

## CULTURAL DISLOCATION AND CHANGING IDENTITIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE LOWLAND

**Dr. Richa Bijalwan**

Assistant Professor English  
THDC-Institute of Hydropower  
Engineering & Technology  
Tehri (Uttarakhand)

### Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's subjects for instance assimilation, broken relationships, home, exile, changing identities, rootlessness, hybridity, cultural dislocation give us greater perception of Lahiri as a Diaspora novelist. The stories she tells us says more of her transnational journey during which she gets herself familiar to both Indian and American culture. Her writings are full of facts of conventional Indian names, foodstuff images, Indian dressing styles and rituals. Lahiri here plays as a representative of the Indian diaspora. Lahiri's outlook on the Immigrant fiction is very dissimilar with others. And she in fact enquires the arrangements and thinks that why one would get marginalized for writing about a precise theme. Lahiri thinks that writers are always inclined to write about the worlds they come from and it is just so happens that many writers emerge from diverse parts of the world than they finish up living in to another, either by selection or for unavailability of the conditions and consequently write about their experiences. The word Diaspora, exile, alienation, belongingness, expatriation are mostly similar to each other in meaning in the world of diaspora writers and they include some kind of ambiguity in nature and tells about being both an immigrant and representative in the foreign land. Here diaspora became a mode of cultural production or it can be called a social form where it talks about merging in a dissimilar culture creating hybrid identities. Lahiri wanted to create different kind of representation of the diasporic life for her readers. The story of The Lowland discussed in the paper signifies this diversity along with cultural dislocation and changing identities.

**Keywords:** Cultural dislocation, identity, diaspora, hybridity.

Jhumpa Lahiri in her stories portrays cultural shock faced by first generation migrants and following the same trend the protagonists of The Lowland also face the cultural shock when they reach America. The Lowland moves between India and the United States, and while the Calcutta

scenes are finely shaped, it is in the depiction of Rhode Island that Lahiri is at the height of her influence, capturing the numerous past and usual situations that give the perfection to its character. Culture shock happens when people face a strange society, and they start feeling perplexity, anxiety, and insecurity. Subhash and Gauri experience the culture shock at the early period of their lives in America. Gauri's first morning in Rhode Island is full of bewilderment and surprises. "No one came to prepare the tea, to make the beds, to sweep or dust the rooms. On the stove he cooked breakfast on a coil that reddened at a button's touch. Oatmeal and hot milk" (126). She realizes that she should forget about having a servant, cooking on the fire, or cooking the traditional Indian cooking. Regularly visiting the campus, Gauri notices the huge dissimilarity between the American university and the Indian one, where she used to study in. In Calcutta, everybody who wanted to pass through the entrance gate of the university building had to be screened and interviewed, but in Rhode Island there were no such things. "There was no guard preventing her, questioning her. No armed soldiers sitting on sandbags, as they had for months outside the main building at Presidency" (132). Besides, the people in Calcutta experience culture shock once they discover about American manner and routine. When Subhash first reached to America his experience is also very unusual. Here is the moment of Subhash's arrival:

A few months later Subhash also travelled to a village: this was the word the Americans used. An old-fashioned word, designating an early settlement, a modest place. And yet the village had once contained a civilization: a church, a courthouse, a tavern, a jail (35)

When Subhash talks to his parents about his life in the U.S., they seem unable to fully understand the diverse descriptions of the American way of life. They also hate it when Subhash chooses to tie the knot with a woman whom they condemn. They had expected him to get married with a girl of their own choice, not a widow whom they condemned and isolated. The second-generation immigrants also experience culture shock. Bela notices the cultural differences between the Indians and the Americans. She does not feel at home and cannot attach with this odd society. "In the taxis they sat in traffic, pollution filling her chest... the bells of colorful rickshaws pulled by hand" (206). People in Tollygunge look at her with eyes wide open in shock. While they are having meals, they notice that Bela has a tough time handling to emulate their table manners. "Watching Bela try to pick up rice and lentils with her fingers [her grandmother] told Deepa to fetch a spoon for her" (196). It is hard to believe for them that Bela has never eaten food with her fingers. Later when Deepa, the maid, takes Bela out to the streets, Bela feels strange look by the strangers, something she had not faced in the United States:

On the quiet walled streets, every few paces, people stopped them asking Deepa to explain who Bela was, why she was there... But now she wanted to return inside. Not liking, as they traced their steps, the way some of the neighbors were pulling back their curtains to look at her. (196)

