

Gendered Migration and Narrative Overtones in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract:

Migration has been a central conceptual category in a post-colonial world increasingly marked by globalization, which involves the fluidization of all-geographical, political, cultural, ethnic, and psychological boundaries of the self as distances are becoming increasingly smaller with the advance of technology and communication. Acquiring a voice through the revaluation of a living migrant condition as a more empowered narrative of female dislocation/relocation in characters present in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* unravels the central theme of this paper. Lahiri structures her novel with exquisite precision and detail. At the same time, her insights into the inner conflict of a woman who chooses her intellectual life over the demands of motherhood are beautifully rendered.

Keywords: migration, gender, narrative

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most eminent Indo-American writers who carries the fresh Indian sensibility abroad and lets it out through her works. She portrays her characters both in the light of native and alien cultures. She has experienced the trauma of failing to find her identity in the new land where she could never have a sense of belonging. She explores the ideas of cultural and personal isolation and identities. She discovers the complex cultural encounters and shifts along the relationship between parents and children, lovers, siblings, husband and wife, and determination of identity in general. She deals with a multicultural society seeking a native identity and the adopted country's new identity. Displacement, adherence to their native culture, attempt to integrate themselves into their adopted homeland, suffer tensions over moral and emotional issues. In her works, culture affects feminine identity more than masculine identity because of women's strong cultural ties to the land of their ancestors. First-generation

immigrants face isolation, while second-generation female immigrants do not deem India as their home.

The Lowland describes the cultural dilemmas of Indian people through repression and displacement. In her narratives, Lahiri examines identity, the importance of objects (as tools for memory or nostalgia), and how immigrant parents want their children to live out the American Dream while preserving a solid connection with Indian roots. Marital harmony, losing a loved one, or parenting consumes the general theme. The migrant metaphor throws light on the process of othering. At the same time, the essay *Dissemination Time Narrative and the Making of the Modern Nation* (1990) says the modern nation is written at its margins by those who occupy those spaces, namely the colonizers, women, migrants, and immigrants. Lahiri's female characters face a cultural dilemma-divided psyche of women torn between two cultures. However, they refuse to sacrifice their individuality to uphold their traditional role.

According to her, a woman must be faithful to herself if she wants to realize herself. Lahiri's novels reveal her artistic vision of the feminist self. She focuses her characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations, and frustrations. They are aware of their strength and limitations but find themselves thwarted by the opposition and present from a society conditioned by the patriarchal mindset. They are concerned with the quest for authentic selfhood and an understanding of the existential problems of life. Lahiri reveals a remarkable insight into a woman's psyche by representing women in different roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and individuals who seek gender identity.

Female Narratives in *The Lowland*

It is argued that those who have suffered subjugation, domination, and displacement produce and transmit a culture of survival that is both transnational and translational. Women are affected by the multi-ethnic environment of the cities they migrate to, thus paralleling the global power structure. Although still centering on family and recreating a home in the new land, some of these migrants develop in diverse ways and become transnational characters who occupy a homelike 'third space.' Thus, foreign soil gives the characters a fertile background to strike new roots.

The novel plots the life of two brothers (Subhash and Udayan) and how their lives diverge when they choose two paths at one point. The two feminine characters, Gauri and Bijoli (mother of Subhash and Udayan), drive the novel to new levels or heights of reading experience. The emotional intensity of the novel is revealed when the absence of loved ones becomes a haunting presence within the subconscious minds of the other characters. In a way, Lahiri explores the psychological nuances of connection, guilt, grief, parenthood, and traumatic situations in different people. It also gives us the political scenario of Calcutta in the late 1960s, the uprising of Naxalism, and how its threatening waves engulfed the lives of so many young men.

A close reading of the female characters in *The Lowland* (2013) reveals that Gauri had married Subhash to stay connected to Udayan. However, even as she was going through it, she knew "it was useless just as it was useless to save a single earring

when the other half of the pair was lost" (153). While mingling with new ladies in Rhode Island, she says, "I have nothing in common with them. Space shielded her more effectively than time: the distance between Rhode Island and Tolly Gunge. It had caused those moments to recede to turn less and less visible than invisible" (182), revealing the pang of alienation. However, her worst nemesis resided within her. She was not only ashamed of her feelings but also frightened that the final task Udayan had left her with, the long task of raising Bela, was not bringing meaning to her life – which showed her mental trauma. However, Gauri's mind had saved her. It had enabled her to stand upright. It had cleared a path for her. It had prepared her to walk away. Isolation offered its form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings. It greeted her at the end of each day and lay still with her at night. She had no wish to overcome it. Instead, it was something upon which she would come to depend.

