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**"Lives of Displacement and Pain of Exile in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowlands"**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to examine the novel, The Lowland, of Jhumpa Lahiri who has focused on the themes of displacement, rootlessness and exile caused by diaspora. Physical uprootedness creates within the concerned section of the population a sense of being marginalized and thereby leading a sense of 'otherness' within the geopolitical territory to which they have migrated. These immigrants encounter both physical and mental diasporas. Lahiri's novel has been a dazzling display of the conflicts and contradictions, longings and the anguish, expectations and the agony of the compulsive situations that demand compromise and flexibility. Facing the intersections of sex and race, her characters are portrayed with confessions, frustrations and painful loss of identity, as they feel cut off from their historical and cultural roots. Finding the new world hostile and incomprehensible, they falter and stumble initially but try to reconcile to the life situations accepting the transition as unavoidable destiny. In her novel, Lahiri has engaged herself to investigate the mental and psychological stresses, turmoil and complexities of their problems. She digs deep into the innermost recesses of the minds of the characters to explore the mental labyrinths as her protagonist feel deprived of their roots and strive to feel at home when homeless, to feel rooted in alien land when unrooted from their native land.

The first generation of diaspora arrivals in America struggled to adapt to American cultural ethos while facing feelings of nostalgia and rootlessness. Along with the first generation's adaptive process the host country too underwent cultural change as it absorbed certain elements of immigrant cultures especially in the wake of globalization. The phenomenon of globalization led to a more openly accepted interplay between cultures, involving exchange of customs, trends, and lifestyles and so on. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the second-generation immigrants in America

who is well read, celebrated and acknowledged as a woman writer in Indian English Literature for her Indian themes. She defines her novels through an artistic integrity with a combination of creative and personal experiences. Her stories address sensitive dilemma in the lives of her female protagonists those are either Indian or Indian immigrants. Her works are an attempt to highlight the predicaments of heroines and their married life, miscarriage and disconnection between the first and second generation. Most of her female protagonists settled abroad are afflicted with the 'sense of exile' and alienation.

Lahiri deals with the diaspora society with multicultural forms of it. Her novels and her characters can be taken as an example of her cross-cultural experiences that forecast a stimulating diversity. Being herself, an immigrant Lahiri knows and feels better the significance of family and how it ties a man to his homeland. She proves that American and Indian culture cannot go hand in hand. In *Jhumpa Lahiri: Critical Perspectives*, Nigamananda Das opines

Jhumpa Lahiri's first generation Indian Americans cherish their post and its memories and an indispensable and integral part of their roots and their beings, her second-generation Indian American reflect both proximities and distancing from it; they seem to perceive and adopt new angles at which to enter this reality. More particularly... they look forward to the concerns and modes of their hybridization and cross-cultural fertilization in the increasingly multicultural space of USA, and not more absorption in the dominant culture. (16)

Subsequently Lahiri entered a world which was aloof from the previous one and full of illusion. A world where parents had little awareness or control over the fundamental aspects of one's identity: school, books, music, and television, things that are to be seeped in. Hundreds of evidences are there which arouse nostalgic feelings and rootlessness among the Indian Americans parents. Immigrant offspring distinguish name and looks and their frequent visit to native place creates problems in adapting in new land. Many of her friends proudly called themselves Irish-American or Italian-American but they are several generations removed from the frequently humiliating process of immigration whereas Lahiri's ethnic roots were still tangled and green, they had not yet descended underground.

Lahiri's second novel *The Lowlands* achieved much fame as the earlier one *The Namesake* or *Interpreter of Maladies*. *The Lowlands* is available in eight parts. The novel resembles the dark narratives of Alice Munro and Meadows Taylor of Anglo-Indian writings of the early twentieth century. It is known for its description of dark, dank, and weedy places that haunt the folks. She is a master of dramatic twists and turns. She knows how to build tension. This story is unique in the sense it is universal. The themes of love revolution and finally desertion followed by alienation add a diasporic touch here. In this backdrop the story begins. *The Lowland* encompasses three themes, namely the issues relating to the Naxalbari movement in Bengal, sexuality and the interface between belonging and displacement. The diasporic subject position overpowers these issues, of course.

Lahiri survey the historical-political issues of the post-independence India minutely. As far as Lahiri is concerned, though her novels deal with the diasporic experiences of the ordinary Bengali immigrants in America, she herself belongs to the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by the American President Barack Obama. So, Lahiri seems to hold an ambivalent position as a

writer. Though in her fiction, she seems to play the role of a knower of the diasporic experiences, she is perhaps not completely acquainted with the experiences of their lives.

