

The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri Analysis Of Diaspora and Sacrifices for Relationship

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is partly set in Rhode Island and partly in Calcutta. This novel paints a brilliant picture of Calcutta of the 1960's and 70's. The novel weaves the plot around the four generations of Mitra family with a breathtaking, addictive narrative style. Initially, the story develops around the Naxalite insurgency in West Bengal in the late 1960's and 70's—the movement that took the country by surprise. The story beautifully speaks about several genres such as diaspora, alienation, romance, family bonding, political turmoil, trust, and betrayal. In this article, I would attempt to grasp the import of the novel by situating Lahiri's unique presence both in the fabric of the narrative as well as in the post-millennium Indian English fiction. The novel's analytical method moves from a detailed study of the tortuous plot through a mesh of characterization. Lahiri casts a spell with the multiplex narration leading to a medley of contemporary themes. In this write-up, I would try to analyze the themes of diaspora and sacrifices for loved ones by means of textual analysis. I would also try to analyze how far the novelist has succeeded in representing the bonding between the characters, and how she had built up the characters as the novel matures in a vibrant and aesthetic brilliance. I will also try to portray how Jhumpa Lahiri makes the readers understand the humaneness of the characters.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*, Diaspora, Alienation, Isolation, Calcutta, Rhode Island

Analysis

The concept of diaspora is brilliantly highlighted and celebrated in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*. All throughout the plot, the sense of alienation and nostalgia is revealed in the lives of all the characters. Most of her novels deal with the theme of diaspora and elaborately describes the inner turmoil that the individuals have to face when they are detached from their motherland. Many native writers have dealt with the theme of diaspora time and again. In fact, you may say that it is one of the most famous themes among the native writers. Traveling to a distant land has nurtured the feeling of alienation in their hearts.

Once in an interview, Jhumpa Lahiri stated, "It just so happens that many writers originate from different parts of the world than the ones they end up living in, either by choice or by necessity or by circumstance, and therefore, write about those experiences." This is what she too faced in her life. Yes, one can't deny the fact that she was born and brought up in a faraway land. But she understood the feelings of nostalgia in her parents' hearts, visited her homeland countless times, and ventured into the world of writing with a mind determined to write about this. (Felicelli)

While growing up, Lahiri was tempted to write about the tragic incident she heard about when she was visiting India. The story was of two brothers who were killed in an encounter. They were involved in a violent political uprising and became a threat to the ruling party and thus it was a necessity to execute them. The poor fellows were killed just a few hundred yards away from Lahiri's grandparents' home in Calcutta. The police was merciless and forced the young men's family to be the witness of their horrifying death. "That was the scene that, when I first heard of it, when it was described to me, was so troubling and so haunted me—and ultimately inspired me to write the book," says Lahiri.

The Lowland is basically the story of two brothers who were like two different sides of the same coin. But this story touches much deeper emotions and delves into the darker corners of the human heart. The plot tells an elaborate story of ideology and how a family is shaped by it. Without catering to our thirst for the exotic, the descriptions of the world the boys were born into are starkly vivid. The characters are very near to our hearts and commonly known by all. They hail from a middle-class background, dwelling in a quiet subdivision, focused on studying thick textbooks, eagerly knowing about the world with the help of transistor radios, always

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up to some pranks or the other, sneaking into the club for foreigners' right outside their doors. The two brothers were very close in their ages and thus were inseparable from one another. As the boys reach their adulthood, they slowly began to drift apart from each other and their interests took different paths. The vibrant colorful mesh of their lively differences slowly changed the lives of everyone around them. Gradually, the readers are caught in the plot and find India fading into the background as the bleak, harsh solitude of New England academia overtakes entirely. (Mayfield)

