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Amnesiac Selves: The Dilemma of Nostalgia and Dislocation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract

Displacement and dispersion characterize the lives of many postcolonial authors writing from abroad. Postcolonial interventions in the form of cultural artefacts have destabilized the definitions of nationhood. This paper attempts to look into the dilemma of sense of identity and the cultural dislocation faced by the diasporic Indians in America as depicted in *The Lowland*, a fiction by Jhumpa Lahiri. The novel is about two brothers who come of age in the 1950s and 60s in the city of Calcutta. When one of the brothers becomes involved in the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s, their paths diverge and one of them goes to the United States and the other one stays behind to take part in the movement. The text is about the consequences of each of their choices. Being

both a migrant and diasporic writer, she creates a narrative that reveals the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of diaspora. In the light of this framework, the paper attempts to explain how Lahiri put forward the concept of nation-space as to accommodate cultural difference and redrawing the frontiers how the nations have become “the cross roads to a new transnational culture”. The ‘imaginary’ as any ethnic enclave is a nation-state that defines itself as a group in displacement.

Keywords

Diaspora; Quest for Identity; Cultural Dislocation; Cultural Assimilation.



The obsession with the concepts of home and belonging is a familiar aspect of literature produced by writers of former colonies. Displacement and dispersion characterize their lives. It is considered as a result of the alienation experienced by the immigrants as they are made to resist, filter and integrate into a culture different from theirs. Postcolonial interventions in the form of cultural artefacts have destabilized the definitions of nationhood. Jhumpa Lahiri’s novels are knitted mostly around the themes like dislocation of immigrants, cultivating the dismay for those pining for those who have left, and the final discernment and acceptance in life for the ones who left that there are no places to hide in this world, especially from one’s own guilty self.

Indo-Anglian literature is associated with the works of native Indians as well as the members of the Indian diaspora, such as V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Agha Shahid Ali, Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie, who are of Indian descent. Jhumpa Lahiri, the recipient of Pulitzer Prize for fiction and a recent new wave literary artist, is a writer of uncommon elegance and poise. Delving deep into the hearts of her characters viz. Indian immigrants in America, who navigate between the cultural values of their

birthplace and their adopted home, Lahiri examines the anxieties, struggles and biases of her characters to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behavior.

Cultures for Lahiri is both hyper-local and disingenuous, a fickle companion to make up a basis when there comes relevant matters of the subconscious and the soul, helplessly drawn to shores far away when assimilated life beckons from close by. Lahiri creates conflicts in comfort, comfort in conflicts. She achieves in mapping the border between the personal and political, even as examining philosophical notions of time and history. Weaving together the elements of alienation and discord, rejection and hope, love and loss.

The characters challenge the notion of fixity and inhabit a sort of fluidity in newly forged cultural patterns that are redrawn on the 'palimpsest' of the previous cultural bearings. Lahiri challenges the ideas of a coherent unity though these shifting identities and subject positions are shaped in what appears to be a linear historical development. Lahiri's stories deal with expatriate Bengali families living in the United States. The focus is on second generation Bengalis raised in the United States who find a new sense of belonging, who search for it or learn to live without it. Beginning with the mention of the first generation immigrants with their identities and cultural orientations firmly grounded in the Indian ethos and the next generation struggling with their inherited cultural heritage forking out new identities while being unable to discard their inheritance, hence the notion of a palimpsest. The text enacts an ambivalence that the protagonist or other characters choose to or come to inhabit. This make them explore subject positions acting in two apparently binary discourses of the orient and the occident. The hybridity that falls out from the ensuing synthesis redefines the subject positions.

The diasporic writers are often negotiating between the home and the host countries. Hubs of immigrants are migrating to America. National borders

are fought over and redrawn materially and textually, undermining any idea of a stable location, writers create cultural products emerging from the shifting grounds and realizes that “our identity is at once plural and partial” and “sometimes we feel that we straddle two culture . . . it is a fertile territory to occupy for the writer” (Rushdie 15).

The novel narrates the saga of the Mitra family in Tollygunge, Calcutta and in Rhode Island, USA. Two brothers, the studious Subhash and the mercurial younger brother Udayan were raised in Calcutta in the years immediately following Indian independence. Udayan was involved in the Naxalite revolutions of the 1960s and the Communist movement that took over Calcutta whereas his cautious and bookish brother Subhash left India to pursue a Ph.D. in Rhode Island; Udayan remained in Calcutta, growing increasingly rebellious until he is captured and executed in front of his parents and his pregnant wife Gauri. When Subhash returned for Udayan’s funeral, he married Gauri in order to protect his brother’s legacy, promising her a new beginning in Rhode Island. Gauri builds a tentative, melancholic life with her new husband. She gave birth to Udayan’s baby, a daughter named Bela who grows up believing that Subhash is her father. Then abruptly Gauri abandoned the child and spouse to become a professor of Philosophy in California. Out of the horror of Gauri’s betrayal, Bela and Subhash developed a tender convincing bond that is pushed to its utmost limits when Bela, by the novel’s end a grown up woman, pregnant with a child, learns that Udayan was her biological father.

Reaching America, Gauri focuses her attention on taking classes at the local university and Subhash becomes the role model of a flawless father to Udayan and Gauri’s daughter Bela. His greatest fear is the child realizing the fact he is actually her father’s brother, even though it would crumble his married life with Gauri. He cannot ignore his ageing parents in Kolkata and yearns to be there and take care of them. Lahiri juxtaposes the tug-of-war

between the Subhash's comfortable lives in the East Coast in America versus the debilitating life of his parents in the East Coast of India. His intrinsic memories are impinged on his native land from where he cannot tear them apart. Like a patch of land at the back of his house in Kolkata, which becomes submerged during the monsoons (a lowland) and emerges again when the rain abates showing also two distinct ponds side by side separated by an embankment, the two cultures he wears and lives in breathes, often become inseparable, recognizable at the same time.

