



HYBRIDITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

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Abstract

This Research Article, Hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland is a literary work that aims to analyse cultural features in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. Diaspora studies, generally, discuss the nature of exile, nostalgia, memory, hybridity and identity crisis. It explores the two key terms, Hybridity and Diaspora writing. The research talks about the juxtaposition of past and present. Cultural perspectives are implied in traditions and the characters' attempts to survive culturally as revealed in the works mentioned, as well as the spaces of the home country and the settled country. This article focuses on the Novel and Short Stories that follow the general characteristics of diaspora literature. It also focuses on the Writer's efforts to consciously or unconsciously utilize time and space in order to deal with possibly fractured consciousness and split identities. It explains the significance of such a study as a possible area of focus in diaspora writing.

Keywords: *cultural change, cultural perspective, diaspora, hybridity, identity*

Introduction:

Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. It deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the



immigrant settlement. Diasporic writing unfolds these experiences of unsettlement and dislocation. A diasporic text can be investigated in terms of location, dislocation and relocation. The changing designation of home and accompanying nervousness about homelessness and unfeasibility of going back are recurrent themes in diasporic literature.

2. Indian English Novelists:

The great writers of Indian English fiction like Raja Rao, Mulkraj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya, had a strong dedication to expose cruel realities of life to effect the desired change in society. Nationalism, Partition Poverty, Peasantry, Subjugated Women, Rural-Urban Divide, East-West encounter, Casteism, and Communalism were some of the themes quite closer to their hearts. All of them are well known for realistic portrayal of contemporary Indian life. Taking departure from the first generation of Indian English novelists, the postmodern Indian English novelists have concentrated on a completely new set of themes like issues of globalization and subsequent multiculturalism, feminism, diasporic sensibility, consumerism, commoditization, upward mobility, erosion of ethical values.

3. Diasporic Writers:

Diasporic Indian writers like Meera Syal, Shashi Tharoor, Hari Kunzru, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri have faithfully demonstrated the lives of both first and second generation immigrants in the US. This is possible because big issues like religious discrimination and racial intolerance are no longer the main concern of these writers. It is here that the different reactions by Indian, westerns and diasporic characters towards similar situations are bound to differ only apparently. It reveals that the inner needs of all human beings are the same.

Indo –American diaspora is one of the important Diasporas which has exerted the massive impact on the literary world and produced literary genius of our time. As Jhumpa Lahiri is the recent author of Indo- American writing, before taking into account her literary contribution, it would be proper to take a brief note /review of the background of Indo – American writing of which Jhumpa Lahiri belongs as a second generation expatriate writer. Lahiri portrays the situation of second generation expatriates who confidently asserts their ethnic identity in multiculturalist's situation.

4. Jhumpa Lahiri's themes:

Jhumpa Lahiri's writing is featured in her 'plain' language and very clean, neat and engrossing narrative technique. Her characters are mostly Indian immigrants, navigating between the cultural values of their birth-place and their adopted nation. Her writing is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri investigates her characters' struggles, dilemmas to faithfully reflect the details of immigrant psychology and behaviour. Her first two literary works, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*, spotlighted mostly on first generation Indian



American immigrants and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. They describe their attempts to keep their children familiar with Indian culture and traditions and keep them close to their cultural roots even in an alien land. Lahiri's two novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* highlight the needs of the individual. She shows how later generations of immigrants depart from the restrictions of their parents who are often devoted to their community, family, and other immigrants.

The theme of the novel *The Lowland* investigates the lives of middle-class educated Bengali immigrants either coming to America to seek higher education or brought by the stroke of fate. These immigrants are obsessed by their preference, loneliness and the guilt of vanished connections with family and lovers in their native country. In addition to these well-known themes of Jhumpa Lahiri, a description of powerful story about a real political revolt took place in some parts of India in 1960s and which is known as Naxalite movement in the first part of *The Lowland*. The second part of the novel highlights its far-reaching effects on the one family.

Lahiri focuses the diasporic dilemma of her characters whose lives cutting shuttle between India and the United States over the course of five decades. The story deals with the theme of uprooting and assimilation with attempts made to set up connectivity among the characters. It can be observed the novel focuses on individuals and his or her fortune rather than focusing collective element in the diaspora.

Lahiri demonstrates hybridity in numerous parts of the novel. She mentions two ponds in Tollygunge at several points in the novel, and finally shows the two merged after a wet monsoon. This can be regarded as a reference to hybridity. The narrator tells us that the two ponds across the lane would overflow and become one, very similar to hybrid characters, who after exposure to two cultures, form hybrid identities.

