

Diasporic Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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ABSTRACT

Diaspora is a movement of a group of people shifting from their home land into new land for their settlement. Diasporapeople experience some disputes dealing with their identity in new regions. Diaspora covers a major ground in all its richness and variety touching upon numerous, cultural, ideological and intellectual discourses. The term Diaspora is sometimes used to denote the development of human civilization all over the world. This study focuses on the issue of diasporic identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's The lowland. It is represented by Subhash and Gauri. The lowland is an ambitious novel which focus on the story of Indian immigrants in the United States. The concept of cultural identity proposed by Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah are applied to reveal the diasporic identity. It is the effect of the process of adjustment, an adaptation to the new background which is different from the previous one. The historical background of Indian American is added to compare Indian American's life as portrayed throughout the novel. This study traces out the diasporic identity in Subhash and Gauri which is different and how they adjust to the new culture. Subhash was able to adopt both his previous and new culture while Gauri forget the previous culture but adopted new culture. There are few reasons which make Subhash and Gauri migrate from their native land to America. Those few factors are lack of job, poverty and political movement. Thus the characters whoever shift themselves to America experience diasporic identity and recognize them as Indian American.

Keywords: diaspora, diasporic identity, culture, immigrant, Indian-American

INTRODUCTION

The word Diaspora is taken from the Greek language, which means scattering, and it also refers to the dispersion of people from their homeland. A simple definition of diaspora literature would be works, which are written by authors who live outside their native land. Diaspora is a catchphrase which is especially connected with a particular subject and is used more often in news papers. Diaspora registers more major communities than Post-Colonies and their lived experiences in all their good and bad feelings on something or some persons, contradictions, multiple traversals, imaginary 'returns' to homelands, nations of the mind and this unfolds in all such extremely large number of communities across the Globe. The term Diaspora is sometimes used to denote the development of human civilization all over the world. The Origin of the Primitive human and later dispersal to establish human societies in different parts of the world means Diaspora and Diasporic condition. The term Diaspora has been used as a marker of movement across cultures and the dislocation such movement causes.

The history of Diaspora can be broadly divided into three phases leading to the Post-modernist Diaspora viz., Ancient Diaspora, Medieval Diaspora and the Modern Diaspora. The Ancient Diaspora can be called as traditional reference of the term "Diaspora" denoting the exile of Jews from Israel back in the sixth-seventh century B.C. and later in the second century A.D. from Jerusalem. The Jewish movement is called as exile because it was a movement with force, where they were being separated from their homelands and relocated as lost group in the new lands. The Medieval Era from 200 A.D to 900 A.D was witness to large group, especially because of opening up new routes between different countries. Many tribal people relocated themselves in search of better life, later many other religious located in new lands. The modern era movements during the period of colonialism were largely due to war, slavery and search for economic betterment. People from colonized lands moved to other colonies as paid laborers or were transported as slaves. Man, entering into new land is unable to handle his conflicts, constantly marks his identity. The literature of the Indian Diaspora is delivered by many writers for example Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, S.S. Baldwin, V.S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, Kavita Daswani, Uma Parameswaran, Rohinton Mistry, Meena Alexander, Jhumpa Lahiri, Meera Syal, Anita Rau Badami, Bharati Mukherjee and many others analyze problems of immigrants.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born to Nilanjana Sudeshna to Bengali Indian immigrants in London, She moved with her family to the United States when she was three years old. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island and earned a B.A. in English literature from Barnard College in 1989. She went on to earn an M.A. in English, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, an M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. From 1997-98, she held a fellowship at Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center. In 1999, Lahiri published her first short story collection entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*. It dealt with the issues of Indians or Indian immigrants, including their generation gaps in understanding and values. *Interpreter of Maladies* was awarded the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In 2003, Lahiri published her first novel, *The Namesake*, originally a novella in *The New Yorker*. It is the story of the Ganguli family, comprised of parents who immigrated to the United States from Calcutta and of their children, Gogol and Sonia, raised in the USA. The story follows the family over the course of thirty years in Calcutta, Boston, and New York. She published another collection of short stories called *Unaccustomed Earth* in 2008. With this collection, Lahiri broke from her previous literary focus on first-generation Indian immigrants to the United States and their family problems. The stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* focus instead on the second and third generations of immigrants and their assimilation into the culture of the United States. She has won many awards, including the Trans Atlantic Award from the Henfield Foundation (1993), the O. Henry Award for the short story "Interpreter of Maladies" (1999), the PEN/Hemingway Award for Best Fiction Debut of the Year for the *Interpreter of Maladies* collection, and most recently the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award (2008) and the Asian American Literary Award (2009), both for *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Jhumpa Lahiri brings new vigor to old literary themes in *The Lowland*. The story begins with the life of two intelligent brothers, one of who gets attracted to the Naxalite movement and as a result, loses his life for the same. The other brother, who migrates to US, takes his brother's pregnant widow with him to give her a new life.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE LOWLAND

Diasporic identity is a result of a process of assimilation, homeland and host land culture, its identity is based on differences or pluralism. These differences happen because every person has different impression in assimilation process.

