



Reflection of diasporic sensibility in Jhumpa Lahiri's "the lowland"

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Abstract

The present paper aims to explore the new approach to diaspora as Lahiri puts more emphasis on unfolding a variety of experience, a state of mind and sense of identity that is based more on relocation than dislocation. Diaspora consciousness or sensibility is a particular kind of awareness said to be generated among present day transnational communities. Lahiri has convincingly shown that immigrant experience and diasporic sensibility is not simple and straight forward but it is disturbing, contradictory and in a state flux. The pursuit for identity, rootlessness, reminiscence, sense of solitude and hostility, cultural adaption, globalism, multiculturalism are several imperative facets of diasporic sensibility which are reflected in *The Lowland*. In this age of globalization, it comes a long way from earlier implications of violence and moves towards third space. Lahiri's second generation characters reflect the sensibility of new Hyper Mobile, Techno Savoy diaspora. The novel also focuses on as it unfolds multigenerational story that revolves around the individual choices and decisions and the role of destiny. It portrays the 21st century globalised, multicultural and transnational diasporic culture. This culture is hybrid, heterogeneous and a plural one.

Keywords: diaspora, transitional, immigrant, identity, rootlessness, globalism, heterogeneous

Introduction

The term "Diaspora" is derived from the Greek word "dia", which means 'through' and "speirein", which means 'to scatter'. Literally, Diaspora means scattering or dispersion. Thus diaspora is a dislocation from a geographical location of origin and relocation in another territory or country. The Oxford English Dictionary 1995 edition discovers the etymology of the word diaspora back to its Greek root and to its appearance in the Old Testament. The term is associated with the Jewish historical experience. They were banished from their motherland Palestine forcefully. To survive, they spread throughout the world. This process of scattering gave birth to the new term diaspora. Today, this term has obtained a more extended meaning beyond the original implications of aggression, calamity, alienation, loss, exile and return. The process of migration in today's world made the term diaspora much more multifaceted and complicated. The question of acculturation, assimilation, belonging and not belongingness, the loss of identity have made the term complex and multilayered. It would be apt to share observation made by Sushma Varma and Radhika Seshan as they comment;

However, the Diaspora is a broader term. It is not homogeneous whole nor a series of concentric circles. Issues concerning the Diaspora would include not only the question of identity, but also questions of culture and power, multiculturalism, and transnationalism. (Varma, Seshan, 2003:29) ^[3]

Nowadays diaspora deals with decolonisation, increased immigration, global communication and transport which promote multi locale connection, dwelling and travelling within and across the nations.

The process of diaspora refers to: the process of becoming spread, the community is living in foreign parts, and the

place of geographic space in which the detached groups live. In this connection, Bill Ashcroft an Australian author defines the concept as, "Diaspora is the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions". (Ashcroft, 1998:68-70) ^[1]

Some scholars consider diaspora around the process of European colonization. Diaspora is of significance to postcolonial studies because the descendants of these people have produced unique cultures. The diaspora includes those people who reside outside their 'natal territories' and understand that their traditional motherland are reflected deeply in the languages they speak, religions they adopt, and the cultures they live.

Diaspora expresses banishment, exile and consciousness of exile. The change is not a mere change in geographical location, but the whole life is whirled in the process of immigration. The immigrants develop a feeling of loss in the process of immigration. Here the loss is the loss of tradition, past, cultural roots, sense of belongingness, etc. The dispersed community faces dual loss: one is the loss of its native culture and another as he/she cannot assimilate with the new world completely. They shuffle in between these two cultures. Nowadays the term diaspora has been used to refer a continuously altering, an unsettled concept of cultural identity. It is usually agreed upon that the concept of culture and diaspora are now associated with a vast field of meaning including global processes of de-territorialization, transnational migration, and cultural hybridity.

According to William Shafer all diasporas have been formed as an effect of voluntary or forced migration. In most cases, preferences to join or set up diasporic units have been made only after migrants have settled in their host countries. Most diasporas have been participated not only in financial activities in their host countries but also in significant cultural and political interactions with their homelands. It should also be noted that diaspora is always

intimately connected to displacement, that on the one hand, it points out disturbing experiences and on the other hand it keeps relationships with different cultures which promotes the understanding of human life among the Diasporas.

Diasporic literature is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes all the literary works in it, written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. In this context all the writers can be regarded as diasporic writers, who wrote outside their country but remained related to their homeland through their works. Diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest for identity. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. Uma Parameswaran has defined it as follows;

-----First is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind Mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have 'arrived' and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (Parameswaran, 165)

Diasporic writing unfolds the experiences of unsettlement and dislocation. A diasporic text can be investigated in terms of location, dislocation and relocation. Diasporic literature also deals mostly with the inner conflict in the context of cultural displacement.

