

# Immigrant Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland

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Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is a judicious supplement to her already popular oeuvre of fiction writing, including Pulitzer Prize winner *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). The story of novel concerns two siblings, Subhash and Udayan Mitra and due to circumstances in the 1960s, they parted their ways. Subhash moves to United States for higher studies in Oceanography and settles there while his younger brother, Udayan, lives by Marxist ideology. The tumultuous political context in the wake of colonial rule in India marks the personal saga of a family deeper than in any other Lahirian fiction.

Lahiri's plots are focusing diasporic predicament of characters striving to cope up with problems of familial relationships and interconnectedness between people. She delves deeply into emotional tangles of her characters and establishes the need for reaching out in renewed emotional communication between them to resolve conflicts and problems of mutual adjustment. Portraying life of the Indian migrants to America, Lahiri has been very poignant in capturing the diasporic spirit of her characters muddled in multiple emotional tangles. However, she deals purely with emotional turmoil and subsequent isolation and guilt experienced by central characters. The narrative deals

with the theme of uprooting and assimilation with efforts made to establish connectivity among the characters.

The present paper first discusses the concept of identity and cultural transformation in diasporic space and then traces these issues in *The Lowland*, which was introduced. Identity is a topical issue in the contemporary study of culture with many ramifications for the study of ethnicity, class, gender, race, sexuality and subcultures. Identity becomes an issue when something assumed fixed, coherent, and stable has displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. Identities are not something finally; rather they are constantly producing themselves anew. Identity is associated with desire i.e. desire for recognition, association, and protection over time and space. Identities and diasporas are constructed under circumstances, and situations which are not chosen deliberately. In other words, identities and cultural are perceived within the domain of cultural circumstances and are not things, which exist; they have no essential or universal qualities.

They are constructed, made rather than found, by representation. In Etienne Balibar's words, "identity is never a peaceful acquisition: it is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of annihilation that can be figured by another identity or by an easing of identities." (186). the question of identity for diaspora is no doubt a question of the „self“. Cultural factors are very important in the quest for the identity and self, especially for immigrants.

The „self“ reflects upon an autonomous subject or the subjectivity of every human being. As she elaborates, further, Understanding of identity was a result of the romantic interpretation of the self as the inner reality of a given subject. It revealed in itself the concept of the subject as an absolute and autonomous being and denied any decisive or obligatory references outside itself. It denied transcendence outside oneself and identified itself only with its immanent reality or with its own immanent validity. (2) The existence of the „self“ inevitably suggests the existence of an opposing factor known as the „other“, which also strengthens the comprehensibility of the

self, or as Mikhail Bakhtin says: “The self is the gift of the other” (quoted. in Skulj 3).

As Skulj writes: “No cultural identity can be identified or analyzed only on its national ground . . . Otherness” is, irrevocably, cultural reality. The other does not necessarily endanger its selfness or its principles of identity” (2). Regarding this, the Indian immigrants involved in an internal dialogue and/or opposition between their ethnic culture and the culture of the country in which they abide: America. For the children of the immigrants who were born in America, the site of the confusion is their household or parental home in America where the Indian culture and customs still exist even if in a diluted form. As Natalie Friedman writes about the children of the immigrants: “they can only define home as the place where their two cultures merge-the literal and metaphysical location is in their parents” house. . . Their behavior is akin to that of tourists in their home countries” (115). Moreover, American culture, which is a blend of different cultures, and being American add to the confusion of diaspora. The

clash happens inside, having the „other“ interchangeably replaced sometimes by the Indian and sometimes by the American side of their identities. Realization of, and coming into terms with their new and unique identities as cosmopolites take time and sometimes it never occurs.