As the title suggests, the lowland separating the two ponds plays the most crucial part in the plot. Though the plot moves back and forth from the homeland to a foreign land, one can always feel the shadow of the lowland lurking about here and there. The readers are very much aware that the two ponds represent the two brothers—Subhash and Udayan. The ponds have their own unique characteristics, but they are so very similar to each other, always trying to become one with each other as soon as there is shower from the skies. Lahiri plays brilliantly while portraying the characteristics of the two brothers. The brothers were only 15 months apart and were inseparable. But Subhash always had been a quiet child and did not prefer objecting to whatever he was told to do. As long as the task seemed common and bearable, he used to perform it accordingly without questioning further. Udayan on the contrary was starkly opposite. He was never satisfied with the answers provided to him and wanted to go deeper to dig up the unknown details. He always showed possessive streaks and never allowed any attention to divert from him. He wanted their mother, their father as well as his brother all to his own. Subhash in return allowed his brother to do whatever he wants. Though being the elder of the two, he felt safe to be overpowered by Udayan. (Lahiri)

It is observed that *The Lowland* shows a stark difference from other works of Jhumpa Lahiri because alienation and displacement of the characters not only comes from the actions and choices of the characters but also is caused by their diasporic dilemma. A sense of alienation always prevailed in the characters' lives and it intensified when they travel to the foreign land. As alienation comes from an American culture, mostly in the initial days after their arrival which gradually keeps increasing, the characters experience isolation. No matter how much they tried to drown themselves in piles of work, they could not come out of the sense of alienation and loneliness. The elder brother Subhash has always been family oriented and thus missing of family life back at Calcutta heightens his loneliness, "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)

Subhash could never disrespect his younger brother Udayan's rash ideologies but sometimes was extremely angry with himself that he could never achieve a free life that his brother could attain even though he traveled away from his homeland into an unknown foreign land. Being the mature person he has always been, he made the firm decision of marrying his brother's widow Gauri and brought her back in America to save her from the horrifying hardships of widowhood. But as time passed by, he understood that his decision to marry Gauri was doomed to fail as his mother has predicted. He understood that he will always be a familiar stranger to Gauri and can never become a replacement for his brother. Though finding his life partner in Bela's history teacher, he could not escape from the pangs of loneliness of old age. He was always haunted by the ghosts of his past and felt acutely alone in this alien land, "But he had lost that confidence, that intrepid sense of direction. He felt only aware now that he was alone, that he was over sixty years old, and that he did not know where he stood."(Jain)

The male and female protagonists, Subhash and Gauri, always thought of Rhode Island as a place of solace, a place where they escaped to in search of peace while running away from the horrors of the past. Subhash wanted to present the 23-year-old Gauri with a life full of happiness and wanted her to realize that Udayan's death was not her fault. Gauri wanted to become a devoted wife not because she could fall in love with Subhash but because she wanted to show her gratitude toward him. But in the end nothing fell to place. They definitely felt relieved when they understood that these white-skinned foreigners were least bothered about the Mitra family's past. Despite of that solace, the brown-skinned characters felt alienated and lost among the strangers of the new land and new culture. They were constantly remembered about the occasions they used to celebrate in their homeland be it the Indian Independence Day or Durga Puja. This strange land's colorful Christmas can never be compared to their Indian tradition and culture. In his childhood, the brothers were always curious and fascinated in learning more about the elites in the Tolly Club. But when the elder brother got the chance of knowing these elites in person, he preferred to stay in home and loved his reclusive life. Subhash never really ended up making loads of friends in Rhode Island. Same was in the case of Gauri; though being very popular among her students, she felt at peace while spending her 'alone time'.(Mayfield)

It is observed that Subhash, Gauri, and Bela are unable to mingle in the Calcutta environment and are equally dislocated in their Tollygunge home. Every neighbor here knew what happened to Udayan and his tragic destiny. But to these neighbors the lives of these three remained a mystery, and they never bothered about disclosing it either. Subhash and Gauri felt that as nobody in America knows what happened to the members of the Mitra family in Calcutta, it could give positivity and a necessary space for the couple to start a new life. However, the truth was much harsher than they expected. The secret of Bela's parenthood and their inner

turmoil haunted their scarred lives forever. Hence they helplessly become psychologically displaced in the turbulent tides of diasporic environment. (Felicelli)

