

IMMIGRATION, ASSIMILATION AND HYBRIDITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

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Abstract:

The fictional world of Jhumpa Lahiri always questions the existentialistic capabilities of the migrants, essentially the Indian Americans, under the realm of multicultural gregariousness. She offers new insights into immigrants' experience in her novels and short stories. In all her works, the first generation immigrants are successful in adopting the culture and the standards of life of the host country. The experience of the second generation, born in America is different. For them, the fulfilment of the American dream is a lifelong question. Lahiri makes it clear that the cultural differences emerging between the generations are crucial in achieving success and also in establishing identity. Lahiri's inheritance of Indian ancestry and her experience in different continents especially in Europe and America made her to be the true child of displacements and dislocation. This multi-cultural background leads her to acquire multi-cultural life style and this life style serves as a central theme in all her works. The present study brings out the cultural conflicts of the immigrant Indians in the United States with special reference to her latest publication *The Lowland*.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, Lowland, immigration, cross-culture, hybridity

Assimilation of an immigrant in the American culture requires unceasing alternations of his own self, an intimate observation of the host culture and an isolation to disown his native culture. *The Lowland*, by Jhumpa Lahiri, is a milestone in portraying the taxing realities of immigrant lives in the multicultural phenomena. Subhash, Gauri and Bela are caught up in America's multi-cultural environment either for good or for the preparation of the worst. Of course Gauri is benefited but her estranged relationship with her daughter Bela and Subhash dooms their lives. Subhash rescues Gauri from Tollygunge, from the secluded life of a widow in the house of her in-laws and from the clutches of social evils and she is 'unable to express her

gratitude for what he'd undertaken' (137). Her marriage with Subhash takes her to Rhode Island and she transforms herself to enter a new world, a world even Subhash himself has not seen after his arrival to the United States. Her transformation is distinctive and determined but not natural though gradual. In the beginning she never ventures out and stays always 'indoors, resting, reading the campus paper Subhash brought home with him every day' (130). Her expedition on a rainy day to a nearby grocery store ends after eating 'cream cheese' unknowingly that 'it was intended to be spread on a cracker or bread' (131). Her exploration of buildings, departments, classroom and finally the philosophy department in the campus interests her to attend classes. Later, she makes it a routine and 'liked spending time in the company of people who ignored but surrounded her' (133). Her observation of other American girls helps her to bring in a revolutionary change in her dressing which Udayan himself may not have liked. A few months of her life in America has given the feeling that she is tired of her long hair and Indian costumes. She has accepted the physical reformation whereas for her psyche there is no cure. She still lives with Udayan, still expects him to come one day to her surprise. She is unable to reconcile with fate because Udayan is felt in each and every action. Unable to keep traces of Udayan out of her life, she decides to break all ties with Subhash and Bela as she finds it difficult to make them a part of her life.

Subhash not only rescues Gauri but also her daughter Bela from her mother who dislikes her and behaves indifferently with her. Gauri's interests are more in philosophy than on Bela. He disapproves of the idea of hiring somebody to take care of Bela 'though he'd told her, when he asked her to marry him, that she could go on with her studies in America, now he told her that her priority should be Bela' (165). At the same time Gauri's independent self demands freedom from the responsibilities. She has grudges over 'Subhash's absence when he was at work, his ability to come and go and nothing more' (163). His responsible nature and willingness to dedicate life are not emotional expressions lasting for sometime. For him it is a penance made to achieve the meaning of life. He ventures into this phase and completes his mission successfully like a yogi and finds the meaning through Bela's upbringing.

Initial interventions like Holly, an American woman of French Canadian descent and his free spirit to amalgamate himself in the American soil, like any other American, may have changed his life if Subhash has not brought Gauri to America or Holly has not reunited with her husband. He retains his self-respect both with Holly and Gauri. Though his relationship with Holly continues for sometime, his cultural upbringing forbids him to think of marrying her because of 'the fact that she was technically another man's wife' (77). Her lonely life is similar to any other American woman who lives away from her husband. She has an enchantment towards Indian culture, the way of life, family and relationships. She collects details from her boyfriend Subhash and recalls that: 'The most ordinary details of his life, which would have made no impression on a girl from Calcutta, were what made him distinctive to her' (76).

The relationship between Gauri and Subhash is neither physical nor spiritual. Her spiritual relationship with her dead husband Udayan offers no room for anybody to move with her. Even her daughter Bela is secondary. He never takes the advantage of seducing her but waits till she herself yields. Such tolerant life is impossible in a country like America where everyone's individuality is measured in terms of his freedom and happiness. Subhash is an idealist who lives an isolated life carrying the injustice done to him by Gauri without grudges but with principles.