The expression of identity has inextricably bound up with the notion of culture. At the basis of ethnic and national identity, there exists a common culture. Ross Poole also believes that “in almost all cases the emergence of a sense of national identity coincided with a flourishing of national culture” (27). A nation is primarily a cultural community, and the national culture provides the national community with its feel of continuity, which is an important factor in every type of identity. Hence, it is reasonable to discuss every type of identity in relation to cultural affiliation. Stuart Hall argues that there are at least two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first position defines cultural identity in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective one true self which people with a shared history and

ancestry hold in common. In particular, he uses the language of „purity“ and „cultural origins“ to characterize this view of cultural identity. Within the terms of this definition, as Hall argues, “our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provides, as one people, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 393).

The contemporary immigrant writer’s work that I am analyzing in this paper is attempting to create an alternative space to locate and stabilize their characters in the new land of settlement. Lahiri goes back to post-colonial India, but draws attention to the poverty that determined young and idealist intellectuals to envision violence against wealthy landowners and then self-sacrifice as the only possible solutions to change the system. The fictional canvas stretches for nearly four decades in time, moves from India to America, and witnessed with a handful of fictional

characters connected by blood relation but separated by volition.

The story of dead Udayan and his elder brother Subhash who though look alike are of opposing characteristics. Udayan, dynamic and pushing while Subhash withdrawn and diffident have attachment for each other which tragically results in unforeseen disharmony in Subhash’s family life. In their childhood they used to play in the open place in Tollygunge the memories of which haunt Subhash long after his brother’s death. In the spring on 1967, they started hearing about peasants revolting in Naxalbari, a village in the Darjeeling District, at the northern of West Bengal. Located at the foothills of the Himalayas, nearly four hundred miles away from Calcutta (now Kolkata), Naxalbari is closer to Tibet than to Tollygunge. But Udayan is impressed by the injustice of ruthless landowners against hardworking villagers in that faraway region. Still living in a feudal system, they are denied revenue from the crops they grow, some of them starving for lack of food. In 1967, in the papers and on All India Radio, they started hearing about Naxalbari. It was a place

they'd never heard of before. It was one of a string of villages in the Darjeeling District, a narrow corridor at the northern tip of West Bengal. Tucked into the foothills of the Himalayas, nearly four hundred miles from Calcutta, closer to Tibet than to Tollygunge. Most of the villagers were tribal peasants who worked on tea plantations and large estates. For generations they'd lived under a feudal system that hadn't substantially changed.

Wealthy landowners manipulated them. They were pushed off fields they'd cultivated, denied revenue from crops they'd grown. Moneylenders preyed upon them. Deprived of subsistence wages, some died from lack of food. (13) Bengali communists help to organize the uprising in Naxalbari, while several demonstrations take place in Calcutta in support of the peasants' cause. For a few months there are fights with the police, some peasants lose their lives, and a few landowners were abducted and killed. In July, the rebellion brought to its heels, but for Udayan it represents an inspiration, an impetus for change. He is outraged that the government has turned victims into criminals. Ironically, this is what will

happen to him also: from a young intellectual genuinely concerned with the well-being of poorer fellow citizens, he imperceptibly changes into an accomplice to terrorist acts. "It wasn't the first instance of peasants in the Darjeeling District revolting. But this time their tactics were militant. Armed with primitive weapons, carrying red flags, shouting Long Live Mao Tse-tung. (13). but on another hand, Central government announced that .There were reports of banditry and looting. Peasants setting up parallel administrations. Landowners being abducted and killed... Central Government banned the carrying of bows and arrows in Naxalbari.

The same week, authorized by the West Bengal cabinet, five hundred officers and men raided the region. They searched the mud huts of the poorest villagers. They captured unarmed insurgents, killing them if they refused to surrender. Ruthlessly, systematically, they brought the rebellion to its heels.(14) As usual, Subhash is more cautious and wonders: "What good are bows and arrows against a modern state?" (21) Even after attending a Naxalite meeting with his

brother and helping him paint slogans on neighbourhood walls he still is not convinced that the Maoist ideology can solve India's problems. Their father, a government employee, also dismisses the movement saying his generation has built a nation and there is no need for further upheavals: "We're independent. The country is ours" (23). Udayan is arguing to his father which seems to be a type of inter-generational conflict and started challenging his father, the way he used to challenge their teachers at school: People are reacting and Naxalbari is an inspiration, an impetus for change. The Naxalite Party is formed, and on May Day 1969, ten thousand people march to the centre of Calcutta (now Kolkata) in support of the movement. Udayan is excited: "The revolutionary situation was ripe, both at home and abroad... A high tide of revolution was sweeping through the world" (33).

