



Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*: A study of alienation and identity

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the leading and successful second generation of Indian writers of English novelists. Lahiri's *The Lowland* explores complex nature of human relationship and feelings of loneliness and the question of identity. The novel centres round the theme of political and personal violence, duty and desire, heritage and homeland, secrets and conspiracies and alienation and identity. *The Lowland* is a comprehensive, enthusiastic story that examines in detail the junction of the political and the personal scenario, enveloping nearly fifty years of Indian and American history through the lives of one family. Jhumpa Lahiri's themes are far-fetched and widely focused on the issues of acculturation, assimilation, desolation, fragmented identity and individuality of the characters in an alien land. Being a contemporary novelist of immigrant experience, she incandescently substantiated the problems encountered by the second generation in the 'imaginary homeland'. In this paper, an attempt has been made on the theme of alienation and identity.

Keywords: alienation, identity, immigrant, culture, diaspora

Introduction

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.

Background

Jhumpa Lahiri first made her name with the quiet, meticulously observed stories about Indian immigrants trying to adjust to new lives in the United States. Navigating between the Indian traditions they have inherited and the baffling new world, the characters in the first collection of short stories entitled *The Interpreter of Maladies*, (1999) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, look for love further than the barriers of ethnicity and generations. In her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), Lahiri enriches the themes that made her first collection an international bestseller: the settler experience, the clash of cultures, the conflicts of absorption, and, most expressively, the knotted ties between generations. Here again Lahiri displays her skilful touch for the ideal detail - the fleeting moment, the turn of phrase - that opens whole worlds of emotion. Then the eight stories which appeared in *Unaccustomed Earth* () take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand, as they explore the secrets at the heart of family life. Here, they enter the worlds of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers. *The Lowland* is Lahiri's fourth book. It was elected for the National Book Award in 2013, the Man Booker Prize 2013 and the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction 2014. She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2012.

Analysis

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.

The Lowland revolves about a Bengali settler family in the United States and the Indian sections serve up as a backdrop to the story as it develops. The missing of family life back at Tollygunge heightens the loneliness of Subhash as the text narrates:

For a year and a half, he had not seen his family. Not sat down with them, at the end of the day, to share a meal. In Tollygunge, his family did not have a phone line. He'd sent a telegram to let them know he'd arrived. He was learning to live without hearing their voices, to receive news of them only in writing. (Lahiri, 50)

Subhash's loneliness intensifies on India's Independence Day as he observes and compares it with his present situation as the text informs; 'The following day was August 15, Indian Independence. A holiday in the country, lights on government buildings, flag hoisting, and parades. An ordinary day here.' (Lahiri, 61)

The lowland is a story of loneliness. In the beginning both the brothers felt lonely without each other's company. Subhash felt extremely companionless in Rhode Island, as he was away from his family and there was no hope of meeting the family in the near future. We find Gauri also feels lonely although she cherished the company of her brother. Her elder sisters were all married and living at distant places. She was living with her maternal uncles, but most of the time she was alone, confined to her room facing the main street of Tollygunge, and the only companion was the noise in the street. In Rhode Island Subhash is all alone when he gets the news of the tragedy. All of a sudden all the past things flash on his mind's eye. The place where they played, where they grew up holding each other's hand everything revives. In the previous separation there was a chance of reuniting, but in the second separation loneliness returned and this time forever. Earlier the brothers were linked through letters, this time they were linked through Gauri and her unborn child. When Udayan told him that he had married Gauri, Subhash felt devastated: until now he thought the space was reserved for him, but this relationship did not work. Although this was something Subhash knew beforehand, but he did not like Holly to break it. When Holly deserted him, his loneliness became serious it got intensified with the news of the unexpected tragedy. Subhash tried to fill the space created by Udayan with Holly but it was a failure.

Udayan's death brought Subhash from Rhode Island to India to console his parents but seeing him Bijoli, his mother was not ready to show any happiness but felt in her heart hatred towards Subhash:

Rage at Subhash for reminding her so strongly of Udayan, for sounding like him, for remaining a spare version of him. She'd overheard him talking with Gauri, paying attention to her, being kind. (Lahiri 186)

When Subhash told his mother about his marriage decision she bluntly replied: "*He was risking everything, and they were never to enter the house as husband and wife.*" (Lahiri 186) Bijoli's intentions here was clear sign of hurting Subhash as well as dissuading him from marriage. She said it because:

A girl she did not like to begin with, did not want in her family, was going to become her daughter-in-law twice over. She said it because it was Gauri not Bijoli, who contained a piece of Udayan in her womb. (Lahiri 186)

The novel outset with the description of lowland itself, lowland that was to be a monumental place for the Mitras in the future. The opening lines reads like the way one would guide a new traveller to reach the place: "East of the Tolly Club, after Deshapram Sashmal splits in two, there is a small mosque. A turn leads to a quite enclave. A warren of narrow lanes and modest middle-class homes. Once within the enclave, there were two ponds, oblong, side by side. Behind them was the lowland spanning a few acres" (Lahiri 3). In fact, this picturesque description is a beautiful instance of loneliness and identification of the land.