Diasporic writers were initially more autobiographical with references to the narration of self. At a later stage they turned towards scholarly writings with studies on diaspora. The reasons of migration are social, political, financial, trade and commerce, as religious preachers, soldiers, as expatriates, or as guest workers in search of better life and opportunities. The immigrants attempt to assimilate, adapt and amalgamate with the society of their host country. Their attempts of adaptation and adjustment are not without their concern to maintain their original culture and identity.

The Indian diaspora is a general term to describe the people who migrated from India. Migration has taken place due to historical, political and economical reasons including higher education, better prospects and marriage. The origins of modern Indian diaspora lie mainly in the subjugation of India by the British and its incorporation into the British Empire. One of the significant characteristics of Indian diaspora is that they write the know-how of migration. The experiences of migrancy of Indian diaspora such as displacement, alienation, rootlessness, fragmentation, racial discrimination, marginalisation, crisis in identity, cultural confrontation, etc. are largely portrayed in contemporary Indian writing in English.

Diasporic Sensibility in Lahiri's *the Lowland*

The present paper is an attempt to explore the diasporic sensibility in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most prominent and proficient writers of Indian diaspora. She was born in London to Indian migrant mother. She is acknowledged as an Indian American writer. Her real name was Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri when she was enrolled in school, the teacher decided that Jhumpa Lahiri should be her school/good name. She has received the prominent award Pulitzer Prize for fiction, for her debut literary work *Interpreter of Maladies*. She has been shortlisted for Man Booker Prize 2013 as well as for US National Book Award

2013 for her novel *The Lowland* (2013). Lahiri has won DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in Jaipur Litfest 2015 for this novel.

The novel *The Lowland* investigates the lives of middle class educated Indian migrants either coming to America to seek higher education or brought by the stroke of fate. These immigrants are obsessed by their preference, loneliness and the guilt of vanished connections with family and lovers in their native country. A political revolt took place in India in 1960 and which is known as Naxalite movement in the first part of the novel. The second part of the novel highlights its far-reaching effects on the one family. In this novel, Lahiri focuses the diasporic dilemma of her characters whose lives cutting shuttle between India and the United States over the course of five decades. The story deals with the theme of uprooting and assimilation with attempts made to set up connectivity among the characters.

The Lowland tells the story of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra. Subhash is more careful and realistic, so he leaves the troubled city of Calcutta in order to follow an educational career in USA. His younger brother Udayan is more radical and obsessed by a sense of equality and justice, joins the Naxalite movement in the 1960s. Caught in the midst of the communist movement taking place in West Bengal, Udayan is finally put to death by the police in the lowland. His siblings return home, hoping to pick up the pieces of the crushed family, and marries Udayan's widow out of a sense of duty.

The novel deals with themes of displacement across lands, identities, choices and roles. Lahiri has created the very intricate character of Gauri. Like Moushumi, the academic in *The Namesake*, Gauri too has the capacity to alienate herself from the world, not having the idea of what she wants or why. This tendency of Gauri is resulted in her identity crisis that is heightened in a diasporic dilemma. Unlike the other characters, Gauri is troubled with a past, a tragedy and a memory of guilt haunts her life in America. Gauri had never attempted to be ideal in her role as a wife and mother. Instead of the traditional role of perfect Indian woman, she tried to discover her own identity and choices, without any proper justification.

The Lowland is different from other writings of Jhumpa Lahiri as displacement and alienation of characters is not caused only by their diasporic dilemma, but it also comes from the choices and actions of the characters. The characters experience isolation and alienation comes from an American culture in the initial days after their arrival. When busy in his research work in his early days Subhash feels a sense of alienation and loneliness as the text describes; Sailing even slightly east reminded Subhash of how far away he was from his family. He thought of the time it took to cross even a tiny portion of the earth's surface. Isolated on the ship with the scientists and other students and crew, he felt doubly alone. Unable to fathom his future, severed from his past.' (Lahiri, 2013: 50) ^[7]

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." (50)

After the tragic death of his brother, Subhash decides to

marry Gauri and bring her in America to save her from the hardships of widowhood. In the passage of time, Subhash's decision to marry Gauri has proved very painful to him as he feels acutely alone in his old age. Though he finds his life partner in Bela's teacher he feels the pangs of loneliness of old age in an alien land as the text reveals; '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.' (172)

It should also be noted that Subhash, Gauri, and Bela are equally dislocated in Calcutta and Tollygunge, where everybody knows of Udayan and his destiny. In America, nobody knows what happened with Mitra family in Calcutta that could give a necessary space to Subhash and Gauri to start a new life. However, their inner disturbance and secret of Bela's parenthood haunted their lives, and they become psychologically displaced in the diasporic environment. Gauri is a woman who is not able to forget her past, and that enforces her into a kind of aloofness and alienation not only from the present, but also from her daughter Bela. She cuts her hair according to American style, throws away her saris and attempts to lose herself in the study of philosophy. Ironically, feeling of isolation comforts her as the text depicts; 'Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings.' (165)