He joins the guerrilla warfare against the Indian state, while Subhash starts applying for PhDs in the United States. His younger brother senses that once he leaves, he will not come back. He accuses Subhash of being selfish, of not

wanting to jeopardize his career and personal future for their country's prosperity. All their lives they had been as one, but now their paths are parting: But he was no longer in Tollygunge. He had stepped out of it as he had stepped so many mornings out of his dreams, its reality and its particular logic rendered meaningless in the light of day. The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them; he was the sole link. Here life ceased to obstruct or assault him. Here was a place where humanity was not always pushing, rushing, running as if with a fire at its back. (23) Udayan becomes more and more involved in Naxalite activities; he even loses the fingers from a hand in the explosion of a bomb he placed at a safe house. By 1970, the Naxalites are operating underground, carrying out attacks and ransacking schools, blasting cinemas and banks. They are responsible for "sadistic, gruesome" (87) killings of unarmed traffic constables, affluent businessmen,

members of rival parties, and even educators.

They take control of certain neighborhoods', including Tollygunge. Udayan and Gauri get married in secret, without celebrations. His parents find out after the civil registration and they are outraged to have been excluded. Not only did they not arrange his marriage, but also they actually had no idea he was seeing someone. Gauri loves her husband so much that she helps him plan the assassination of a police officer. While tutoring two students in Sanskrit, she observes from the window a policeman's timetable. The comrades need him out of the way, and she tells Udayan the fact that his day off is Thursday. On this day the officer is unarmed and he always takes his son home from school. That is when they attack and murder him. Udayan is more radical than Subhash, he is driven by a sense of equality and justice, joins the Naxalite movement in the 1960s. The police in the lowland behind his parental house eventually execute Udayan when he has caught in the midst of the communist movement taking place in West Bengal.

In youth, the brothers parted their ways. Udayan drawn towards reform and revolution becomes active in the Naxal Movement. Subhash on the other hand leaves for America for education much to the chagrin of his brother. The narration is shifted to America to describe the experience and exploits of Subhash. His aim was to complete his research and return to Bengal as it is "only a matter of a few years" (30). He has been brought up in Bengali cultural space and had deep respect for his parents and affection for his brother. He also had a sense of responsibility for his parents. His words to Udayan reveal the deep sense of parental responsibility: "They're the people who raised. Who continued to feed you and clothe you? You'd amount to nothing if it were not for them" (31). Like typical Bengali, he believed in the arranged marriage system and wondered what type of woman his parents would select for him. In America, he was very shocked after watching Narasimah, an Indian, married to an American woman. At that time, he was also fully aware of the great chasms that separated the Indian cultural space from the American one. But after



staying some days in American cultural space, he also hesitated even in conversing with women, but his stay in hostland brought about a radical change in his attitude as he began to spend weekends with a married woman, Holly: "Subhash was surprised, also troubled, that she could speak to him calmly, without acrimony. The person on the other end of the line remained deeply familiar to her. He saw that because of Joshua, in spite of their separation, their lives were permanently tied." (50) He even thought of breaking all his ties with his parents and settling down in America with Holly.

