

Cultural Dislocation and Acclimitization in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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**Abstract**

Jhumpa Lahiri, the English born American novelist and short-story writer often referred to as the 'neo-class of immigrant' has deftly portrayed cross-cultural and bicultural experiences in her writings. Time, has brought a shift in her perception of cross -cultural experiences and her understanding of transnational identities and their cultural adaption. Her novel *The Lowland* narrates the divergent experiences of two brothers harboring extreme ideologies. It revolves around the personal and political lives of two brothers and spans nearly fifty years of American and Indian history through the lives of Mitra family. This paper examines the novel in the context of cultural estrangement, alienation, dislocation and eventually acclimatization in an ever changing cultural space.

**Key Words:** Cultural dislocation, alienation, acclimatization, cross-cultural. immigrants

Jhumpa Lahiri is known for her powerful and poignant depiction of clash of cultures, alienation, hybridity, diaspora, isolation and identity crisis of the immigrant. Some of these themes can be studied in her novel, *The Lowland*, which also focuses on the tangled ties common in generations as they migrate and settle down in the US. The tale that is chronicled in *The Lowland* was nominated for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award. Lahiri won the 2015 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature for her novel, *The Lowland*.

The diasporic phenomenon became prominent in the wake of the post-colonial movement. Many of the post-colonial theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Gloria Anzaldua, Rey Chow, Felix Guattari, et al have, therefore, deliberated on the creation and continuation of diasporas in the globalised world.

The 'diasporic space' in the broad canvas of culture is an emerging field against the backdrop of a globalised and transnational world. This 'diasporic culture' differs from the traditional norms and understanding of culture in being hybrid, blended and plural. The native culture of an immigrant gets alloyed and variegated with the hegemonic culture of the host society.

When immigrants enter into a society, they are construed as a minority as against the majority. The identity of the minority is threatened by the culture, customs and tradition of the host country. Moreover, every migrant unconsciously follows three phases i.e. location, dislocation and relocation:

“The trajectory of a migrant follows the pattern of location, dislocation and relocation, each one of these phases being luminal rather than sharply defined ones.

The process of acculturation is a slow one-sided (the minority seeking integration with the majority) process and is not without a sense of loss and exile. It is also not a clear transformation; it gives rise to hybridity marking different stages of acculturation” (Malik 156).

Jhumpa Lahiri's characters follow and pass through these phases as is depicted in her novel *The Lowland*. Lahiri is known for her perception and discernment into the life of the Indian Immigrant community. Her works focus on the challenges faced by the immigrant community in an alien world. Her first collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies* is focused on the immigrant experience while it also has some stories pertaining to an Indian setting with Indian characters. *The Interpreter of Maladies* also won her the coveted Pulitzer Prize. Her second collection *Unaccustomed Earth* and her novel *The Namesake* delve into the different aspects of life of people who travelled from India to the 'Land of Dreams' a phrase synonymous with America, in search of a better opportunities in life or for higher studies. Therefore it would be correct to conclude about Lahiri:

“Her work has primarily focused on first and second-generation Bengali immigrants, exploring themes of exile, isolation, and assimilation. Lahiri’s insight into the psychology of relationships, aging, maturity, and loss is remarkable” (Batra 50-51).

The journey of her characters' begins when they are in India and then they migrate to America with a purpose. Their purpose makes them interact with the host community during which they undergo the

phases of location, dislocation and relocation. A friction arises due to the distinct and diverse cultural backgrounds of the two communities.

What does it take to practice and remain loyal to one's indigenous culture in a foreign land? Is it possible to preserve the home culture in a hegemonic host society? What are the cultural differences between the home culture and the foreign culture? To what extent is it possible to adapt to the host culture? What are the in-between spaces? Do they magnify or reduce with time? These are some of the questions and areas this research paper attempts to answer.

In *The Lowland*, the setting begins in Tollygunge in Calcutta. The story revolves round the lives of two brothers Subhash and Udayan. Subhash is elder to Udayan by fifteen months. The two brothers are inseparably attached to each other.

The novel deals with first and second generation diasporic immigrants and their journey of alienation, adaptation and assimilation. The first generation immigrants: Gauri and Subhash Mitra find it grueling and demanding to accept the hegemonic host culture while the second generation diaspora: Bela adapts and assimilates into the American cultural practices effortlessly. The traits like lack of familial bonds, liberal dress code untraditional sex-orientation are discernable in Bela.

*The Lowland* describes characters who leave their own land and settle down in foreign countries resulting in a change in their home culture. The culture of the host country is hegemonic. As a consequence the diasporic

people repudiate their ethnic culture and assimilate with the hegemonic and dominant host society's "in-between" cultural spaces. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) refers to the "in-between" spaces as "terrains for elaborating strategies of selfhood singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself...it is in the emergence of interstices-the overlap and displacement of domains of difference that the inter-subjectivity and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural value are negotiated."

Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* (1985) has defined culture as "a record of our reactions in thought and feeling to the changed conditions of our common life" (285) and it is in this backdrop culture is explored in the novel, *The Lowland*.