Jhumpa Lahiri as a diaspora writer, deals with a multicultural society both from in and out, seeking to find her native as well as the new identity in the host land. They are able to get acculturate in the new country, embracing its socio-cultural values, at the same time experience a sense of nostalgia for the Indian culture and sensibilities, experiencing alienation and uprootedness. Two main characters, Subhash and his wife Gauri who born and brought up in India are shown as two diasporic identities in the story of the novel. Even though they grow up in India, but in their twenties, they start to leave India and they spend the rest of their lives in America. Subhash, the main character holds his native culture firmly and gradually adjusts himself with new culture in new place.

“There were hotels he might have entered in this part of the city to have a whiskey or a beer, to fall into a conversation with strangers. To forget the way his parents behaved, to forget the things Gauri had said.” (*The Lowland*, 2013: 134-135).

Thus, when he returns to India, he forgets to act like Indian instead as an American. Subhash already gets adjusted to American culture. In order to prove himself as an American, he even consumes beer as they do when he meets his college mates or professors in a party or event. He does everything as Subhash wants the American to define him as citizen of America. In America, Subhash starts to accept the location and surroundings. He simply does everything as for the wish of Americans which is not acceptable in India. Subhash feels that inside this room he was able to forget about what his parents would think, and the consequences of what he was about to do. He takes courage to sleep in same room with a woman and thinks that American society is different from Indian culture and no one bothers in America as it is routine in their culture. But in India, unmarried woman and man are kept apart strictly by the strict order of parents and society. Sometimes Subhash still longs with his memory about his homeland. Whenever he returns to India to see his parents after a long time, he realizes the tradition when he is in India.

“The day after they arrived her father sat for a ceremony to honor her grandfather, who had died a few months before.” (*The Lowland*, 2013: 234).

Gauri, the other character also experiences same as Subhash. As Gauri arrives in America, she slowly adjusts with the new culture. In a less time, she absorbs the culture of America and adjusts herself with the American culture and so avoids sari and wears jeans.

“Most of the other Indian women wore saris. But in spite of her jeans and boots and belted cardigan, or perhaps because of them, Gauri knew she stood out.” (*The Lowland*, 2013: 206).

The quote above proves that Gauri is proud of her image. She seems to be different from other Indians in America and thinks that she need not be afraid as she has the ability to express herself. This new identity makes

her more courageous and positive. She is out of previous identity as she thinks that it has bound her with her nativeland. Similarly, once in a situation when she is to be picked up by a driver for a lecture but he misunderstands her to be a servant and instead tells her to inform the owner of the house that he has arrived.

“Her appearance and accent caused people to continue to ask her where she came from, and some to form certain assumptions. Once, invited to give a talk in San Diego, she’d been picked up by a driver the university had sent, so that she would be spared the effort of driving herself. She had greeted him at the door when he rang the bell. But the driver had not realized, when she told him good morning, that she was his passenger. He had mistaken her for the person paid to open another person’s door. Tell her, whenever she’s ready, he’d said.” (*The Lowland*, 2013: 286).

This proves that Indian Diaspora in *The Lowland* does not avoid their culture in host land but abandon their custom and assimilate the new culture. They feel that America as home and a better place due to their living most of their lives in America. As a result, each individual sees diasporic identity in a different point of view. This diasporic identity is formed when diasporic people try to adjust both their former land values and host land culture differences how far they seek to return to their native land.. This situation is depicted in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*.

III. CONCLUSION

In the first analysis, diasporic identity can be defined as the multiplicity to recognize the identity of Indian migrant.

Lahiri as the omniscient observer applies the dilemma of her characters to realize the malady of their immigrant life. She also tries to handle with the dynamics of culture as well as diaspora in each condition. Her stories, thus, provide a powerful healing touch to immigrants caught up in alienation, exile and isolation.

Jhumpa Lahiri's latest novel *The Lowland* focuses on Subhash and Udayan, two brothers who are born fifteen months apart. Subhash is calm and obedient, while Udayan is quick and courageous. Udayan identifies with the Naxalite movement, a Maoist-inspired peasant revolution that seeks to return land to the poor by engaging in rebel warfare against government forces.

The novel shifts back and forth in time and takes on different points of view, which allow readers to see how anger and unfaithfulness overflow through the generations.

Gauri doesn't obtain arms against landholders but she gives papers at academic conferences. Sarcastically, loss and anger cover the way for a rejection of essential politics. For Gauri anger was always more than her love for Udayan like some weakly mating pair of insects. Anger at him for dying while he might have lived, for bringing her happiness, and then taking it away, for trusting her, only to be disloyal to her, for trusting in sacrifice, only to be so self-centered in the end.

In fact, deliberately personal abandonment is worse than political risk. Gauri abandons Subhash and her daughter, Bela, who never gets more than it. There's a sense of honesty when Gauri realize the damage that she

cause her daughter. She understood now what it meant to walk away from her child. It had been her own act of killing. It was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed.

The Lowland dwells in multifaceted territory. Gauri realizes the Naxals are unaware to a cruelty much closer to residence that of women. Udayan had sought after a revolution, but at home he'd probably to be served; his only bequest to meals was to wait for her and serve him.

At present, when a distrustful could not care less attitude is fast developing to decay the foundations of the sacred ancestral ties, the novels of Kamala Markandaya and Jhumpa Lahiri can provide as eye-opener. They motivate one to treasure these bonds and maintain their harmony. These are the reasons which make the main characters to migrate to America. In the same way, America being a develop country promises more things such as higher learning, job opportunity, safety and freedom. This might become the dragging factor for Indians shift to host land America in order to pursue their visions and start new and a life which is destined.

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