The storyline of *The Lowland* moves rapidly thus. First Part narrates the beginning of the story in the lowland in Bengal. There are two brothers - Udayan and Subhash raised in Tollygunge in Kolkota, the 'lowland' of the Naxals. The two grow up inseparably. They get educated. They find joy in fixing and listening to radios, learning things like Morse Code. Later they graduate from a university where challenging the accepted ideologies. As a matter of fact, Udayan accepts the Naxalite movement, while Subhash joins a university for higher education in Rhodes Island in America. The American brother pities the world because it listens to the Vietnam War though the Indian Naxalite movement was vaster than that. Politically speaking, the author, instead of focusing on Indian-American diasporic disturbances, writes about Naxalism in order to attract the attention of American government. She remains silent about the political strategies of her hostland. This is what Aijaz Ahmad complains about her too.

Second Part of *The Lowland* continues the story of the brothers. Udayan, the Naxalite grows. One day, he marries Guari, a beautiful woman. Gauri meets Udayan in the university campus. She likes the subject of philosophy and he likes politics. He was a fan of Marxist/ leftist party. The two like each other, however. Likewise, Subhash likes Holly with her only son Joshua, now divorced from her husband. Subhash has sex with Holly. However, Holly joins Keith for the sake of her son. We notice that lately the Naxalite Udayan is killed in an encounter. Third Part of the novel opens with Subhas meeting Gauri in a bad condition. Gauri is pregnant with a child. The husband's parents decide to desert Gauri after she delivers the child. Subhash asks Gauri to marry him and live in Rhodes Island. Fourth Part speaks of Gauri's journey. She accepts Subhash's proposal. She delivers the child Bela. The two feel discomfiture, because Subhash is not Bela's biological father. Subhash asks Gauri to have one more child for Bela's sake. Gauri attends a course in higher education in America. Prof. Otto Weiss encourages her for a PhD in Philosophy.

Fifth Part speaks of Subhash's father's demise. The couple have not yet revealed Bela's parentage to Bela. But Bela now seven enquires about her real father. Once they are back to Rhodes Island, they notice that Gauri has left for California. Bela attends schools soundly. After graduation she becomes an environmentalist. Sixth Part continues the story. Unfortunately, Gauri too lives a solitary life. She befriends a scholar known as Lorna and both turn homosexual. One day Subhash meets Mr. Richard who dies shortly. Subhash befriends his friend Elise, also Bela's teacher for love. Bela one day becomes pregnant and the father of it is unknown. This upsets Subhash and he reveals about her real father. Unfortunately, Bela goes berserk. She delivers the child Meghna. Seventh Part continues the story. Gauri is in her late age. Subhash then asks Gauri for divorce. Bela gets engaged with Drew. Bela tells Gauri that she will not forgive her for hiding her parentage. Then Gauri returns to India. Part VIII is about Subhash's marriage with Elsie. The final chapter of Part VIII revisits the day Udayan was killed. Lahiri describes the shooting of Udayan thus graphically.

For a fraction of a second, he heard the explosion tearing through his lungs.

A sound like gushing water or a torrent of wind, a sound that belonged to the fixed forces of the world, that then took him out of the world. The silence was pure now. Nothing interfered. He was not alone. Gauri stood in front of him wearing a peach-coloured sari. She was a little out of breath, sweat pooling in the material of her blouse, from her armpits. It was the bright afternoon outside the cinema hall, during the interval. They would miss the first part of the film. Finally, Subhash dies fondly remembering Gauri. What remains finally is 'only silence' as printed in the last line of the novel.

*The Lowland* tells the story of two brothers - Udayan and Subhash - who wish to choose two different lives in two different halves. While Udayan chooses to stay where he grew up, (Kolkata) and joins the Naxalbari movement, Subhash decides to go to America and pursue his research work from the University of Rhode Islands. By 1972, the Naxalite movement is banned by the government and Udayan is assassinated by the paramilitary force for carrying on secret organizational work. Hearing this, Subhash comes to Kolkata and eventually meets Gauri, the wife of Udayan who is now expecting. In the course of events, Subhash marries her. Guari settles with Subhash at Rhode Island and gives birth to Bela. The story moves forward with Bela's coming of age, her discovery of the hidden past and her attempts to cope with the complicated present.

Critics are of the opinion that *The Lowland* is not authentic about the Naxalite movement. For example, Nilanjana Chatterjee as well as Aijaz Ahmad, thinks that Lahiri chooses the realistic narrative mode - the purpose of which is to illustrate the absolute essentially of likelihood in the depiction of time. She succeeds as long as she is depicting the private life of Subhash, Udayan, Gauri, and Bela as a miniaturized family saga, but her realism seems to fail when she depicts the eventful years of the Naxalite movement and its forceful suppression by the then West Bengal government. The second theme of *The Lowland* is sexuality. The sexual relations are too conventional. Subhash has sex with Holly and that is natural in multicultural societies. Subhash's marriage with Guari, though it appears to be illicit, it is conventional. Gauri's homosexual relationship with Lorne is the same ever. In *The Lowland*, except Udayan-Gauri relationship, not a single sexual encounter leads to any kind of crucial or political revelation or understanding in any one's life. They seem to merely serve the purpose of private erotic pleasures.