In America pre-marital sex is a very common matter, but this is a taboo in India. This pre-marital relationship is therefore Subhas' transgression of Indian cultural ethos and involvement in the American cultural space. But unlike the Indians, the American do not feel any emotional bond in these relations. As a result, when Holly, after some days of her relation with Subhas, told Subhas that, I want us to end this nicely, she continued. I think we can. He heard her say that she had been speaking with Joshua's father,

and that they were going to try to work things out between them. He left you. He wants to come back. I've known him for twelve years, Subhash. He's Joshua's father. I'm thirty-six years old. Why did we come here together, if you don't want to see me again? I thought you might like it. You never expected this to go anywhere, did you? You and me? With Joshua? I like Joshua. You're young. You're going to want to have your own children someday. In a few years you'll go back to India, live with your family. You've said so yourself. She had caught him in his own web, telling him what he already knew. (81) Subhas was totally shocked. Even after five years of this, Subhas remained emotionally attached to Holly. Due to this when he found her in the company of her husband, he became jealous of her. Bourdieu describes struggle for ethnic or regional identity as a "struggle over the monopoly of the power to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to make and unmake groups" (221).



Social institutions are the level of authority in whose power there is a possibility of “knowledge installation” and means of self-perception, an authority in identity formation. He learns about Udayan’s marriage and his parents’ welfare through occasional letters he received from his brother. His first visit back home follows his brother’s elimination by the police in a brutal open encounter. His heart goes out for the widow of his brother who is looked down upon by his parents as a necessary outside: He recognized her at once in its glow, from the snapshot Udayan had sent. But she was no longer the relaxed college girl who had smiled for his brother. That picture of her had been in black and white, but now the absence of color, even in the warm light of the candle, was more profound. Her long hair was pulled back above her neck. She sat with her head down, her wrists bare, dressed in a sari of crisp white. She was thin, without a trace of the life she was carrying. She wore glasses, a detail withheld from the photograph. When she looked up at him, he saw in spite of the glasses another thing the photo had not fully conveyed.

The frank beauty of her eyes. (59) His sympathy for her plight and his affection for his brother coupled with his dislike of his parents’ behaviour compels him to take the decision of marrying pregnant Gauri and of taking her with him to America. His stay in the American cultural space made him liberal minded. For this reason he even had not hesitated to marry Gauri after the death of Udayan. Earlier he assured his father and mother that his marriage was up to them to arrange, but now he took this radical step. As result of his stay in America, he came to know how women outside India lead their lives being free from all kinds of restraint and confinement. But returning in India, when he found that Gauri, after the murder of Udayan, was forced to lead her life like an Indian widow, he was terribly shocked. Therefore, he questioned his mother “why she is leading the life of a widow?”(100). Moreover, at that time he was also overwhelmed by the hospitality of the Indians, which he missed totally in America. Actually, his stay in the American cultural space made him a critic of home as well as host culture. In fact, at that time he lived in the cultural space of

„in-between’s“ . It was not a decision taken impulsively and despite the heartless ungrateful behavior of Gauri in later years he never regretted his action. He takes Gauri to Rhode Island with him, although she is pregnant with his brother’s baby. Her in-laws had accused Gauri, as she knew they would, of disgracing their family. Her mother-in-law had lashed out, telling her she“ d never been worthy of Udayan. That perhaps he would still be alive, if he“ d married another sort of girl. They had accused Subhash also, of wrongly taking Udayan“ s place. But in the end, after denouncing both of them, they had not forbidden it. They had not said no. Perhaps they appreciated, as Gauri did, that they would no longer have to be responsible for her, that they would be free from one another. Therefore,, though in one way she“ d burrowed even more deeply into their family, in another way she“ d secured her release. (82).

We can’t deny the vacuum that is immeasurably there in the hearts of Lahiri“ s characters because most of the characters are uprooted from their cultural roots. They struggle to settle down on a land that they feel is alien to them. They

are not strong enough to give a tough fight to the hostile circumstances, instead they fall an easy victim to the circumstances because the distance from their roots has made them vulnerable. The most pitiable condition is that of Gauri, as her heart swells with motherly love and Bela ruthlessly spurns her. Bela accuses her mother of taking advantage of Subhash and of abandoning her. She heartlessly asks her mother to leave the house as if the house would be polluted by her presence. Meghna imbibed some qualities of Udayan, in spite of the upbringing determined to live the life of a nomad, and did odd jobs to help the folk

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