

## **Cultural Alienation and Inner Conflict in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland***

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### **Abstract**

Cultural alienation and dislocation experienced by the immigrant diaspora has always been a constant source of reflection, of people who get torn between two lands, cultures and languages. Jhumpa Lahiri, belonging to this 'neo-class of immigrants', has reached a new standard of bicultural experiences. Hence, her perception of cross-cultural experiences shows radical shifts in her focus and consideration regarding transnational identities and their cultural adaptation.

*The Lowland* is a comprehensive, enthusiastic story that examines in detail the junction of the political and the personal scenario, enveloping nearly 50 years of Indian and American history through the lives of one family. The paper critically examines the novel particularly in the context of the cultural estrangement and internal conflict faced by the protagonist. It seeks to map the cultural effluvia and second generation moral conflicts in an ever evolving cultural space. Jhumpa's theme of unreturned love, destiny, inclinations, displacement and return, reverberates amply through the course of the story immigrants.

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

The postcolonial movement brought the diasporic phenomenon into sharp focus as it picked up momentum in the wake of decolonization. Almost all the postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Gloria Anzaldúa, Rey Chow, Felix Guattari, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, Arjun Appadurai et al have, therefore, deliberated on the formation on the formation and continuation of diasporas in the fast globalizing world.

The reason for this fascination for the diaspora is the important issue of identity. First underlined in the context of newly-freed nations, the notion was quickly taken up to describe the condition of any minority group pitted against a majority based on different color, race, sex, etc. In the case of the immigrants in any society, their identity is threatened by the culture of the host country. Besides,

“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, the Pulitzer award-winner novelist, has brought out these post colonial concerns of identity and culture beautifully in her novel *The Lowland*.

Born and brought up in UK and USA, Lahiri is known for her insight into the life of the Indian immigrant community. Her parents were from India who shifted later to England where she was born. However, they relocated themselves in Rhode Island, America. It is here that Jhumpa grew up and had her education. Her initial contacts with India were through periodic visits of her parents to West Bengal. Her first collection of short stories titled Interpreter of Maladies focused on the immigrant experience besides dealing with the lives of some Indian characters in Indian setting. This anthology brought her the coveted Pulitzer Prize. Later, she published another collection of short stories titled Unaccustomed Earth and a novel The Namesake. In all these books, she examined different aspects of the lives of people who traveled from India to the ‘Land of Promise’ viz., America, in search of livelihood or pursuit of higher studies. It is rightly said that,

“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)).

Needless to say, in such stories, the Indian background of the immigrants is examined minutely. Most of them are adults at the time of shifting to America, where they settle down for the rest of their lives. They have interaction with the American community, which was once upon a time a group of settlers themselves who travelled from different parts of Europe towards the close of the fifteenth century. The interface presents problems mainly due to different cultural backgrounds of these two communities. Even though in the three fictional works which Lahiri Produced, the major theme is diasporic experience, there is still a lot to say on this account and therefore, in *The Lowland* too, she sticks to this theme, even as she devotes considerable space to the background of the Indian characters – as a family back in Calcutta.

The story is set in the Tollygunge area of Calcutta. To begin with, the reader is introduced to two brothers – Subhash and Udayan. Subhash is elder to Udayan by fifteen months. They are inseparably attached to each other. The two ponds in the vicinity of their house symbolize these two brothers. When these get filled up with water during the rainy season, they appear as a single oblong pond, but when the summer sets in, the water evaporates and the ponds appear as two smaller and separate entities. In the same way, the two brothers are alike and yet different in their aptitude and mindset. As they grow up, they prove their brilliance in studies. While Udayan is interested in Physics, Subhash is at home in Chemistry. However, both of them have interest in electrical devices and they keep on conducting minor experiments and mending electrical gadgets at home. Later, Subhash gets a scholarship to study Physics abroad and he moves out to USA.

As a college student in India, Udayan gets involved in the underground Naxalite movement. This movement which began in 1960s takes its name from Naxalbari, a village where the landless labourers took up arms against the landlords. The ideology at the back of it was identified as radical Marxism as enunciated by Chairman Mao-Tse Tung of China and is favoured violent overthrow of government which was viewed as a capitalist adjunct. Udayan became a staunch supporter of the movement. He would take part in secret conclaves of the party, distribute subversive material and help in the organization of violent acts meant to challenge the state.

