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Progression of Gauri (Self) in Jumpha Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract

Indian Diaspora with its magnificent development has an influential survival in the field of literature. During the post-independence period in India, the Indian Diasporic community has developed and become more responsive, and it comes as a result of their increasing recognition by the West. Rootlessness and searching for the roots become identical concept for the diasporic writers. The search for 'home' and the transformation of the identities are an integral part for the writers to deliver the scenario with lot of effectiveness. Jhumpha Lahiri through her novel *The Lowland* portrays deliberately the situation of women in India and abroad through the character Gauri and her existence in Tollygunge and in Rhode Island. She never recovered from the guilt of marrying her husband's brother, for deserting the place where her husband died. The native and dislocation of home appeared again and again as the innermost themes in the writings of Indian diasporic writers. The same happens to Gauri in this novel and it is an experience often

comes from memory for all this community writers that is, a memory of loss, of leaving the home, of not having any soul-connection with the host country and it can be said that the diasporic literature always enacts as a type of bridge between two diverse cultures.

Keywords

Alienation; Diaspora; Identity; Survival; Women.

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Indian writing in English, however, has lived a long life and is more than a century old. There is a long list of Indian writers who started writing before independence. The term postcolonialism has replaced the traditional lexis like Third World Literature and Commonwealth Literature. Every appraisal of the Indian English Literature will unquestionably result in the commitment of the writing of women. Indian women writers constitute a leading part of the fiction in contemporary writing. It provides deep insights, a wealth of understanding, a pool of synonyms and a source of discussion. Through women writers, it is possible to visualise a different world and with their support one can realize the ability of human understanding. There were many writers of Indian diaspora. Feminist themes have also been used by the authors like Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhavabala, Shoba De and Rama Mehta. Regional themes have been suitably used by Kamala Das, Arundhathi Roy, Anita Nair and Susan Viswanathan.

Initially the term 'diaspora' was used for the Jews who exiled from their homeland. Obviously, such a population had scattered and isolated existence, and had experienced the painful cultural alienation and agony of being tattered between two cultures, alien to each other, one abandoned and the other adopted. In the 17th century came the colonialism and such displacements got force whereas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the progression uprooted from their nation to serve the British Empire in different parts of the

world. Strong nostalgia for the 'roots', gearing for the 'home', acute sense of isolation, agony of thrown into turmoil and pains of being marginalised, insecurity, identity crisis, cultural conflict, dissemination and above all the community made them to feel the curse. In an alien land they have undergone and experienced oppression of different phases such as political, economic, etc. They are always termed as the 'other' in the new land.

Diasporic experience is a mechanism of structured driving force, varied identities, new subjectivities, modern recollections and new outlook of language and life. During 1980's and 90's, India had emerged as a major literary nation. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* become popular around the world, after winning the Booker Prize. The universal victory of Vikram Seth's *The Suitable Boy* (1994), *The Golden Gate* (1986) made him the first writer of the Indian 'Diaspora' to enter the scope of best international writers and to register a stable label on the international literary scene. It is also linked with the works of members of the Indian diaspora, such as V. S. Naipaul, Ruth Pravar Jhavabala, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Agha Shahid Ali, Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie, who are of Indian origin.

Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel *The Lowland* brings light to many of the issues with identity faced by diaspora community. Her works consists of the stories about first and second generation Indian immigrants as well as a few stories involving ideas of other migrated communities in India. She belongs to second generation immigration writer who skilfully explains the suffering of the immigrants. Lahiri is an American author of Bengali Indian descent. The Diaspora is usually struck between the native cultures.

Lahiri differs from other Indian writers writing in English. Her frequent visits to Calcutta motivate her to have a different outlook of life and helps her to write differently about the Indian immigrants who have settled abroad. The impact of Bengal culture on Lahiri is reflected in her first collection of short stories. Lahiri like all Bengalis has both a pet name and good name. During her

schooling her teacher decided to call her by the pet name, Jhumpa because her teacher finds it easier to pronounce than her good name. There are many connections between Lahiri's works in the *The Lowland*. The story revolves around south Asian immigrants in the United States. That way the story deal with Indian encounters with Americans or two cultures bumping onto one another.