The journey from alienation through adaptation to assimilation is not an easy one but is what John W. Berry et al defines, when he writes assimilation, "is the way when there is little interest in cultural maintenance combined with a preference for interacting with the larger society"(306).

Assimilation as a process differs when applied to the first and second generation diaspora. In the novel, Subhash Mitra, the protagonist, belongs to a "modest middle class home" (3) of Tollygunge, Calcutta and migrates to the United States to pursue his PhD programme. The two brothers Subhash and Udyaan overlap in their thoughts in relation to their attachment to Calcutta. Once Subhash is enveloped by the American culture, his affiliation and connection with

his home culture reduces and the filial bond between the brothers, his love for his parents and "men, milieu and moments" of Calcutta are strained by the time he has immersed himself in his PhD program and the milieu surrounding his house and workplace. Alienation is slowly and steadily paving the way for assimilation. He is in a dilemma when he comes across an economics professor from Madras, married to Kate, an American. He finds this unusual and strange. He is deeply connected to his traditional roots and ethos and therefore disapproves of Udyaan's act of marrying before his elder brother and also stands with his parents when it comes to approving a marriage of his brother to a girl of his choice.

Subhash's life and burden of alienation and traditionalism are discarded when he meets Holly, a Massachusetts-born French Canadian nurse. Initially he is reluctant to reveal himself to Holly owing both to the difference in culture and age but later they share a strong physical and emotional bond. His loneliness has made him escalate his visits to Holly's house. He has also established a good rapport with her son. Notwithstanding, the intimacy and companionship they have developed, he cannot imagine a lifelong relationship with Holly as he lives on the thought of completing his PhD program and returning to his homeland. But things seldom go as planned and he begins to assimilate to the American culture and puts himself in Narsimhan's shoes who is happily settled with an American wife and children. He loses interest in this relationship after he observes Holly with her husband and son all

happy and satisfied together. He too chooses to move on.

Subhash's relationship with Gauri reaches unexplained and unexpected heights- he disapproves of his parents imposing the norms of an ascetic life on Gauri. He goes against all conventions and marries his brother's widow-to free her from the clutches of traditionalism. He brings her to the US and helps her lead a life exactly opposite to what she would have lived in India. He gifts her freedom: in the broadest sense. It is this freedom that finally separates and divorces Gauri and Subhash in their old age. Subhash and Gauri fail to lead a married successful life, they encounter loneliness, in spite of staying in the same house consequently leading them both to seek love in different people and unconsciously forming "Imagined Communities".

"Imagined Communities" are formed by diasporic people who try to revive their 'home' culture in foreign countries. This applies to Subhash to a certain extent as he has a need of "craving company" and he had spent a few nights in a women's bed, although he had no interest in establishing a relationship" (223). In his old age he develops an emotional bond for Elise Silva, his step daughter Bela Mitra's history teacher. Although Bela disapproves of this relationship she does not protest against it openly. She accepts it as she imagines her father getting some 'homely' feeling at this age in the US. Subhash's very religiously visits Calcutta annually, but the attachment he had previously has vanished similar to Gauri', who had walked away from Bela's life, permanently. Gauri Mitra has

successfully assimilated into the host country's culture. She, just like any other American woman has learnt to lead an independent life leaving behind her daughter and husband. She allows the California culture to engulf her completely. Gauri has acquired the skills of learning German, although she cannot leave behind her Indian accentual patterns she has internalized their dress code, mannerisms and academic interests.

Bela's upbringing and cultural environ are completely different from that of her parents therefore the American language, culture and ethos are totally embedded in her. She does not have to carry the burden of emotional attachment to her parents' native culture. She has learnt Spanish language and has created her own social circle. Bela adapts the American dressing code: She has a tattoo that was similar to an open cuff above her ankle, she has bleached a section of her hair and has a silver hoop in her nose. Subhash like an American parent has accepted her the way she is and never attempts to interfere into her Americanized life. When she learns about her real parents Udyaan and Gauri-she refers to her father as Udyaan, like any American child. She refuses to accept her mother's existence. Bela chooses to settle down in US by agreeing to marry Drew, a vegetable vendor, who does not have a fixed root.

Thus, there is a discernable difference in the manner the first and the second generation immigrants respond and react to a new host hegemonic culture. Initially Subhash shows some reluctance towards negotiation in the 'in-between' spaces but later assimilates in the global milieu of America. Gauri Mitra

on the other hand was never attached to her home culture so for her assimilation into the Californian culture is effortless. Bela, who belongs to the second generation immigrants, chooses the free and independent life that America has to offer.

The novel, on another level also deals with the predicament of parents who are left behind in India, issues and challenges in family ties in America while focusing on the contrast between a practical frame of mind and the idealistic.

Questions of identity arise in the immigrants mind due to their long stay in America and a distancing from their home culture. They face an irresolution and ambivalence of identity. Lahiri has been able to portray in detail every characters hopes and fears, certainties and conundrum along with their joys and grief's. At the same time the transformation and the progress of the characters from the liminal stage to the hybrid stage is carefully illustrated.

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