The third theme of *The Lowland* is Indian-American diasporic experience. Questions could be raised about Lahiri's representation of the Bengali diaspora experiences in *The Lowland*. After reaching Rhodes Islands Subhash realizes that he had been waiting all his life to find Rhodes Islands. That it was here, in this minute but majestic corner of the world, that he could breathe. He starts sending a portion of his stipend "to help pay for the work on the house" and writes that "he was eager to see them (his parents)" (63). But then, day after day, cut off from them, he starts ignoring them. Along with his psychological estrangement from his parents, Subhash's political attachment towards Bengal begins to die.

Subhash's lack of awareness of the socio-economic conditions of India leads him to invent a vague understanding of Indian politics. By the end of the novel, we find an assimilated Subhash, who is completely cut off from his dead parents, his Kolkata-house, and his motherland. He marries an American lady, Elise, 'exchanging their vows on the grounds of a small white church' and never returns

to India. Gauri, like Subhash, establishes herself in America in search of a better living. Compared to Udayan, she is insensitive to the socio-political needs of her homeland, India. Gauri even believes that California is 'her only home.' Lahiri seems to have written *The Lowland* which represents certain politico-historical, sexual, and cultural images of Bengal and the Bengali immigrants in the Rhodes Island. What concerns me about this kind of representation is its repressive potential: representation of this kind often ends in becoming misrepresentation.

In the context of Lahiri's misrepresentation of Bengal in *The Lowland*, it would not be wrong on the emergence of an intermediary genre of fiction, a category to which, probably, her fiction belongs. This kind of intermediary genre, which comprises, amongst other things, 'an irreverence towards national politics and literatures of national liberation, forms of transculturalism and dialogic abundance, and an often magic-realist combination of epic scope and personal, impressionistic memory.

To sum up, one may say that Lahiri delineates the travails of the diaspora people and communities uprooted from their homeland with deft strokes. She illuminates the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism, and the blinding desire for a better life. She has portrayed the craze and compulsions of diasporic journey of her protagonists who live the lives of dislocation - physical, psychological, emotional, cultural, and political. As a writer she knows that her task is to draw the attention of the readers to the existence of these issues rather than offer any shortcut solutions which, in any case, will vary from one situation to another, as also from one country to another. That is why she is content to raise and problematize the issues about home, homeland, diaspora and belongingness by treating them from multiple angles and thereby demonstrating how complex and baffling they really are. The diasporic stories are studies of individuals caught in between conflicts of traditions and cultural mores, trying to establish individual identities while experiencing a sense of alienation and isolation. In *The Lowland*, Lahiri moves beyond primary diaspora themes like culture-shock, rootlessness, and nostalgia to more evolved second and third generation concerns such as parent-child bonding, cross-cultural marriage, dilution of culture, and generation gap. Though issues like generation gap are a universal phenomenon, in diasporas the gap gets enlarged because of vast changes in lifestyle, the conservative upbringing of the first generation, and the liberty given to children in the West. The phenomenon of immigration creates a wide chasm between the kind of families, first generations immigrants grew up in, in their homeland India, and those they create here in America. With no means by which the second generation in America can be taught the importance of relatives, filial responsibilities, and obedience to parents the first generation wages a losing struggle against the onslaught of American culture which insidiously pervades their families. In a society which puts individuality and personal freedom above all else, the dichotomy between Indian value system and American attitudes creates a system of impossible choices for the second generation.

*The Lowland* make an effort to deal with the issues and conflicts faced by the second generation as it makes its peace with the fact of its duality. Lahiri also articulates the effort that the second generation makes in order to assimilate into the mainstream, which often manifests in the form of cross-cultural relationships and

miscegenation. The themes gradually but definitely move towards more universal human concerns rather than concerns over colour of skin and definition of 'home.'

*The Lowland* shows a definite evolution in Lahiri as a writer. She shows development in themes from basic diaspora problems of acculturation, language, food and bringing up children in *The Namesake* to second generation issues such as unconventional careers, miscegenation, filial obligations or the lack thereof, and break down of family ties in *The Lowland*. The themes and stories are still Indian but their treatment and outcome are more universal, and aimed to resonate not only with new global multicultural Indian generation, but also universally with the rest of the world.

Lahiri's oeuvre has been characterized by her unadorned and simple language and her characters are often Indian immigrants to America who must navigate between their adopted home and the cultural ethics of their native land. She examines her characters' ambling anxieties and biases to register the predicaments and details of immigrant psychology and manners. Her fiction is autobiographical and it has been frequently drawn upon her own experiences as well as those of her acquaintances, friends, parents, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. She writes largely about the human conditions of diaspora in America. It incorporates the dispersion of people from their homeland which leads to hybrid culture and identity. Lahiri's focus is on the mindscape of characters and human predicaments with her wider perspectives.

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