Around the same time, Udayan gets attracted towards Gauri. Her house was near his college and her brother Manash became Udayan's friend. Thus, Gauri comes in contact with Udayan and is also drawn towards the Naxalite movement. After some-time, Udayan is killed by the police in a fake encounter. Subhash comes to India to take part in the final rite of his brother. It is here that he thinks seriously about re-settling Udayan's wife Gauri. Much against the wishes of his parents, he marries Gauri and takes her to the United States to usher her into a new life. He believes that she would be able to forget Udayan's tragedy and settle down to a new life in America.

But things happen in a different way. Gauri is able to relate to him physically but not emotionally. Later, this physical union does not remain Subhash-specific. She takes a number of lovers but with none of them she develops any emotional bonding. Then, it is either her teaching or the romancing as a time-pass to which she devotes herself fully. She becomes an emotional bankrupt. After many years, when her daughter has grown into a young woman and given birth to a girl, named Meghna, she visits them, not for any reapproachment but for getting divorce papers signed by Subhash. That shows her rigidity. However, her past attachment with her dead husband asserts itself and she goes to Calcutta as if on a pilgrimage but comes back empty-handed. The visit is a failure.

How she absorbs the American culture and gives up the much-touted Indian emotionalism speaks volumes about the clash between two cultures. That brings us to the question of cultural difference and a shock which is faced by the diasporic people in any part of the world. The culture shock, as the anthropologist Kalervo Oberg outlines it, is the psychological perplexity experienced by people who unexpectedly enter completely different cultural environments to exist and work. Culture shock is accelerated by the tension that develops from losing all our common signs and symbols of public intercourse.

Upon entering into a new society, the culture shock takes time to wane which could vary from a few weeks to some years or decades, and in some cases, it may not dissipate at all. In case of Indians migrating to the west, it takes a long time to go and even then, it is a mixed culture which they evolve, after fine-tuning the cultural traits of the host country to their taste. As to why it happens, it can be safely argued that India, being an old civilization, has a very deep impact on its people. Our culture is high on ritualism and symbolism. No day in the calendar goes without the mention of some ritual or the other. However, subtlety and refinement are the hallmarks of Lahiri's approach so that the reader hardly feels the existence of culture shock. But the cultural difference is surely marked by the characters. Thus, we see in the *The Lowland*, rather a slow

demolition of the cultural barrier in Gauri. She does subscribe, in course of time, to American culture, and become fiercely individualistic person, and yet some-thing of the old culture remains in her which takes her back to Calcutta towards the close of the story.

The novel does throw subtle hints of cultural difference, as Knopf review states,

“The middle section of *The Lowland* presents a particularly arid stretch. We know the basic outlines of the assimilation story: the confusion about American customs, the unshakable loneliness, the sense of having made a horrible mistake in coming to this brash, cocky country. In *The Lowland*, though the characters are even more inert to their new home, trapped as they are in their own impenetrable depression.”

Now, before taking up the area of cultural difference which is the main burden of this paper, let me briefly explore the meaning of culture. The English word culture is a participial form of the Latin verb *colere*, which means, variously, to “till,” “foster,” “care for,” “pay attention to,” “honor,” or “worship.” The central idea encompasses all that we value in our life at the anthropological sense, we mean the way of life of a particular people or society. It includes the manner in which they eat, dress and live. It also means their customs, rituals, taboos and fetishes, beliefs and values. Culture is the key to understand how they would behave in a particular situation at the collective or individual level.

The meaning of culture “that dominated usage from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century’s (and the definition that Eliot sought to defend) centered on the development of the highest and the most sacred elements of society” (Snoeberger 3). The contemporary theories of culture like cultural materialism do not contest our understanding of culture as enunciated here; rather these seek to point out the practices of common people which are ignored due to the elitist bias in our understanding. Generally, we have been trained to think of only the elite in a society as the upholders of culture. Scholars like Mathew Arnold and T.S. Eliot have viewed culture in this way, but the Post-Marx approach tips the balance in favor of the common people. The Marxist view of culture is as “superstructure which is determined ultimately by the economic ‘base’ or ‘structure.’ According to them, whatever the textuality of history, a culture and its literary products are always conditioned by the material forces and relations of production in the relevant historical era” (Malik 138)

It goes without saying that while noting the cultural manifestation of a particular people, like the Indian diaspora in America in the present case, we are guided by practices indulged in at the level of people like Subhash and Gauri. They were ordinary people, who travelled from India to settle in the United States. As Subhash migrates to the US, he encounters many new things which influence his life style. Upon reaching America, the first thing that appeals to him is the beautiful area of Rhode, Island, which the human hand had beautified further. Looking at the steel piles of the two bridges stretching across the bay, he felt mesmerized.