Geography is destiny in *The Lowland*. Her title refers to a marshy stretch of land between two ponds in a Calcutta neighbourhood where two very close brothers grow up and where one of them is killed. In monsoon season, the marsh floods and the ponds combine; in summer, the floodwater evaporates. The reader doesn't need any decoder ring to figure out that the two ponds symbolize the two brothers — at times separate; at other times inseparable. But there is still more meaning lurking in this rich landscape. The features of the lowland given deft matter-of-fact strokes have a telling impact on the characters of the novel. Lahiri's narrator goes on to tell us: "Certain creatures laid eggs that were able to endure the dry season. Others survived by burying themselves in mud, simulating death, waiting for the return of rain" (Lahiri 3). In the suburban streets of Calcutta where the two brothers wandered before dusk and in the hyacinth-strewn ponds where they played for hours on end, the lowland was their playground. This description of the location is highlighted and significant.

The alienation has been described in different ways by different scholars. Arnold Kaufman mentions: "To claim that a person is alienated is to claim that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction." A dictionary of literary terms defines alienation in the following words: "Alienation is the state of being alienated from something or somebody; it is condition of the mind". Encyclopaedia Britannica describes alienation as "the state of feeling estranged or separated from ones milieu, work, and products of work or self."

The word alienation in English has originated from the Latin word '*alienato*' which is noun, its verb form '*alienare*' means to snatch, to avoid, to remove or to make things for others. The French words '*alienate*' and '*alienation*' are closure to English words '*alienate*' and '*alienation*'. The Greek words Anomia and Anomie which mean self-alienation and alienation from society respectively are regarded modern in their use. Anomia indicates personal disintegration from the society. About Anomia i.e. self-alienation G. H. Nettler writes: "Anomia is personal disorganization; alienation is a psychological state of an individual and alienated is the person who has been estranged, made unfriendly towards his society and the culture it carries". As a matter fact, Anomie, Anomia and Alienation can be used interchangeably. In English language Isolation, Estrangement and Separation are some of the other words, used for Alienation.

In '*The Lowland*' the two brothers Subhash and Udayan, who have been nothing without each other, despite of being different in nature and attitude. Subhash goes to Rhodes Island, America for higher studies while Udayan prefers to be a part of Naxalbari movement in India. Udayan loneliness is well depicted when he writes a letter to his brother in America. *The Lowland* is formulated about the impression of alienation. Though, they have separate ideas and ambitions in life, elder choosing to go abroad for studies, younger to endure in Naxalbari movement, both the brothers have affection on one another. Each feels comfort and friendliness in other's

presence. It is when Subhash goes away in his own decision, Udayan feels lonely and he promulgates in his letter to Subhash:

The days are dull without you. And though I refuse to forgive you for not supporting a movement that will only improve the lives of millions of people, I hope you can forgive me for giving you a hard time. Will you hurry up with whatever it is you're doing? An embrace from your brother." (Lahiri, 38)

After Udayan's death Subhash marries Gauri to save her from alienation. But Gauri is haunted by her past all the time. She never proves to be a good wife and a good mother. As a matter of fact, Gauri has also been a sufferer in her own ways. Udayan marries her without the consent of his parents. So, Gauri in her in-laws' house is not accepted and remains alienated. After her husband's death she goes to Rhodes Island with Subhash and gives birth to a baby girl, called Bela. Being haunted by past, she alienates herself from Subhash and her daughter Bela. She remains restless. For her, isolation is the only remedy to get solace.

Udayan's parents also feel alienated and lonely after their son's death. Their one son has been killed and other one is in America. And Gauri too moves to America. They have no choice except leading a lonely life and after sometimes Subhash's father also expires. Before his death he wanted to dispose of the house but could not because of the emotions and feeling, attached to the house. Subhash's mother also dies in loneliness. "She died on her own in a room with strangers denying him the opportunity to watch her pass (Lahiri, 221)."

During the time of her unexpected death, she is hospitalized alone; no one there to console her and finally, leaves her breath at deprived stage, not giving chance to Subhash to be with her at the last moment of her life. It is a pathetic but inevitable.