Though considering Rhode Island as his true home, Subhash could not help but compare each and everything with his homeland, Calcutta. He desperately wanted to search for similarities in between the very unfamiliar lands, but doing so provided him a solace of some sort which was unexplainable and soothing to his heart. "Here in this place surrounded by sea, he was drifting far from his point of origin. Here, detached from Udayan, he was ignorant of so many things." In the beaches of Rhode Island, he found a resemblance to the delta lowlands surrounding their locality in Calcutta. He had a mixed feeling of homesickness and freedom; he tried his best and learned to live by the association she perceived with his homeland. (Stoican)

Udayan ended up taking another bold step defeating Subhash all over again. He married the love of his life, Gauri—a girl of his choice and not his parents'. This was a decision which Subhash could never take as he had accepted this responsibility as his parents'. Udayan sent her picture to Subhash, and in return Subhash felt lonely and jealous thinking Gauri will take over his place in his brother's life. But destiny was playing another game altogether. Subhash has always been fond of playing chess, which was taught to the brothers by their father. When he received the news of his brother being killed, he returned to his homeland; a Calcutta so changed that he was unable to recognize that it was the same dreamland of his tender childhood. His destiny arranged the chess pieces of his life and he ended up marrying his brother's wife, who was pregnant with his brother's child. Subhash could not help but marry Gauri legally as he understood the lingering dangers that were engulfing her life. He knew that Udayan's ghastly deeds will burn their family's roots, especially Gauri as being the wife of a terrorist was the worst crime one could ever commit. Their mother was against the whole idea, but Subhash thought that securing Gauri and the unborn child was what Udayan would always want him to do. That is why he went against his parents and took Gauri back to Rhode Island with him. Subhash wanted to do every possible thing to become a good husband and a good father. To Gauri's utter dismay, she understood in every step of life that Subhash was a much better and responsible version of Udayan. But still she could never share a portion of her heart with him; she knew she was unable to love anybody again.

Gauri being an orphan always showed the characteristics of an independent and free individual. Though she escaped to America with Subhash to leave the ghosts of the past behind, she is not able to come out of the clutches of her past horrors, which enforces her into an aura of alienation and aloofness not only from the day-to-day life but also from Bela. She chops off her hair, throws away all her saris, and vainly tries to adopt the American style. She neglected Subhash and Bela while wholeheartedly losing herself in the study of philosophy. It is extremely ironical to notice that the sense of isolation ends up comforting her, "Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings." (Lahiri) Clinging to the secret and memory of Udayan's death makes her unable to adapt in any place which led to her becoming a stranger in her in-laws' home. Though being married to Subhash, she still prefers to remain a stranger in his life. On the contrary, she finds solace in the anonymity that is offered to her by the American academia.

Jhumpa Lahiri has also brought in the sense of isolation and alienation in Udayan's life at the time when he is injured while preparing explosives. The once brave and bold young man began to show typical signs of weakness and pain fully dwells under the threat of police investigation, "He worried that he might not be able to hear the buzzer, if it rang, or the approach of a military jeep. He complained of feeling alone even though they were together. Feeling isolated in the most basic way." (Lahiri) Udayan helplessly met his death being involved in the gruesome murder of Nirmal Dey, a police officer. Though he never was the one to use the knife, he definitely was one of the masterminds who plotted the murder. Gauri knowingly becomes a part of the killing plan as she took the responsibility of spying Dey and keeping track of his daily routine. Her blind belief and love for Udayan try to ignore the doubt that makes her question Udayan's intentions of asking her to spy. But Gauri could not escape the pangs of guilty conscience and to a certain extent felt betrayed by Udayan's actions. She felt she too could not understand her lover's true soul and thus a feeling of isolation arises. (Moore)

All throughout the novel, Mitra family's peace continued to be disturbed by the ramifications of the past actions. The course of their lives in Calcutta as well as Rhode Island saw a fearfully huge transformation with Udayan's tragic death. This indicates how the sociopolitical events back in their hometowns affects immigrants' lives for generation after generation. As Meera Bharwani rightly states, "By presenting the responses of the first and second generation diasporas and people on temporary and more permanent settlements from India and Pakistan, now Bangladesh Jhumpa Lahiri shows how the conditions in their homelands have an effect on them in the alien land." (Bharwani)