"With her hand, she had painted herself into a corner and then out of the picture altogether." ...learning was an act of rediscovery, knowledge a form of remembering...

With children, the clock is reset. We need to remember what came before. "Everything in Bela's life has been a reaction. She would say I am who I am; I live as I do because of you." This shows the existential crisis of Gauri's daughter. There is too much information, and yet, in her case, not enough. In a world of diminishing mystery, the unknown persists."

At twenty-three, Gauri is already a widow; she is also about to become a mother. She is pregnant and grieving: "Udayan's ghost was palpable within her, preserved in this room where she spent all her time" (99). She shuts the door, and the window shutters, trying to keep inside "whatever invisible particles of him floated in the atmosphere" (108). Subhash is ready to return to the United States. He is determined to take Gauri with him: for his sake (he is alone), for hers (her in-laws would have driven her out after giving birth), and for the baby's (it would be raised in a place where nobody knows the painful truth and they could be a family). However, the bond between Subhash and Gauri is "a shared awareness of the person they'd both loved" (115). The past connects them and projects a future together, although they do not share a love in the present. Even Gauri understands it is a useless act, "just as it was useless to save a single earring when the other half of the pair was lost" (153).

By marrying Subhash and leaving India, she has the opportunity to put the ghastly events behind her, the child can come into the world "ignorant and safe" (125). However, the town is called Providence, and Gauri knows the noun's meaning: "foresight, the future beheld before it was experienced" (125). She carries the future inside her but is keenly aware she cannot free herself of Udayan's memory: "She felt as if she contained a ghost, as Udayan was. The child was a version of him, in that it was both present and absent. Both within her and remote" (124). She changes places but is unable to let go of the past. Indeed, even on the plane, "it was time, not space, she had been aware of traveling through" (125). However, "[p]art baby not to be born.

To delay if only for a little longer, its arrival” (144). Immigration is "a lifelong pregnancy” for Gauri, too. In her case, the metaphor refers to her inability to escape the past and 'deliver' an entirely new self in the United States. She gives birth to a child but never really becomes a mother. She lives in a time before Bela was conceived before her biological father was killed. She stays away from India for forty years, yet she behaves as if she were perpetually of her wanted the pregnancy simply to continue, for the pain to subside but for the pregnant with feelings of guilt and unresolved traumas. Gauri thrives professionally in the United States and travels the world to attend various conferences.

The female characters in *The Lowland* force themselves to fit in the new atmosphere as much as possible and construct a new identity, which is motivated by the social conditions in which they survive.

Conclusion

Lahiri documents characters who face the trauma of cultural displacement and the feeling of cultural nostalgia. Her stories also document exiled souls in muted boundaries of space and time. Her female characters are caught in immigrant situations, inhabiting the fictional world of large-scale transnational migrations, in which borders of cultures are frequently traversed and need to be constantly negotiated. Lahiri's characters are identified as cultural hybrids whose hyphenated identities are troubled by tension and anxiety. Her characters are sketched realistically.

Women in the diaspora remain selectively attached to and empowered by a home culture and tradition. Lahiri's female characters preserve themselves and try to establish their identity as Indian women. Being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. According to Judith Caesar, Lahiri's plot is a meditation upon inner space and intimacy' (2005:65). Places and spaces connect people. When people are gone, their memories linger in those places and spaces. It takes time to enroot oneself in a new soil through generations. The knot of this Lahirian text is tied at the intersection of the spatial distance from the homeland and the temporal proximity to the traumatic events of the Indian past. Lahiri explores the narratives of Indians in exile- of people navigating between the inherited strict traditioned and the baffling new world they must encounter daily. She has portrayed some of the problems engendering by the experiences of migration and diaspora, such as displacement, marginalization, and the crisis of identity. The predicament of female characters in the novel shows the author's kaleidoscopic vision, where she pictures their mental stature with the utmost care and precision. Most of the characters are victims of their circumstances. They either fall prey to it or come out victorious. While a few outlive their situations, they are torn in between. Thereby, Lahiri gives voice to the voiceless.

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