Bijoli did not die in Tollygunge, in the house to which she'd clung. And though Subhash had returned to be close to her, from so far, he'd arrived, that final morning at the hospital, too late. She'd died on her own, in a room with strangers, denying him the opportunity to watch her pass." (Lahiri, 156)

The other characters which feel alienation are Udayan's parents. After, Udayan's death, Subhash moves again to America along with Gauri, their daughter-in-law. Now, they are left with no one at their house. After some days, Subhash's father dies. His mother is left with no one in the house. She is entirely abandoned by circumstances. Before the death of Subhash's father, he wanted to sell his house and move away from Calcutta, but they could not do that, they reminisce all the past happened at their sight, right from their marriage, birth of two children, memories of their studies, Udayan's marriage and Udayan's death as debacle. He feels the house and their staying in the house without any children is hopeless. He feels:

The house stood practically empty. A mockery of the future they'd assumed would unfold. The next morning, a few minutes later, after Deepa entered the room, Bijoli heard the cup and saucer break into pieces against the floor. Before Deepa came to find her on the terrace, to tell her he'd died in his sleep, Bijoli already knew. She became a widow, as Gauri had become. Bijoli now wears white saris, without a pattern or a border. She's removed her bangles, and stopped eating fish. Vermillion no longer marks the parting of her hair (Lahiri 128-129).

Bijoli's home feels just as forsaken, its course just as diverted. Udayan has not lived to inherit it, and Subhash refuses to come back. He should have been a comfort; the one son remaining when the other was taken away. But she was unable to love one without the other. He had only added to the loss (Lahiri, 131).

This clearly indicates the loneliness of the house. Metaphorically speaking, this place was full of joys and happiness but now it symbolises desolation, loneliness and alienation. Ironically speaking, this is the value of life and time.

All the above extracts from the novel elucidates the emptiness, the endless sorrow, never returned children, not negotiable past, not amendable agreements with Subhash and Gauri, the conditions place them at the conduit of alienation. Even after her husband's death, Bijoli spends time doing her daily duties, dwelling in the memories of Udayan and Subhash. Nonetheless, the occupied rooms with cloudy darks, the utmost grief in her bones and the loneliness in the soul embroil her to maximum isolation and force her to highest desolation.

According to Oxford Dictionary the semantic meaning of 'identity' is that 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is'. In pragmatic sense, the meaning of 'identity' has many conventional elucidations. The world is satiated with full of people from different race, creed, colour, tribe, religion, region, caste, and culture. According to Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov:

What cognitive perspectives suggest, in short, is that race, ethnicity, and nation are not things in the world but ways of seeing the world. They are ways of understanding and identifying oneself, making sense of one's problems and predicaments, identifying one's interests, and orienting one's action. They are ways of recognizing, identifying, and classifying other people, of construing sameness and difference, and of "coding" and making sense of their actions (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov, 2004: 25).

In the novel, *The Lowland*, the death Udayan disturbed other lives of the family and their identities are transmitted or reasoned to alienation. Gauri as Udayan's wife has one kind of identity in her marriage life but when Udayan dies, her individuality is confused, and the identity got by Udayan is vanished. When she remarries Udayan's brother, Subhash, her identity is negotiated in another form.

Identities are transmitted hereditarily. But, there is possibility of shaping new identities by individuals of a family with their thoughts and ideology and with their behaviours and attitudes accordingly. Now, if an individual of a family dies with in any natural or unnatural reasons, then those identities are diffused to other family members in their interest. At the same time, the death can affect the people of family in many ways, for the reason that, the identities are connected to one another in the family. So, the sudden demise of a member in

family directly or indirectly can disturb or facilitate the rest of the life. In overall sense, the very core of personal existence or identity put to disruption of life.

The socio-political movement of Naxalite and its consequences on Mitra family is the backdrop of diasporic setting. The psychological suffering of the central characters and the dilemma of the family relations are highlighted in the novel. Jhumpa Lahiri also depicts emotional dilemma of the characters who constantly urge for emotional link and mutual understanding among them. The themes of familial relationship, displacement, alienation, identity crises and choices are interwoven in the story of the novel. In the twenty-first century, alienation and identity are the indispensable terms for the society which is clearly reflected in the present novel.

Conclusion

The Lowland is the second novel by American author Jhumpa Lahiri, published by Alfred A. Knopf and Random House in 2013. The book received praise from critics and was commercially successful. Alienation, isolation, and loss of identity are some of the predicaments from which immigrants suffer. Jhumpa Lahiri, a child of immigrants, has experienced the feeling of alienation at a very early age. Born in London and brought up at Rhodes Island, United States of America, she has been torn between two cultures. Lahiri has illustrated the theme of alienation and loneliness through different characters who find themselves cut-off from their cultural and historical roots. Cultural alienation and dislocation are experienced by the immigrant diaspora that 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 novel has been divided into eight parts. Lahiri has presented her views very carefully and critically.

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