She torn between the two persons clings to the memory of the Udayan's death and the secret that she hides. The secret makes her unable to adapt in any place as she was a stranger in her in-laws' home, and she is an equally stranger in Subhash's life, though she likes the anonymity that American academia offers her. Jhumpa Lahiri has also dealt with alienation and isolation of Udayan when he gets injured in the preparation of explosives. He always remains under the threat of police department as the narrator informs;

He had trouble hearing, asking Gauri to repeat herself. There had been damage to one of his eardrums from the explosion. He complained of dizziness, a high-pitched sound that would not go away. He said he could not hear the shortwave when she could hear it perfectly well. 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. (78)

Udayan's death is the result of his being involved in the killing of a police officer called Nirmal Dey, though Udayan was not the one to use the knife, he was the one, among those who plotted the murder. Gauri becomes a part of the plan when she spies on Dey and keeps a track of his daily timetable. In her blind belief and love, Gauri either never comprehends the consequences of her actions or ignores the doubt that makes her question Udayan's intentions, in asking her to spy. The ramifications of the actions long ago still disturb the Mitra family. The event of Udayan's death changes the course of their lives in Calcutta and Rhode Island. It shows how the socio - political incidents back at home affects immigrants lives for generations together. As Meera Bharwani rightly comments; '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.' (145)

After their arrival in America, Subhash again showed his maturity. Knowing that it will take Gauri time to accept him as a husband, Subhash keeps patience with her and tries to give her space to not make her feel cornered or pressurized to allow her active participant in the relationship. Gauri soon gives birth to a daughter Bela, but cannot bring herself to care for the child as much as a mother would. Not out of post-delivery despair or because she still mourns for Udaya anymore, but because of her inner obsession for seclusion and philosophy, she cannot love and attach with Subhash and Bela. Soon even the sexual aspect of their relationship did not carry forward. When a couple of years into the marriage, it dawns on Subhash that Gauri won't have any child with him or even love Bela the way a mother should.

Gauri adopts the American concept of liberty spotlighting on individual independence and personal advancement. At the center of the novel is Gauri's unresponsiveness as a mother. By and by, she is so self-absorbed that she cares neither for her husband nor her daughter Bela. She became preoccupied with philosophy, a discipline that is deeply associated with problems of life, love, destiny, God and so on. The critical obsession with philosophy makes her alienate and unconcerned towards actual human life, love, and family bonding. Gauri more and more isolates herself, pouring her energy into a doctorate in philosophy. She specializes in the neo- Marxist social theory of the Frankfurt School.

Subhash finally realizes to himself, the marriage is a mistake and was damned from the beginning as predicted by his mother. Through this marriage, he wants to attach to his brother Udayan but the marriage displaced him psychologically. The farce of the marriage finally ends 12 years later, when Subhash has to return to India owing to the death of his father. Six weeks later when Bela and Subhash return to Rhode Island, they find the house empty and a note written by Gauri, explaining that she has left for good and is shifting to California, where she has been received a job in one of the universities.

The separated couple never meets again. Bela is obviously left shell-shocked by these developments and in the wake of the separation of her parents ends up in depression. She became a victim of alienation and withdrew herself from family and decides to follow a nomadic life and never marry. She is psychologically displaced due to eccentric and disgusting behavior of her mother. It is years later, that a now 34-year-old Bela finally discovers the truth of her parentage and though enraged at the disclosure, forgives Subhash - since he has been the only parent she has ever really had and been loved by. Subhash was collapsed after reading the paper of Gauri written in Bengali language informing him her decision to pursue her obsession by handing him over all responsibilities of Bela. Though Subhash experienced freedom from a loveless marriage, his fathering Bela got a shock when he observed her looking her own space for establishing her identity, as the text narrates; '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.' (214)

He began to be enfolded in fear and nervousness as he felt that his fatherhood was breaking down under the feeling of loneliness in an alien land.

Conclusion

The above discussion shows how the novel is a collage of the experiences of uprooting and resettlement, of the intermingling of personal and social histories, and of many other human dimensions involved in transplanting a culture to a new land. Lahiri explores familial relationships in *The Lowland*, makes an in-depth study of isolation and guilt experienced by the protagonists. In *The Lowland*, Lahiri combined both history and life experiences, to bring out a superb fiction steeped in isolation and guilt to her protagonists. She has successfully given her characters a universal appeal – making them stand for the dilemma of every man in every age, irrespective of culture and ethnicity. With her simple, absorbing and straightforward narration, the fictionist explores very powerfully familial ties and emotional relationships. The story revolves around minute observation of life with great suspense page after page.

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