When Gauri finds a job at the University of California she informs about her departure to her husband and her daughter on a letter left on the table. Lahiri portrays how the role of an Indian woman has altered.

From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman . . . She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end. (*The Lowland* 240)

In the present era of transnational migration, the flow of the people among the different countries, convergence of the different cultures, creolization and thereby borrowing and lending the different aspects of a culture to form hybrid identities etc., have broken the concepts of fixity and absolute territoriality. The intersection between the territorialisation and deterritorialisation creates the 'third space' or liminality where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' occurs. Therefore, the concepts of homeland and identity in this age of global migration form a complex framework. The floating nature of home and fluid identity has replaced the age-old concepts of fixed 'home' and identity as well. The idea of 'home' evokes the spatial politics of home, the sense of self, its displacement, intimacy, exclusion and inclusion. The flow of the people across different countries breaks the concept of true

home. The notion of home not only construes the sense of self, but also ties with the human emotion, feelings, sentiments, proximity and intimacy. Beyond the spatial territory, 'home' is associated with emotional territory.

Reaching the Rhode Island Gauri gives birth to Bela. Her Indian ethnicity reminds her regarding the social codes and customs of the Indian Bengali culture and her role as a mother. But she has already been filtered into an American culture. She always resists the happiness that the role of a mother and wife would offer her and sticks on to her studies. The solitary atmosphere in the life of Subhash makes him recapture the particular moments of the domestic life of Calcutta. Regarding the immigrants' situation abroad, Gupta and Ferguson puts that, "Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world" (10-11).

The global migration and cross-cultural networks has detrimental effect upon the first-generation immigrants and they try to hang on to their indigenous land through reiterating and subsequent re-accessing of their memories to their home land. This feeling of nostalgia is absent in the second generation immigrants; for them the parental land is unknown. They usually hold intimacy to their birth land. National identities are undermined and supplanted by hybrid identities, where in both the first and the second generation immigrants are vacillating. Therefore, the immigrants hardly have any sense of belongingness to any singular place than the multi-places. In the context of the postmodern society with all its complexities of global migration, territorial intersections, cross cultural and hybrid identities appear to contradict the popular hearsay 'Home is where the heart lies'.

The question of identity is a more difficult one for those who are culturally displaced. The characters of *The Lowland* lives grow up in two worlds. Jhumpa Lahiri believes that the challenge of exile, the loneliness, the

recurring sense of alienation and the memory, nostalgia and longing for the lost world are more explicit for the immigrant communities than their children. The Lowland speaks about the assimilation of a family from Bengal to America. The cultural dilemmas experienced by them and the new child and the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations experienced by them in their effort to settle “home” in the new land.

The diasporic identity of Gauri and Subhash is the effect of the process of assimilation and adaptation to the new environment which is totally different. But the diasporic identity of these characters are different on the different ways they assimilate the new culture. Subhash was able in adjusting his former culture and the new culture while Gauri adopts the new culture and forgets her native identity. Poverty, economic factors and political issues which cause them to migrate to America disappears there.

Identity and diaspora have a complex connection. Displacement may make the diaspora feel confused to identify their identity and pose difficulties to set and combine the culture and identity, creating transnational communities. Lahiri's characters looks at diaspora and displacement from an entirely different point of view. She describes the first and second generation immigrants' perceptions regarding dislocation and diaspora. She herself is writing from the “place of hybridity”. Subhash and Gauri are first generation immigrants, who pick out displacement as an opportunity to live a better life and by getting rid of the old values and traditions which were the main cause of their misery and despondency. Bela belongs to the second generation immigrant shares the same views of her mother regarding displacement .Both of them gaze at displacement as an attempt to reject the past, an escape from the haunting memories of their previous life and relations.

Gauri is haunted by the memories of past life in India. Her mind has been colonized several times by the cultures adopted and as a victim of that she lives in a postcolonial society. Even there she is marginalized and

displaced. In order to get rid of the oppression which she faces in her own society, she happily chooses displacement. She is a victim of patriarchal oppression and domination and fake social norms and values as well. So she seeks dislocation as a way of escape from this. In order to break with the barriers of the past, she takes refuge in American culture which provides security, freedom and independence. She does not want to go back to a world where she has no individual identity and opportunities to live a better life.

As noted in “Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction” by Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero, “[n]early all of these stories deal with the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States, rendering the difficulties of making personal connections across cultural boundaries-and sometimes even within families-palpable to readers” (852). In her “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*”, Nathalie Friedman writes that “scholars and critics have dubbed her [Lahiri] a documentalist of the immigrant experience” (111).

Immigrants, in their Indo-American duality and personal dilemmas, may at times become neurotic, schizophrenic, ambivalent, and suspended between the two worlds. While asserting their individual and national identities as spiritual odyssey, these immigrants are neither capable to cast off their cultural legacy nor they are able to encapsulate themselves in a new socio-cultural environment. As a result of which they experience a contra-acculturation and hybridization in their attempt to syncretize the two. They take refuge in their native culture as an antidote or a moral or spiritual resource to checkmate their decentred consciousness. Facing cultural inauthenticity, they essentialise contra-acculturation for their emotional and psychological needs. But in the dilemma of their native and acquired selves and celebration of cultural diversity they become psychedelic and nostalgic and look back with a sense of emotional exile and with an awareness of the problems of adjustment. Living with their existential realities, they continue

their ceaseless struggle in a different culture and in search of new possibilities and quest for identity they acquire a hybridized culture which is devoid of love, truth and faith.

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