“The symmetrical rise and fall of the Newport Bridge, recently completed, had arched portals and cables that would light up at night. [...] End to end, he was told, the wires of all the suspended cables would span just over eight thousand miles. It is the distance between America and India; the distance that now separated him from his family” (65).

He liked the lighthouse with three windows like three buttons on the placket of a shirt” and felt he had discovered the most beautiful place on earth. On cloudy days, “at intervals, the sound of a fog-horn pierced the air, as conch shells were blown in Calcutta to ward off evil” (38). The difference was clear: while in the land left behind, they propitiated the God to do things for them; in America, they depended upon their own efforts.

Not only the place looked different from what he was accustomed to see in India – the two Lowland ponds back in Calcutta – but also the people and their life style. The difference in the two cultures was to cast its shadow on his whole life:

“Subhash could not fathom the extremes of his life: coming from a city with so little space for humans, arriving in a place where there was still space for humans, arriving in a place where there was still so much of it to spare” (243).

The over-populous India is clearly contrasted here with the sparsely populated America. India is also a land of unique characteristics and contradictions. Subhash felt it was difficult to explain the Indian situation at times, like when it came to politics about which his American friend Richard wanted to know, Subhash didn’t know how to describe India’s fractious politics, its complicated society, to an American. He said it was an ancient place that was also young, still struggling to know itself.

Gauri’s experience of the difference talks about some other dimensions. The cold in Rhode Island was severe in the mornings, and the windowpanes were like sheets of ice when she touched them. When she went to the classroom, she noted that the student sitting next to her was wearing long silver earrings, a gauzy blouse, and a skirt that stopped at her knees. Her body was unencumbered by the yards of silk material that Gauri wrapped and pleated and tucked every morning into a petticoat. These were the saris she’d worn since she stopped wearing frocks, at fifteen. What she’d worn while married to Udayan, and what she continued to wear now.

It was in Rhode Island that Subhash met Holly, the pretty American woman, somewhat older than him, with whom he was to share the bed for many days. It was the lady’s son Joshua playing at the beach who caught his eye and then became the means to reach the mother. She worked as a nurse at a small hospital in East Greenwich. She worked as a nurse at a small hospital in East Greenwich. She had been living separately from her husband from some time. Subhash found that he too was interested in sea-birds. She asked him about India and he told her that his married brother Udayan and his wife stayed with his parents. Now this is a system

followed in India and not in America. He knew that it was impossible for Holly, probably for any American woman, to imagine that life.

They started meeting regularly at the beach. One day, when she invited Subhash to her home, he could not say no, even though he knew that she was American, and that she was probably ten years older than he was. Upon reaching there, he observed that it was a sequestered house. Other houses in the vicinity were also hardly inhabited as these were vacation-homes of rich people. How could a woman live with her son and a dog in his far-off lonely area – the question flummoxed him.

“He marveled at the self-sufficient nature of her life. And he was also slightly nervous for her, living alone in such a remote place, without bothering to lock her door. There was no one to help her, apart from the babysitter who looked after Joshua while she worked. Though her parents were alive, I thought they lived nearby, in another part of Rhode Island; they had not come to take care of her” (72).

This was indeed puzzling for him because it showed a cultural trait that was totally alien for an Indian.

One Friday evening, when he went to see Holly, Joshua was not there. He came to know that every Friday; he goes to spend some time with his father. After taking dinner, the natural instincts worked and they were bedded. Though Subhash was a little hesitant, Holly did not care for any scruples in sexual matters. As he was about to leave, Holly asked him suggestively, “Should I let you know, he next time when Joshua goes over to his father” (73). It was the American way, as he could see, very different from the Indian way.

Jhumpa Lahiri examines the American family life vis-à-vis Indian. When Holly asked Subhash if he was close to his father, Subhash was drawn into thinking for a while. The picture of Joshua riding his father’s shoulder came to his mind. His father was not that loving but like all Indian parents, he was not that loving, but he was a consistent one. Lahiri as a keen observer of immigrant life also probes the inter-racial marriages. Prof. Narsimhan and his American wife present the picture of a happy couple. That perhaps is the ideal of a globalized culture, as Lahiri seems to suggest. Again, Americans desist from poking their nose in others’ affairs; the concept of privacy is sacrosanct there. When Gauri and Subhash attend a party at Prof. Narsimhans’, he is apprehensive about questions being asked about his marriage to Gauri, but contrary to his speculation,

“No one questioned that Gauri was his wife, or that he was soon to be the father of her child. The group wished them well, and they were sent off with an assortment of objects” (139).

