

From Resistance to Acculturation: A Critical Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract: This research paper intends to throw light on the problems and difficulties faced by the three major characters of the novel *The Lowland* during the process of acculturation. Acculturation is a psychological and social phenomenon which can be defined as a process of change in attitudes and behaviors of the individuals who live in multicultural societies or who have come in contact with a different culture due to colonization, invasion, migration, political upheaval and globalization. Acculturation occurs when a member of ethnic minority adopts the cultural values and norms of the dominant group. Instances may include learning the language of the host country or acquiring citizenship. Hence, immigrants discard their own traditions and beliefs and embrace the culture and identity of their new country. *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel

and fourth literary output published in 2013, is a multigenerational family story of two brothers Subhash and Udayan who are very close to each other but their path diverges when Subhash goes to the United States of America to obtain his Ph.D, degree and Udayan stays back in India and joins a political movement which results in his mysterious murder. Despite his parents' will, Subhash marries his brother's widow Gauri who was pregnant with Udayan's child and settles in the US. The present paper aims at showing how all the characters in the novel face insecurities and mental challenges during the process of acculturation and assimilation. How they struggle hard to redefine their identity and create a space for themselves and their children in a hostile modern world.

It is very hard to define the term 'culture' as it is a very intricate and fluid concept. It comprises everything from the way we dress and eat, to our religion and language. It is the exhibition of one's nature in one's ways of living and thinking. It influences almost all areas of life whether it is literature, rituals, religion and entertainment. The two distinct components of culture are material and non material culture in which material culture includes objects that are concerned with the material aspects of one's life such as dress, food and domestic goods. Non-material culture, on the other hand, is related to ideals, rituals, thoughts and beliefs. In fact the material culture of a civilization is the

concrete form of non-material culture. As the cultural development is a long historical process operating in a local, regional or national context, it keeps on changing geographically and when two cultures encounter each other, they can change and adapt, a process known as acculturation.

The concept of acculturation was first introduced by the American geologist John Wesley Powell who used it in a report for the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology in 1880. He opined that in response to the interaction with different cultures, many behavioral and psychological changes spurred in people due to cross cultural imitation which can be termed as acculturation. So, in simple words, acculturation is a process in which an individual or group of individuals from one culture comes in contact with another culture, embracing and assimilating the beliefs, values and cultural practices of the other while still withholding their own distinct identity. Later on, the term was associated with the people who left their homelands and settled in other countries. Acculturation accompanies with itself a series of changes including food, dressing sense, way of living and customs, when the new immigrants begin to adapt to the societal culture around them. These immigrants also bring with them a set of values, traditions, food and language from their home country. Thus, Acculturation follows migration and continues in multicultural societies among ethno- cultural communities. J. W. Berry in Encyclopedia of Applied Science writes:

“The initial interest in acculturation grew out of a concern for the effects of European domination of colonial and indigenous peoples. Later, it focused on how immigrants (both voluntary and involuntary) changed following their entry and settlement into

receiving societies. More recently, much of the work has been involved with how ethno cultural groups relate to each other, and to change, as a result of their attempts to live together in culturally plural societies.” (Berry, 27)

As a widely acclaimed young writer of Indian origin, Jhumpa Lahiri acquires a unique place among the galaxy of women diasporic writers. Her strikingly fresh Indian sensibility abroad that she carries with her from her native land is reflected in her fiction in an impressive form. In his book *The Invention of Canada: Literary Text and the Immigrant Imaginary*, Arnold H. Itwaru writes: “[T]he immigrant writer is not merely the author away from their ‘homeland’.” (Itwaru, 25) As Ramraj writes, “Yet though Diasporans may not actually want to return home, wherever the dispersal has left them, they retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religions, and languages of the ancestral home who speaks about the immigrant experience, but who has lived it [...] one who is familiar with some of the inner as well as the outer workings of these particular contexts”. (Ramraj, 215). Born to Bengali parents who later settled in the USA, Jhumpa is proud of her cultural heritage. Through her writings, she provides insights into the experiences of Indian immigrants as well as the process of their acculturation into American culture. Despite being brought up in the modern and technologically advanced society of America, Jhumpa rebuilds her closeness with Bengal and Bengali traditions through the experiences of all those Bengali Indian immigrants who made America their ‘home’.

