving her enough time to recuperate and accept her new role. He does not want to make her feel under pressure and hopes to be a good companion. Gauri, who is already pregnant with Udayan’s child, gives birth to a daughter Bela, but cannot bring herself to care for the child as much as a mother should as a result of her growing obsession with a cloistered life and the escapism academic pursuits entail. Her love for philosophy, a discipline that is deeply associated with the questions of life, death, destiny, God, reflects her attitude to real-life problems. She is a person who wishes to engage with problems only in a textual world where these problems do not make any demands upon her physical or mental fortitude. Her obsession with philosophy makes her feel out of touch with actual human life.

As time goes on, Gauri isolates herself more and more from life and channelizes all her energies into the PhD programme she follows. As a result of her self-imposed seclusion, she cannot feel any kind of love for Subhash and Bela. After a couple of years into the marriage, Subhash realizes that Gauri won't have a child with him or accept Bela as her daughter in the proper sense of the term. Subhash finally realizes that the marriage was a mistake and that it was doomed to fail from the beginning as predicted by his mother. What he actually wanted through his marriage was to reconnect with his brother Udayan, but the marriage has been an utter failure and it has displaced him from his inner world. The marriage breaks up after 12 years when Subhash has to return to India to attend the funeral rites of his father. Six weeks later when Bela and Subhash

return to Rhode Island, they find the house empty and a note written by Gauri, explaining that she has left for good and is shifting to California, where she has been offered a job in one of the universities.

The separated couple never meet again. Bela is left devastated by these developments and in the wake of the breakup between her parents ends up feeling depressed. She is a victim of alienation and withdraws from the family circle and decides to follow a bohemian life. It is her mother who leads to her displacement. The novel takes us years later to revisit a 34-year-old Bela who has now discovered the truth of her parentage and though enraged at the disclosure, forgives her uncle Subhash since he is the only one who ever really cared for her.

Conclusion

Unlike her other fictional works based entirely on diasporic concerns and characters trying to establish their identity in multiple relationships, in *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri, gives a twist to her fictional narrative by setting the story against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement. Lahiri's protagonists are ones who are living in a kind of twilight zone, with hope and determination, communicating with the past as well as the present. Her intricate dialogues with detailed observation, renders the narration at ones poignant and powerful. The novelist allows the readers to enter into the mindset of the characters. Her narration is simple, yet engrossing and straightforward and her subtle psychological undertone set off her greatness as a skilful writer.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri sustains a complicated narrative spanning three generations with a deft and yet profound touch. The novel takes off slowly in the beginning when the author paints the historical and political background of the Indian Naxalite movement, which in the mid-1960s entangles one of the two brothers central to this tale. But the narrative takes off once we are privy to the scenes of Indian daily life in the home of the brothers, Subhash and Udayan, who are as close as twins yet vastly different temperamentally.

From the descriptions of the lowland—the marshy area near their home in Calcutta and the scene of a crucial moment in the novel—to the scenes across the Atlantic in Rhode Lahiri masterfully delineates place and mood. Much of the novel takes place in America, in the hallowed portals of academia. Lahiri captures these environments skillfully, contrasting the overwhelming crowdedness of Calcutta with the almost barren seascapes of Rhode Island. She takes us into Indian life and custom and lets the reader experience feel the clash of cultures that Subhash encounters when he relocates to America. She also delineates the gradual assimilation of American values by Subhash and Gauri.

What is obvious is that the novel is first and foremost a search for identity by a set of characters disconnected from their homeland. The novel deftly interweaves contemplations on Indian culture, abstract concepts and philosophical discourses running the gamut from Hinduism to Descartes' cogito. Lahiri's wide-ranging reference points enrich this novel and underscore the academic environment in which much of it is set.

It is true that Gauri is a distant, cold, and academic character and that the reader never warms up to her. But as the novel progresses, the reader finds himself sympathizing with each character as he/she tries to find happiness. As an investigation of the lives of middle-class educated Bengali immigrants who uproot themselves to America to seek greener pastures and run away from their past, the novel remains true to its vision. In addition to the themes of identity and displacement, Jhumpa Lahiri introduces historical specificities into her novel in the form of the political revolt that took place in parts of India in the 1960s. It can be observed that the novel is a synthesis of factual political and historical events and personal life. Lahiri's focus is on the diasporic dilemma of her characters whose lives alternate between India and the United States over the course of five decades.

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