Lahiri's fictions endow the facts of immigrant lives, their frustrations, unhappiness, struggles, visions, adjustments, transformations, etc. Her writings portray the narratives of first and second generation Indian immigrants as well as few plots merging the ideas of other migrating societies in India. Her stories move around the difficulties of relationships, communication, a shift from the convention to modern and a loss of identity. Her novels always deal with uneven lines between gender, sexuality, and social status within a diaspora. Usually the characters are homeless from India or in the United States; and they all exhibit the effects of dislocation in diaspora. Growing up with links to the UK, the USA, and India created in Lahiri a sense of homelessness and it is revealed in her writings.

Among the array of Indian women writers in English Jhumpa Lahiri is spaced out, she is a recognized mutineer, deeply individual, passionately feminist, ornately expressive and profoundly spontaneous. She peeps into the innermost recesses of an individual to express the inexpressible and project the agony of existence. Her work, despite its innovative dimensions, suffers from the inherent contradictions of existential philosophy, often termed as existential dilemma and this paper intends to trace the same.

The novel, *The Lowland* is the reflection of Jhumpa Lahiri's own experience as an immigrant. The author expresses her own thought and experiences in the novel. Her novel, *The Lowland* contains themes of engagement in relationships between couples, families, and friends. Through these relationships she expresses the ideas of isolation and identity, both

personal and some of cultural. The characters in the novel undergo the psychological trauma, gender bias and quest for root which are bound up with the disappointments to settle in America with their Indian identity. Particularly in this novel, Lahiri regularly leaves these crisis unresolved. As a result, her work gives us a reasonable view point on the future of her characters. It has the capacity of imagination of Lahiri's worries about their real-life incidents. She often connects her characters with cultural isolation, extreme personal isolation.

The main plot is about second generation Indian-American, like Lahiri herself. Her characters travel in between the significance of marginality and strangeness in foreign countries. The fictional narrative of *The Lowland* is set both in America and India, which is united by the ideas of rejection, isolation, and the search for fulfilment. This novel, mainly tells the story of the characters Subhash, Gauri and Gauri's American born child, Bela.

The innermost part of the story is the secure childhood relationship between Subhash and his younger brother, Udayan, born in Tollygunge. The bond is broken when Udayan becomes entangled in the Naxalite activist movement. Lahiri admits that Subhash stayed in clear view and decided to leave his hometown to continue his higher studies. In the beginning the people stepped out from their native and it is forced immigration, for example trying to escape the religious and other political or social persecution. Later the purpose was changed and it was in search of a better life, prosperity and material success. But here it is Subhash who prefers the latter.

In the Naxalite party Udayan meets Manash who is one of the members in the movement. They develop their friendship and his frequent visits to his home paves the way for the love towards Gauri. Udayan marries Gauri against the custom. His parents are totally disappointed in his wedding. When Udayan starts his marriage life in his home, Naxalites also start to protest against the government. He gets a teaching job in Tollygunge. He teaches to the

intermediate school students. At the same time he writes some letters to Subhash. He informs what's going on in Tollygunge by the letters, and also intimates about his marriage with Gauri and sends a photo of Gauri to Subhash. From the above stated sentence it is very obvious that only through the letter from his brother Subhash gets communication about his family and hometown. Unfortunately the police was searching him and they shot him dead. The incident was staged in front of the eyes of Udayan's own family. After visualizing this encounter, the whole family of Udayan was completely upset. Especially, Gauri starts to hate the land. She started to alienate from the family. Her life is filled with loneliness and it is depicted in the following lines,

Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings. The promise that she would find things where she put them, that there would be no interruption, no surprise. It greeted her at the end of each day and lay still with her at night. (43)

The institution of marriage is of unrivalled significance in the life of a young person. In the life of an Indian woman it marks a point of maturity and signifies the flowering of life. But for Gauri it burdened her emotionally by marrying the man whom she loved. After her marriage her life in her mother-in-law's home was terrible and she spent each and every day in vain. Although she joins along with her husband in the Naxalite movement, her nature and feminine qualities never changed in her.

Gauri in Tollygunge, who is characterised as a suffering woman eventually tries to break the traditional boundaries. To exhibit her self-esteem and boldness to throw off the burden of suffocating tradition she marries Subhash. Women are more discriminated under the patriarchal pressure. they struggle under the repressing mechanism of a closed society. Lahiri has created the new emerging Gauri in this novel and she does not want to be the

doll as men prefer. She asserts her individuality and aspires self-dependence. She nurtures the desires of being independent to lead her life on her own.