Bela's tour to India is for her to be present at a funeral. The arrangements and the ritual hit her as bizarre, new, and confusing. "A barber came... shaved her father's head and face... the nails of her fingers, then her toes, were pared off with a blade" (196) for the mourning ritual. She observes all the arrangements with shock and bewilderment since no one did such things in the United States. Lahiri demonstrates hybridity in several occasions 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," (192) comparable to mix characters,

who after experience to two cultures, shape hybrid identities. Being located in the ‘third space,’ the protagonists inevitably come to terms with their diasporic condition and make every effort to blend in. Gauri is enthusiastic to hold anything the adopted land offers as “she liked spending time in the company of people who ignored but surrounded her”(133) and “She began to want to look like the other women she noticed on the campus, like a woman Udayan had never seen” (134). She chooses to live in the United States forever and never to return to her homeland. “In any case, California was her only home. Right away she had adapted to its climate” (235). It is signalled that Gauri is willing to join the new community from the first months of her life in America. 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” (36). Lahiri shows how hybridity adopts something entirely new which is different from what is usual. Subhash lives in the U.S. for a few years, and when he takes a trip to India, he realizes 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 any other Bengali he felt an allegiance with the foreigners now. He shared with them a knowledge of elsewhere. Another life to go back to. The ability to leave” (112).

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” (131). This is actually how no one looks like in America. Women either dress in leather coats if they are Americans, or saris if they are Indians, and not both of them at the same time. She herself begins to sense the harshness of her being dissimilar. 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” (134).

All the major characters are involved in identity struggle. Subhash is the elder by fifteen months, but Udayan is more adventurous and more ambitious. Although he is attached to his younger brother, yet always struggles to prove himself best from Udayan but fails:

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 favor him. It became his mission to obey them, given that it wasn't possible to surprise or impress them. That was what Udayan did (11).

As the brothers reach adulthood, Subhash decides to travel to the United States for an education and eventually migrates to make his own identity. However, there he comes to know that his younger brother has got married:

Not only had Udayan married before Subhash, but he'd married a woman of his choosing. On his own he'd taken a step that Subhash believed was their parents' place to decide. Here was another example of Udayan forging ahead of Subhash, of denying that he'd come second. Another example of getting his way (47).

When Udayan dies, Subhash goes back for the funeral and decides to save his brother's widow, Gauri, from a harsh future as a resented member of his parents' family, by marrying her and taking her back to the States. Gauri is expecting with Udayan's child, but Subhash is

eager to pretend to be the baby's father when they get to America, and Gauri gives consent to go along with the plan. Subhash and Bela have no option but to reconstruct their lives. It takes time, and in the progression, they float away from each other as well. As a consequence, Bela turns out to be something of a nomad, travelling the country, surviving job to job. Subhash remains on the edges of her life, providing unappreciated support, the guarantee of home that Bela needs so often.

On the other hand, no matter how firmly Gauri attempts to incorporate herself to the Western women, she cannot absolutely turn into one of them. As the narrator suggests, "She knew there weren't too many women who looked like her on the campus. 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" (171). She knows that only by shifting her clothes, she cannot completely resemble usual American women, and understands that there exist irremovable obstructions. Her look and pronunciation becomes the reason people to ask her where she is from, and even to form certain guess. For example, when she is invited to give a talk in San Diego, the university sends a driver to pick her up, so that she does not have to drive. Gauri meets the driver at the door, but he does not understand that she is his passenger. He mistakes her for the person who is paid to open the door for another person. "Tell her, whenever she's ready, he'd said" (236).

Shifting identities have well been depicted by the narrator. The narrator tells the reader about Gauri in her old age, after she has lived most of her life in the United States:

And yet she remained, in spite of her Western clothes, her Western academic interests, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and, against the backdrop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had wed. (236)

One of the novel's important qualities is its portrayal of emotional callousness, which is the gloomy side of endurance. She separates herself with Bela and Subhash and finds a new location and identity. She dislocates herself first from India and then from Rhode Island, "She entered a new dimension, a place where a fresh life was given to her" (232). In this tale where kind people who are prepared to give up their future for the sake of others, who trust in relations, togetherness, and being there for one another through good and bad, Gauri emerges explicitly selfish. A self-centred and callous woman, she seems to worry little or not at all for those closest to her. But Gauri is not devoid of any guilt "Within her was the guilt and the adrenaline unleashed by what she'd done, the sheer exhaustion of efforts. As if, in order to escape Rhode Island, she'd walked every step of the way" (232). Lahiri draws a woman "who makes a life on her own, alone, full aware of the intense pain her desire for independence causes those in her immediate entourage" (Muduli 92). But Gauri knows from the starting that she will never love her new husband, Subhash. He also knows this perhaps, and yet Subhash expects that by performing his duty toward his brother, he and Gauri might be able to construct a life. She isn't in love with Subhash, but she is grateful for his sympathy, and they begin their journey for the new world with usual expectations for the future. She knows that the basis of the coming together of her and Subhash is Bela. Had Bela not been the source of association between them, she would have never lived with Subhash:

Because of Bela the possibility of separation was not discussed. The point of their marriage was Bela, and in spite of the damage Gauri had wrought,

in spite of her new schedule, her coming and going, the fact of Bela remained (176).