Jhumpa investigates the psyche of resistance running within the conscious mind of both the first generation of

immigrants who struggle hard and survive in their exile as Indian Americans and the second generation of immigrants suffering from identity crisis and non belongingness, have accepted their fate as Americanized Indians. The first generation of immigrants having gone through the agony of uprootedness, encounter American culture with discontent and remain nostalgic throughout their lives. While on the other side, an 'Imaginary Homeland' is created by the next generation of immigrants who look forward to the situation of immigrants as a method to rebuild their predicament against the burden of conventional cultural subjugation. Adesh Pal says:

“The first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From the second generation onwards, ties with the homeland gradually get replaced by those with the adopted country. Food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs of individual communities etc. become the markers of identity. These are retained, discarded or adopted differently at different times and places.” (Pal, 2004).

This research paper is an attempt to throw light on the difficulties and problems faced by the immigrants during the process of acculturation. It also shows how the characters in the novel are able to get acculturated in the new country, embracing its socio-cultural values, and at the same time experience a sense of nostalgia for the Indian culture and sensibilities, experiencing alienation and uprootedness.

The present novel under study *The Lowland* is set against the backdrop of political movement. It narrates the story of two brothers who are different in their attitude and nature. The elder brother Subhash is more

realistic and practical whereas the younger one Udayan is idealist and radical in nature. During the 1960s, Calcutta was the center of the Naxalite Movement and at that time there was a lot of chaos in its streets. Subhash got rid of this chaos as he migrated to the USA for higher studies. But his brother Udayan, being radical in nature, got involved in Naxal activities. He was in love with Gauri who was a philosophy student and later on they married. This was the time when he was actively participating in many rebellions and was shot to death by someone. His wife Gauri was expecting at that time. Subhash came back to India from the US and decided to marry Gauri as she was living a very painful life. Much against his parents' will, he married Gauri and took her to Rhode Island in the US to usher her into a new life. He believed she would be able to get rid of Udayan's tragedy and find meaning in life. The later part of the novel unfolds how personal choices play a vital role in deciding their destiny and how they spend the rest of their lives in resentment and guilt.

Gauri gave birth to a girl child named Bela but she did not prove to be a good mother. She had an obsession for higher studies and fondness for solitude and America was the best place to nurture her individual freedom and obsession for liberty. She blindly followed her passion to pursue higher education without feeling guilty. If she were in India, the situation would have been different. In India, she might have been living the life of a widow deprived of all the pleasures of life. America welcomed her with open arms and provided her everything to fulfill her dream. As she got tired of her Indian lifestyle and dressing sense, she discarded that way of living too. She was very much philosophical

in nature. Her studies and philosophies alienated her from her family. The bitter experiences of life displaced her emotionally and she became a victim of depression. Subhash's marriage with Gauri made him more alienated and isolated. When Subhash and Bela visited India to attend his father's last rituals, Gauri finally decided that she could not live with Subhash anymore and left Rhodes Island. She wrote a letter to inform both of them about her decision and new job and went to California. This act of Gauri made his life more miserable. Now he had to bear the burden of raising a child also.

The representation of characters is quite different in the novel. Except for Gauri, Most of the characters are very simple. Gauri is a complex character who deliberately isolated herself from others and made her life even more complex that leads to identity crisis. It was impossible for her to run away with the memories of Udayan and her past, “In the back of her mind, she told herself she could come one day to love him, out of gratitude if nothing else.”(The Lowland, 127) As a result, she did not want to be a good wife and ideal mother. Society's norms for an ideal woman do not suit her well. The character of Udayan is guided by sublime thoughts but unfortunately had a tragic end. Subhash, on the other hand, is a practical and nice person who always thinks for others but becomes helpless.