Though Gauri decided to devote her life to her revolutionary husband, Udayan's usual remained selfish till the end. He left her and entered into world of the unknown. Gauri was totally crushed in the hands of fate. At the tender age of 23, she had to witness the brutal murder of the man she loved. The police killed Udayan in an encounter, while his family watched the whole horrifying scene standing motionless in their terrace. This incident wounded her heart so deep that the scar became permanent. Though she decided to accept Subhash's proposal and moved to America, Udayan's ghost never left her side. She was haunted by the terrifying deeds

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that she helped her husband to commit. She never could shake off the horrors of her hometown though dwelling in the calm and quiet life of America. A part of Gauri's identity died with Udayan's death. No matter how much he cared for her, Subhash never could bring back that innocent, reckless smile on her lips, the smile that he saw in Gauri's photo sent to him by Udayan after their marriage. Gauri on the other hand knew that she could never shake off the ghosts of the past if she clutched on to her previous self. So becoming aloof from her old self was the only option to cope up with staying alive. (Browne)

Gauri in her desperate attempt to run away from the horrors of the past adopts the American concept of liberty that highlights personal advancement and individual independence. The concept of motherhood and family ties are at the center of the novel and spotlights Gauri's unresponsiveness as a mother. Seeing Bela reminded her of Udayan each and every time, and Bela's affection for her stepfather became intolerable for her. Hence, she decides to become so self-absorbed in her life and career that she ends up neither caring for Subhash nor Bela. She became completely preoccupied with the study of philosophy, a discipline that is intensely associated with troubles of life, destiny, love, God, and so on. This decisive obsession with philosophy makes Gauri alienate from reality, and she becomes unconcerned toward actual human life, family bonding, and love. Gauri tried to find solace by isolating herself more and more, pouring all her energy into achieving a doctorate in philosophy. (Moore)

It was not only Subhash who was affected by her indifference; Bela became the most wounded victim. Gauri abandoned them when Bela was just a 12-year-old. Bela was unable to understand whom to blame for the sorry mental state she began to go through. She loved Subhash, but to a certain extent considered him as the cause behind her mother's departure. Gauri left a note to Subhash saying she was giving Bela to him. But Subhash knew that Gauri was successful in taking Bela's mind and heart away. Bela would always remember her through the severe hatred she developed for her mother.

Though knowing the truth of Gauri's aloofness in his heart, Subhash never thought of giving up on their marriage. But with her departure Subhash finally realizes that their marriage is a mistake that was damned from the very beginning. Udayan's death left a big hole in his heart. Udayan was his alter ego and his death brought an identity crisis in Subhash's life. He now had to play both the roles of his as well as his brother's. He wants to attach to Udayan through this marriage, but the marriage ended up displacing him psychologically. The farce of their marriage finally ends as Gauri left for California to pursue her career. Subhash wanted to do everything in his ability to excel in being a single parent. But as the shock of her mother's departure made Bela look for her own space to establish her identity, Subhash could do nothing but stay mute and see his daughter drift away from him, "She was establishing her existence apart from him. This was the real shock. He thought he would be the one to protect her, to reassure her. But he felt cast aside, indicated along with Gauri. He was afraid to exert his authority, his confidence as a father shaken now that he was alone." (Lahiri) Knowing the truth about Bela's real father, Subhash could never bring himself to claim Bela's complete love and devotion for him as her father. He became engulfed in nervousness and was extremely afraid as he felt that his fatherhood was doomed to shatter under the apprehension of loneliness in an alien land. (McLeod)

Bela left their home in Rhode Island as soon as she was an adult. She became a stranger to Subhash and maintained a comfortable distance never mentioning about her whereabouts to him. Subhash never intruded her space and silently prayed for her healthy growth and safety. One day when Bela returned and revealed to his father about her pregnancy, Subhash felt Udayan's ghost has come back from the grave to claim his daughter. Bela was an extremely headstrong and independent woman and declared that she was going to raise the child alone. Bela's scarred heart never wanted her own child to feel the same identity crisis that she felt when her mother left her. It was then when Subhash decided to come clean and tell the grave truth he was hiding from her all these years. He let everything at stake and was determined to accept whatever Bela's decision would be after knowing the truth. (Mitchell)