The most important part of the story is the child's undisclosed paternity but how the marriage turns as bitter experience for both persons also strikes us:

She never expressed any unhappiness, she did not complain. But the smiling, carefree girl in the photograph Udayan had sent, that had been Subhash's first impression of her that had been Subhash's first impression of her, that he had also hoped to draw out-that part of her he had never seen (159).

In this condition, Gauri soon finds out a longing for freedom and independence consuming her, dominating her mind and body like a permanent disease. In Rhode Island, she was not interested to Subhash either; she constantly maintains the detachment and her independence from him. She was not capable to communicate her appreciation for what he had accepted or to express the ways he was a better person than Udayan. They lived separately in the same apartment. She progressively cuts herself off from Subhash and Bela. As Bela prepares to begin seventh grade, Gauri completely leaves them, leaving husband and child upset, angry, shocked, broken.

Gauri gradually leaves Subhash, and then finds herself incapable to love her child, Bela "She is acutely aware of her shortcomings as both a wife and a mother, but chooses to continue on this path" (Singh 262). Lost into a philosophy class on Subhash's campus, she becomes enthusiastic for Plato and Descartes, and starts avoiding the little girl, leaving her alone in the house so as to study the heavy books which is a matter of curiosity to her so much more than her daughter. More resolutely heartless actions follow, with shocking impacts on all concerned. Gauri follows Subhash to Rhode Island, but is incapable of connecting with him or her later daughter Bela. The couple raises the girl as if Subhash were the biological father. While the young Bela and her father visit India a few years later, Gauri secretly moves to the other side of the United States. She then lives a concealed life and never hears anything from Bela or Subhash. She admits and knows that going distant from Subhash and Bela was her own choice. It was "Her own withdrawal, covert, ineluctable. With her own hand she'd painted herself into a corner, and then out of the picture altogether" (232).

Bela grows up and, after conquering harsh emotional damage because of her mother's escape, becomes a nomad. Later, she is drawn back to her father, when she gets pregnant. Subhash then admits the reality about her father, but this does not transform the relation he has with her. On the contrary, she chooses to reside with him nonetheless and meets Drew a few years later, with whom she creates a stable relationship. Bela is a daughter and later finds her true identity in being independent and a single mother. But when the truth of her real father is revealed she is stunned entirely. However is improved from the disturbance and finds her true identity. When Subhash is in his seventies, he asks Gauri for a divorce to be able to marry one of Bela's old teachers, Elise. Then one day Bela meets Gauri, who has travelled back to Rhode Island to arrange the paperwork for the divorce. Bela responds badly to this and Gauri travels to India to commit suicide, but she cannot do it. She then moves back to California, where she gets a letter from Bela telling her that maybe in the future, when she is ready, she might want to see Gauri again.

One of the subjects of Jhumpa Lahiri's this novel is the association between historical and personal time, the way single lives can encompass extremely different places and ages, the perseverance of the past. It expresses with new force the journey from mid-twentieth century

India to contemporary America that has been a steady feature of Lahiri's fiction, reminding us that for all the distance between here and there, then and now, these worlds are correlated by those who have lived, loved, and suffered in both. Besides human relationships, the issues like cultural displacement, up rootedness, alienation, identity crisis, isolation, nostalgia are also subtly established in this novel. A picture of post colonial India, World War II, Indian Independence movement, and partition of Bangladesh etc. is also shown in the novel. Lahiri's great power as a fiction writer lies in that graceful, effortless-to-read writing, adds to the admiration she holds for each of her characters even Gauri. She throws no judgment on Gauri's decisions, offers no disapproval for what might be seen, even lived on its own terms, as eventually no life at all. She purely poses the questions. The Lowland is a story of changing identities and cultural dislocation along with repressed emotions and the essential loneliness of the human circumstances.

### Works Cited

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. London: Random House, 2013. Print.

Muduli, Swastika. "From Innocence to Experience - A Diasporic Perspective in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*" *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*, Vol.2. Issue 3. 2015 (July-Sept.), 90-92. Web.

Singh, Archana Verma. ISSN - 2249-555X "The Female Iconoclast in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*" *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, Volume.4. Issue.6. June 2014, 261-262. Web.