When Gauri steps in Rhodes Island as Subhash's wife, she renovates herself to enter a new world, a world even Subhash himself has not seen after his arrival to the United States. Her transformation is unique and resolute but not likely however steady. In the beginning she by no means comes out and stays for all time indoors, inactive, reading the paper that Subhash brought home with him every day. Her outing on a drizzling day to a close by grocery store initiated her interest in assessment of buildings, departments, classrooms and finally the philosophy department in the campus interests her to attend classes. She has taken the first step towards the journey of women liberation from the clutches of the patriarchal society and takes this voyage to terminate the supremacy of tradition and she wishes to exercise her right of equality.

Gauri clearly rebuts the role of being victim at the hands of dominating culture and society. She is able to sense clearly that women need to stubbornly believe in the strength of womanhood if they want the world to recognise their strength. With this optimistic view she observes American girls in the campus and it helps her to bring in a radical change in her style of dressing. A few months of her life in America has given the mood that she is bored of her long hair and Indian attires. Though she sounds bold, determined and action oriented, she could never oust Udayan from her mind. She still lives with Udayan, and loves him. This makes her to fail to exercise her rights and freedom as an individual. Haunted by the memories of Udayan, she decides to break all ties with Subhash and her daughter Bela. She becomes isolated and unable to discover her own identity and fails to get a sense of belongingness, finds herself dislocated, displaced and disoriented in an alien land. The conflict between her desires and reality intensifies and thus instigates an inner struggle in Gauri's heart as she is drawn into the life of chaos and confusion.

Location and home allow for ample space and abundance of language. The feeling of dislocation and alienation create both positive and negative possibilities. Dislocation may be physical movement from home caused by war and persecution. It may be a voluntary migration with the feeling of estrangement and displacement. Expelled from home and lost in diaspora, Gauri, has experienced tragic married life and remarries without any choice. The author here charts the journey of an urban middle class woman who is caught between traditions and modernity. Her works do not directly deal with diasporic situations but she objectively views the entangled lives of urban, educated middle class women reflecting on gender relations.

The turmoil prevailed in her heart made her to reject her daughter, Bela. Gauri's interests are more in philosophy than on Bela. It may be noted at this juncture that the two factors which enable the modern women to assert are education and economic independence. Gauri leads her life as a modern woman cared of nothing after gaining her financial strength. It may not be fair on traditional grounds for a mother to abandon her child to assert her individuality to prove that she is a 'New Woman' who is not ready to give up her identity for the sake of her daughter.

If it has happened at her native she will be punished and even executed but in the west no one is ready to question her except Subhash. In the beginning he encouraged her to pursue her studies but later 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 tells her that her priority should be Bela' (165). At the same time Gauri's independent self demands freedom from the responsibilities. She has achieved much more than being a mother to her daughter. She is strong willed and career oriented. She is fed up with the roles of wife and mother and attempts to carve her own innovation. Rejecting her family slowly she develops psychomatic symptoms of stress and depression balancing between the existing and living.

Discontentment leads her to rebelliousness and restlessness. Her anxiety, discomfort, loneliness and isolation do not encourage her to lead a happy life. Her busy schedule in order to keep her away from her family leads to restlessness and it drives her to enjoy the absolute loneliness, a sort of entrapment.

Most immigrants like Gauri, are bewildered with reference to their identity, whether first generation or second. Her depiction of the immigrant pain is without the tinge of despair. She seems to put forward an answer for the warped traits that results due to the cultural divergences. Thus, she finds her identity through her female protagonists to who do look back but make a choice with what they receive and choose the best of both the cultures, that of their homeland and their host country. Hall explicitly connects this ingenious effort with the concept of hybridity:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (*Cultural* 401–2)

The characters in her novel have been uprooted from the secure life of traditional set up and are struggling to cope with the new environment by learning new strategies and cope up methods, but in order to afford an alternate life style, such wisdom has to be lived and experienced at first hand. Her fiction establishes a certain Indo-American cultural link, in the postcolonial background. She had made a search for identity with an emotional empathy through her female protagonist, Gauri. The greatness of her writings is in making the tale of human eccentricities provocative. Jhumpa Lahiri does not unambiguously indicate out the solution. She has presented her woman

characters as they are in real life, but her character, in one way or the other, convey the message of modesty and fairness, and inspire us to retain the good of the past in the face of the challenge of life with the head held high. Almost all the stories end on a positive note, with the hope of a tomorrow.

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