Every first generation immigrant is tormented between the two selves, native and alien. Subhash's sufferings are different for different causes. His sufferings are for his duty in India as a son and for his responsibilities in America as a father. He forsakes his duty of caring his

parents in Tollygunge to carry out the responsibility of bringing up Bela. His efforts to bring his parents to the Rhode Island to live with him failed. Bijoli, his mother, cannot love the living son in the absence of the other. His parents' love for their house is greater than that of their children; 'in a sense it had been their first child' (184). He realises that his relationship with his homeland is diminishing and yet he writes to his parents that 'he was eager to see them. And yet day after day, cut off from them, he ignored them' (63). He has learned 'to live without hearing their voices, to receive news of them only in writing' (63). Among these complicated personalities and their perceptions Subhash remains as a tormented soul with none to console except the presence of his much-loved daughter Bela. Though he lives far away from his original home where he has nobody to mention, he feels connected to it. Also he cannot accept America, like Bela, as his own. He says that 'this arbitrary place, where he had landed and made his life, was not his. Like Bela, it had accepted him, while at the same time keeping a distance' (253). He carries certain aspects of his native land like the language, relationship and food, even to the third generation immigrant Bela not knowing whether they will be of any good to her. Subhash's personal feelings are reflexive of Lahiri herself:

Around non-Indian friends, I no longer feel compelled to hide the fact that I speak another language. I speak Bengali to my children, even though I lack the proficiency to teach them to read or write the language. As a child I sought perfection and so denied myself the claim to any identity. As an adult I accept that a bicultural upbringing is a rich but imperfect thing. (Lahiri 2006)

Gauri has been influenced in many ways by the Western philosophy of life. In her childhood she was not brought up by her mother. She returns the same to her child also. Udayan promises her education after her marriage. Her interest in philosophy leads her to pursue higher studies at the cost of her family. Self-alienation is an escape from reality and responsibility. She decides her destiny in California by choosing teaching as her profession. Isolation is exile to the immigrants but for Gauri isolation is a reward. Mrs. Bagchi in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* leaves India in order to escape from being married again after her husband's death. Both Mrs. Bagchi and Gauri want to live a secluded life in the United States and for the former the seclusion is natural whereas for the latter it is forcible. In her seclusion, Gauri considers her child as a burden, an unwanted thing on the earth, a mistake made 'unwittingly'.

Bela is not only the cultural offspring but also the daughter of America. Her father respects her individuality much. He is conscious of getting her married but they are living in a place where nothing can force. Even Elise, an American woman, advises him to say nothing in this matter. If it is India, he would have taken his responsibility. He says:

He had learned to set aside the responsibility he'd once believed would be his: to do his part to secure a daughter's future by pairing it with another person's. If he'd raised her in Calcutta it would have been reasonable for him to bring up the subject of marriage. Here it was considered meddling, out-of-bounds. He had raised her in a place free from such stigmas. (263)

Subhash wants Bela to introduce somebody as her boyfriend. But it never occurs. Instead, she tells him that she is pregnant. 'She wanted to become a mother' (263) but 'the father was not a part of her life' because he is not like Subhash. Her impulse to deliver a child without a father is a revolutionary thing in the Indian concept. Like Pearl, the daughter of Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*, Bela's child may also be considered as a sin in any other civilisation but in the American

context, it is the liberty the land has given to its citizens. Bela, unmindful of her origin, a place where she has visited only once, and the cultural aspects of her ancestry, which was once marred by her father, decides to bring up her child alone. The determination and the strong will with which she carries the child make Subhash believe that she will be ‘a different mother than Gauri’ (265). He knows that the contempt about his own life with Gauri is the reason behind her choice. Bela too tells once to Drew, her boyfriend ‘the truth about her mother. That she’d left and never returned’ (299). However, the land of opportunities has given Subhash an opportunity to be blessed with a wife to love and children and grand children to care. His marriage with Elise Silva is ‘a looking forward late in life’ (330). Elise says that ‘their purpose was religious, perhaps funerary or commemorative’ (331).

Cultural values and certain ethical codes are identified as important phenomena while the immigrants experience terrible disaster due to the non-observance of their original culture. Like many other immigrant characters of Lahiri, Subhash, Gauri and Bela have also understood their limitations and break away from such disasters. It is obvious that Lahiri’s Indian and American settings in her works give an unconscious vent to her biological association with India and America and they establish a certain cultural link which may, otherwise, be termed as ‘Indian-American’. As a matter of fact, the first generation immigrants learn the language of the settled land and take part in the social and cultural life of America by accepting the hyphenated American identities. Their children in the process of acculturation learn not only the new language but also the negative cultural norms that are remote to their families. Their excessive involvement leads to harmful effects. While writing on Lahiri’s works, Professor Robert Gnanamony (2006) considers that:

Lahiri’s stories do document the characters’ trauma of cultural displacement and the feeling of cultural nostalgia. But there is no ill will and malice against the host country and no clash between Indianness and Americanness unlike her fellow litterateurs. This is not to deny that her stories are also documentation of exiled souls chained in muted boundaries of space and time. (104)

For the immigrants, dealing with the challenges of exile, loneliness and conflicting culture are more agonizing and unbearable than those of their children. As far as the children are concerned, they are more Americans than their parents, yet not fully Americans. Since Lahiri herself is the representative of a displaced identity, she, as a fictional creator, is the right person to talk on this transition between the two cultures, the two countries and the two continents.

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