As Srinivas Aravamudan states, "hybridity is not like a cocktail that you can recompose back to its parts... it's something that comes about when you're not even sure where your origins are coming from".[Huddart 85]

This idea is symbolically presented by the depiction of Narasimhan's life as an Indian immigrant in America. He is an Indian professor at the campus where Subhash studies. "He had an American wife and two tanned light-eyed sons who looked like neither of their parents". Lahiri shows how hybridity yields something totally new which deviates from what is expected. Subhash lives in the U.S. for a few years, and when he takes a trip to India, he realizes that he can never be the same person as before. He feels more like an American than an Indian. While walking on the streets of Tollygunge, he sees Europeans wearing kurtas, beads, exploring Calcutta, passing through. Though he looked like Bengali he felt an allegiance with the foreigners now. He shared with them knowledge of elsewhere another life to go back to the ability to leave. The first time Gauri wants to go out for a walk in Rhode Island, she tries the dress that her husband has recently bought for her. She "put on her winter coat over her sari". This is apparently how no one looks like in America. Women either wear leather coats if they are Americans, or saris if they are Indians, and not both of them at the same time. She herself starts to feel the severity of her being different. Once in the campus lounge, she starts a small talk



with an American girl whose “body was unencumbered by the yards of silk material that Gauri wrapped and pleated and tucked every morning into a petticoat... Gauri felt ungainly. She began to want to look like the other women she noticed on the campus, like a woman Udayan had never seen”. She senses the urge to liken herself to the American girls whom she sees on campus. What she needs to adopt an identity in the U.S. that transcends national boundaries. For the sake of retirement, for the sake of simplifying the end of her life, she would need to become an American. For instance, she copies what other American married women do, adopting the Western custom of wearing a wedding band during the day”. She also keeps her hair short and never tells her little daughter about the Indian custom of women letting their hair grow very long. It puzzles Subhash’s mother when she finds out that Bela, Gauri’s daughter, has not learned about such customs.

Subhash leaves India for the United States alone. There, he observes how customs differ from those in India. However, he cannot share his perceptions with anyone. He keeps thinking about the huge differences, and almost everything strikes him as strange, new, and different. For instance, when he thinks about the Indian calendar, he remembers that “the following day was August 15, Indian Independence. A holiday for the country...An ordinary day here”. [Lahiri 61] During the first months of his life in America, the idea that, for instance, August 15 is not celebrated at all puzzles him. It is just a matter of time for him to get used to the fact that America is a whole new country, and that he must not expect to see the Indian customs be observed in the U.S. On the other hand, when Subhash travels to India after a couple of years, it is quite noticeable for him that his mother would eat after serving them, as she always did”. This is what he had never paid attention to, but now that he has lived elsewhere, he notices the striking differences. He now knows that India is the place where he can put aside the spoon and the fork since he can enjoy the freedom to eat with his fingers. Watching his mother, he notices that her dark hair is decorated with its bright column of vermillion, to signify that she has a husband. Moreover, he now understands how typical Indian parents behave inappropriately when communicating with their daughters-in-law. He witnesses that his parents mistreat his brother’s widow, not even letting her eat with them in the same room. She has to stay in the kitchen and eat there. Subhash didn’t say what came to his mind. That Udayan would’ve hated them for segregating her, for observing such customs. Subhash prefers the American code of conduct in this regard.

Subhash and Gauri are aware of the Western culture and traditions to some extent and thus choose their own spouses even when they are still living in their hometown. Udayan, who does not wish to continue his studies in the U.S., is well aware of the traditions of marriage in the West, appreciates this aspect of the Western culture and says, “Like Chairman Mao, I reject the idea of an arranged marriage. It is one thing, I admit, that I admire about the West”. [Lahiri 49] When his parents see their son, Udayan, getting married to someone whom they do not approve of, they tell Subhash that, “we hope you’ll trust us to settle your future”. [Lahiri 64] And Subhash promises to let them arrange his marriage. Things do not turn out as their parents wished,



and Subhash also gets married to a woman that his parents do not like. When he is trying to propose to Gauri, he is simultaneously pondering over his parents' reaction. "He mentioned nothing to his parents, knowing that they would only try to dissuade him. He knew the solution he'd arrived which appal them... But he was no longer afraid". [Lahiri 110] Although Subhash and Gauri partially succeed in leading a Western life, they appropriate Western ways at the expense of most of the culture and values of their motherland. Back in India, both Subhash and Gauri followed most of the Indian traditions and rituals; however, as they settle in the United States and get accustomed to the American traditions, they both tend to adopt the American lifestyle.

Bela, Gauri's daughter also exemplifies their rejection 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 marriage. Here it was considered meddlesome, out-of-bounds. He had raised her in a place free from such stigmas. Gauri, unlike typical Indian mothers, dedicates all of her time to her studies and neglects her little daughter. She speaks of her Ph.D. dissertation "as she might speak of an infant, telling that she worried about the pages being blown out an open window, or being destroyed by a fire. She said it worried her, sometimes, to leave them unattended in the house. After years of living on her own, Gauri initiates a homosexual relationship with a Ph.D. student whose dissertation Gauri was supposed to be the outside reader of. She had no recollection of crossing a line that drove her to desire a woman's body. But in America, she enjoyed the individual liberty to take lovers of either sex; something that she could not have dreamed of in India. One of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in postcolonial theory, hybridity commonly refers to that creation of new Tran cultural forms within the contact zone. To culminate the scientific definition and the different forms of hybridity, Ashcroft explains, "In horticulture, the terms refer to a cross breeding or cross pollination to form a third, hybrid species, hybridization takes many fortes: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc... linguistic examples include pidgins and creoles languages". [Ashcroft 94]

5. Conclusion:

Though *The Lowland* cannot be regarded as a diasporic literature in its full and usual sense of the term, one can certainly trace out diasporic dilemma in which the characters involved in multiple relationships negotiating with their personal decisions and destiny.



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