The novel does not shed light on the experiences of usual migration as the trauma felt by the characters is not the outcome of migration but a personal choice. In the beginning, Subhash felt alienated on the foreign land but gradually he successfully adapted himself into the western lifestyle. On his first visit to the USA in a ship, he felt isolated when the ship moved away from

his homeland. During his early days in the USA, he could not speak to his family over telephone since they don't have a telephone in Tollygunge. For almost a year and half he had neither seen his family nor sat down with them in the evening to share a meal. His family did not have a telephone line in Kolkata. He'd sent them a telegram to let them know that he'd arrived. He was learning to live without hearing their voices to receive news of 'em in writing. (Lowland 63) He was in touch with his family through writing. In the beginning Udayan and Subhash shared their whereabouts through writing. Slowly he started to assimilate to American culture. Later on an American woman, Holly who was a bit older and mother of a child came into his life. She was living away from her husband with her ten years old child. Subhash used to visit her and make love with her. Gradually he learns to live without his family and fully merges into the host land. This has intensified his loneliness. His relationship with Holly is against his family tradition. The foreign land and its culture, his alienation, his independence, infatuation towards Holly and his carnal urge made him forget his traditional values. One day while looking at the calendar and realizing it is August 15 he became aware of his loneliness and this intensified his nostalgia. Lahiri writes thus, "the following day was August 15, Indian independence. A holyday for the country, lights on government buildings, flag hoisting and parades. An ordinary day here." (Lowland, 78)

In this novel cultural assimilation was quite easy for Subhash. Acculturation provides him an opportunity to run away from the problems of his native land to a world of freedom and hope. He was happy in his new life without any identity. His nostalgia for Tollygunge is

obvious in the novel but he preferred this new life over his life in Kolkata. In the beginning he used to read Udayan's letter repeatedly. He felt reconnected to Udayan. The nostalgia and memory of Subhash and Gauri is great but they were after the opportunities of American life. Gauri easily adapted to the new culture. She left her Indian style of living and preferred western outfits, studies, language and even had a lesbian relationship. But she could not feel at home anywhere even though she wandered in many places. At last she felt at home in California.

Bela is quite different from the rest. She was born and brought up in Rhodes Island with foreign accent. She had been given full freedom in her life and choices which made her follow her ideals in an unconventional way. She became a true Bohemian. The truth behind her birth made her close to Subhash. She was not good at studies and didn't like the school. At a very young age she left her studies and decided to lead a nomadic life. She devoted herself to farming and travelled to various places. She was leading her life by planting new trees and taking care of animals. She worked hard to convert a barren land into a fertile one suitable for cultivation. She was doing all this to form an identity. This revolutionary attitude of her resembles her father's radical nature.

All the characters in this novel could easily translate into the host culture. Yet we can see the traces of resistance in some of their actions. The names that they gave to their children show their close association to the past. Subhash and Gauri named their child Bela which is a Bengali name. Bela named her daughter Meghna which is also an Indian name. All the correspondence in the novel is done in Bengali

language which reveals the fact that they want to share their feelings in Bengali only. William Safran writes in his book 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', "They continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship."(Safran, 85)

All the three major characters in this novel are victims of dual identity, specific to diaspora life. They are alienated from each other and left their identity to earn a new transnational identity. The relationships are also complicated as well as disconnected.

Thus, *The Lowland* is the true story of resistance and acculturation. Here culture translation is easier when compared to other fictions of Lahiri. The cultural assimilation can be considered as their urge for survival and memory is the link to their life in the homeland. Creating a new identity and life in an alien land comes with significant challenges. First-generation immigrants encounter difficulties as they strive to uphold their cultural values through traditional means. When their children embrace the customs of the host country, it often results in complex intergenerational relationships. Similarly, when second-generation immigrants attempt to assimilate the host country's culture, they grapple with a frantic quest for their personal and psychological identity. Jhumpa Lahiri adeptly illustrates the dilemma faced by Subhash, Gauri and Bela and their endeavor to cope with the situation. Thus the novel is a perfect blend of issues like alienation, choices in life, displacement identity crisis and family relationship. This also reveals the difference in the attitude of first generation and second

generation immigrants and how diaspora shapes their lives.

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