When Bela came to know about Subhash, Udayan, and Gauri, she became completely shattered. She left Subhash and went to a friend's place. She needed to sort out all the information she received—the information that were brimming with shapeless emotions. At this stage, she completely was deprived of her true identity and lost all faith on her parents; she felt like a stranger who was unsure who her real loved ones are. Gradually, she understood her mother's indifference, Subhash's innocence, the sacrifice that he made for the step that her own mother and father took, and she also understood why her grandmother pointed to Udayan's portrait and referred to him as her father when they were visiting Calcutta. Bela sorted her feelings and wanted to stay with Subhash while raising her child in the same house she was raised in. She wanted her child to have a proper home and was determined to protect the child from every feeling of loneliness and abandonment that she herself helplessly agonized over all her life. (Rutherford)

After giving birth to Meghna, Bela told Subhash that now that she knows the whole truth, she loved him even more. After all these years, Bela truly became Subhash's own daughter. Bela was thankful for letting her know the truth and respected Subhash for all the sacrifices he made for her and her mother. She wanted to stay close to him and truly accepted him as her father.

In the meantime, the male and female protagonists were involved with many other characters who changed their lives to a certain extent. Subhash met Holly and becoming intimate with her was the first step he took to defy his family's rules. When Holly left him for her estranged husband Keith, Subhash understood that she still loved him no matter what and Subhash could never take Keith's place. After leaving Rhode Island and settling in California, Gauri found solace embracing a woman named Lorna. But she knew that their relationship was bound to come to an abrupt end. Subhash's heart became maimed after Gauri's departure, but many years later he found Elise and decided to spend the last years of his life with her being bound in the bond of marriage. Bela too met Drew, who made her understand the true meaning of falling in love. Bela gladly gave him the permission of becoming Meghna's father. Meghna loved Drew immensely. (Lahiri)

Knowing the truth about her actual father, Bela refers to him by his name 'Udayan', like every other American child who addresses his/her parents with names only. She decides to completely ignore her mother's existence and adopts a habit of saying that her mother had already died to her friends. Drew, whom she accepts as her husband, also did not have any fixed root in America. Bela always ended up choosing rootless fate in this familiar but alien land. Subhash shows some cultural encounter/negotiation in the beginning of the novel in-between spaces lastly reconciling with a global scene of America. Gauri on the other hand never looks back to her homeland denouncing all the culture and entirely assimilates with the multiethnic culture of California. But in the second generation diaspora of the novel, Belais shown to accept peace brought about by the independent, nomadic life of the American rural life. All the major characters uphold some characteristics of Indian tradition and culture despite their preference toward American culture. Gauri still preferred drinking tea at night, instead of wine. She also felt comfortable in traveling with an Indian shawl for warmth. Even after staying in the States for such a long time, Subhash made Indian food. American-born Bela was taught some Bengali as well and wore her hair long and braided.(Jain)

At the end it can be said that *The Lowland* is a mesh of the intermingling of social and personal histories, of the experiences of resettlement and uprooting, and of a number of human dimensions involved in relocating a culture to an alien land. Lahiri explores the family bonding making an in-depth analysis of guilt and isolation experienced by the protagonists. Lahiri brilliantly carried forward her psychological analysis of her characters, making them live in guilt and isolation by penetrating deep into the shock experienced by each of them. While investigating the dynamics of diaspora and culture in the context of characters hailing from a Bengali community, she has been successful in giving them a universal appeal, irrespective of culture and ethnicity. The novelist speaks about the dilemma of every man in every age and her readers sympathize with the uncertainties and losses faced by the characters. (Mitchell)

All through the plot, the readers sense the shadow of diaspora, the feelings of alienation, the suffocation of living one's life until death comes to take one away. Just as the two ponds represented the brothers, Gauri can be compared as the lowland between these ponds. Always indulged in a tug-of-war, belonging to neither of them. Getting engulfed in their overflowing emotions. But never becoming their possession. Gauri remained the sole witness of Udayan's death just as the lowland was. Jhumpa Lahiri brilliantly brings the readers to understand the humaneness of the characters. The readers may hate a character, but immediately will sympathize with his/her helplessness. *The Lowland* takes the readers in the journey of changing emotions and discovering new bonds within the failure of the others.

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