Had they been in India, their past and present would have been shredded to bits.

Subhash considered for a while marrying Holly but her age, her child and the fact of her being technically the wife of another person were the dissuading factors. Little did he know that destiny would throw him into an almost similar situation! While Subhash should be credited for sticking to Indian cultural norms in trying hard to keep his allegiance to Gauri after he married her, it is Gauri who deviates from her obligations as a wedded wife. She presents the example of acculturation of an immigrant. It begins with her fascination for American way of dressing. The yards of silk sari were indeed difficult to hold as Gauri was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. She liked the way American girls dressed themselves. So, one fine day, she scissored her sarees, petticoats and blouses and switched to the American dresses and hairstyle, without discussing the matter with Subhash. Later, when the child Bela was born, she wanted a baby-sitter for her, even though Subhash did not approve it. He wanted to bring up the child in the Indian way – under the care of her parents, but it was clear that Gauri had imbibed American craze for individuality and was in no mood to compromise.

Gauri getting Americanized is also borne out by her fascination for a man in the 50's whom she chances upon seeing and then starts waiting for him even though nothing come out of it. In contrast, Subhash stays faithful for a long time after Gauri has left him. She envisions life without any kind of encumbrance – daughter or husband: “Time to speculate that [taking up a doctoral program], without Bela or Subhash, her life might be a different thing” (174). She was indeed disoriented by the sense of freedom, devouring the sensation as a beggar devours food. It was this American individuality which propelled her to walk out on her husband after 12 years of wedded life to enjoy sexual liberty. She even developed lesbian relationship with Lorna! Again it was something not so common and definitely not approved of in India.

If Gauri, born in India, could be so free, her daughter Bela, born and brought up in the liberal environs of America, was bound to be free. She too enjoyed sex with all and sundry but did not commit to anyone all her life – picture of a typical American youth. However,

“She swims against the materialist current in America and feels impressed by an 18<sup>th</sup> century cult preaching celibacy and simple life, though she amends the celibacy injunction herself later on. That is her take on radicalism of her father joined to free-wheeling life style of her mother. She has steely determination like her mother and refuses to have any truck with the father of her child” (Batra 2014: 221).

On the Indian side, the picture is dismal. The way Udayan loses her life and Subhash migrates to USA along with Gauri, and their mother, who lived all her life in India is a shattered person. As Khaleej Times review notes,

“After the death of Subhash’s father, his mother, who is going senile, starts to clean the detritus of the two ponds with her bare hands – the rotten waste she surfaces symbolic of her and her husband’s dashed ambitions and hopes of living in a joint

family with their sons and families, the modern indestructible plastic refuse uncovered, of the negligence by her sons” (193).

This is the other side of the picture – a picture of the home left behind by the immigrant and it is indeed a pathetic picture because emotions are rather strongly felt in India.

Indian culture is ancient and is well-ingested in the people through a rigorous and subtle accultural process, referred to normally as instilling *sanskar* by the family and that goes on throughout the life. We see Ashoke and Ashima in *The Namesake*, who maintain their ties, howsoever, tenuous, with India throughout with the latter vowing to straddle the two continents regularly after her husband's death. In *The Lowland* too, we find Sub-hash duly going to Calcutta to take part in the final rites of his dead brother Udayan. Gauri, even though substantially Americanized during her long stay in America, also has an urge to visit Calcutta to feel connected with the spirit of her late husband. This speaks volumes about the impact of her original Indian culture which has not totally been wiped out. She has been transformed but,

“The transformation cannot be viewed in terms of black and white, for they [the immigrants] inhabit a liminal space of constant contestation and appropriation of culture of the adopted country of their parents. In any process of acculturation, the possibility of change exists at all moments of life, so we get hybrid characters rather than pure subjectivities” (Batra 2011:68).

We can conclude with the observation that despite all our talk of globalization sought to be achieved through common trade practices, cultural conflict between two societies is a hard reality that cannot be glossed over. Economics plays its part but even at the back of it, these are the beliefs, and values which always guide actions in the materialist world. Cultural conflict is something which even the most liberal of religions have failed to resolve and it is something that is to stay, maybe, forever.

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