



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Tracing the 'Third-Space Identity' in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*.

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Tracing the 'Third-Space' is very interesting while reading Jhumpa Lahiri as it is the pivotal point of focus in her writings. She excels in picturizing a new model of American identity, though being always tagged as a diasporic writer. Creativity is taken to a new height by a significant enrichment of narrative by Jhumpa Lahiri. She employs socio-cultural and familial past as recurring themes. Here is an attempt to explore immigrant experiences in Lahiri's latest novel *The Lowland*, which got shortlisted for Man Booker Prize 2013. It emphasizes the significance of time and attitude of generations in the process to get themselves assimilated. For the first generation, strong feelings about the country of their origin are inevitable. From the second generation onward, ties with the homeland get gradually replaced by those of the adopted country. Cultural differences remain with the host country, but they start melting as new generations realize that they belong to America's-global culture and their Indian connection does not create any hurdle in their process of assimilation.

The capacity of American socio-cultural milieu to absorb the 'other' resulted in the emergence of global space. The influence of home culture tortures the immigrants but they turn Americanized as they struggle with their minds. Jhumpa Lahiri delves deep into the souls of indelible characters struggling with displacement, guilt and fear as they try to find a balance between the solace and suffocation of tradition and terror along with the excitement of future into the new set up.

As far as the novel *The Lowland* is concerned, it is certainly Lahiri's most ambitious undertaking which eventually opens out into a moving family story. Born just fifteen months apart Subhash and Udayan Mitra are inseparable brothers. One is often mistaken for the other in the Calcutta neighborhood. But they are also opposites with different futures ahead. It is the 1960s and Udayan, the charismatic and impulsive, finds himself drawn to the

Naxalite movement. He is a man who can risk everything for what he believes in. On the other hand, Subhash, the dutiful son, doesn't share his brother's political passion and leaves home to pursue a life of scientific research in America. But when Subhash learns what happened to his brother in the 'lowland' outside their family's home, he comes to India to mourn the death of his brother. He helps to heal the wounds Udayan left behind for the family. He marries the widow of Udayan and takes her to America from the torturing widowhood of Calcutta that she was destined to live throughout her life. *The Lowland* is suspense filled, a masterly crafted novel of fate and will, exile and return. Thus the work offers a lot to explore about the new generation and their lives wherein they try to attain a belonging to a particular place seeking out a new American identity.

Assimilation is a complex process in which immigrants integrate themselves with a new country, but, in this process, lose their heritage too. Their own conscious minds force them to believe that they are assimilated. Accommodating to another culture is not an easy process. Lahiri, through her works, talks about human condition of sensibility about her family's ethnic heritage and the lives of South Asian immigrants in the United States. In the minds of expatriate Indians burden of alienation and rootlessness is well captured.

Dynamics of shift and cultural pull are just one part of the story of the new age or second or third generation Indian-Americans. Cultural interactions have led to the transformation leading to multicultural societies. Swinging from one culture to get grafted in the 'other culture' has become a way of life for them. Therefore, the feeling of 'in-betweeness' is generated. How the dominant cultures cannibalize the non-dominant ones has always been a subject favouring literary artists. United States is basically a migrant nation where the cultural cartographies are blurred to some extent. It is easy to come across instances of hybridity occurring in the recent generations of Indian diaspora in the U.S.

Transplanting people into new soil makes them harder and reactive. It is a suitable metaphor for the transformation that Lahiri oversees in *The Lowland*, in which two generations of Bengali immigrants to America, struggle to build normal and secure lives. As her characters mature in their new environments, they feel themselves as completely mixed up. Generations undergo suffocation in handling relationships. Trips to India, once in three or four years, often excited them.

A nostalgic reminiscence about their homeland is still evident in the first generation characters. Their roots are so deep that nothing can take them away from the memories of their motherland. They had a few visits back their land of origin and also recalled it in their minds. But when it comes to the next generation differences in attitudes can be clearly spotted. Second and third generations were less interested in their parent's land and culture. Difficulties faced by the first generation and second generation during the early stages of expatriation were variable. Institutions, society, economic milieu, all offered a struggled path indifferent to what they were accustomed to. Cultural environment in America, where relationships have another level of exposure, embarrassed them, making it difficult for the Indian diaspora to get assimilated with it.

The first generation immigrants often undergo a check when they have to overcome haunting memories of their past in the harsh reality of the present. Living conditions offered by the adopted land, for them, are hostile in the beginning. They have to suppress their inner desires in the name of assimilation, for their existence. The second generation's approach is somewhat different. They want an assimilated life despite the fact that like their parents are indifferent to the host culture. For them their assimilation-dreams are thwarted by none other than their own parents.

Bela, the daughter, blames Subhash for Gauri's departure. Her grades drop and she has no friends. She has to see a psychologist but without any results. She even tries to commit suicide. After a critical year she turns outward and joins the marching band, plays the clarinet, and embraces ecology and recycling. She is never at home and does not reconnect with her father. Bela excels in environmental science at Liberal Arts College in the Midwest, but does not want to spend her life in a university. In order to create her own space, she moves to western Massachusetts to work on a farm, weeding and harvesting, cleaning animal wastes. She deliberately rebels against her parents and dismisses the academic lifestyle. Bela takes up jobs on farms across the country. She turns careless, wears denim overalls and heavy soiled boots. Subhash notices, "calluses on her palms, dirt beneath her nails. Her skin smelled of soil. The back of her neck and her shoulders, her face, turned a deeper brown" (222). She travels like a nomad, working on American soils from Washington State to Arizona, Kentucky and Missouri. Bela plants trees, maintains beehives and raises animals. She lives for a few months in Montana, in a tent. She has no insurance, no fixed address and no concern for her own future. She lives in a productive, generative time, linked to agriculture. Individual time is subordinated to collective time and well-being. Bakhtin writes in his book *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*, "agricultural time is a pregnant time, a fruit-bearing time, a birthing time and a time that conceives again. This is a time maximally tensed towards the future" (207). He explains that generative time is irreversible binding together the earth and the laboring hand of humans.

Later Bela moves to Baltimore and Detroit, and helps to convert abandoned properties into community gardens, before settling in Brooklyn for a short period. Here she trains the youths to turn a dilapidated playground into vegetable beds. She feels comfortable in sharing a house with ten other people. In Brooklyn she overhears some workers from Bangladesh speaking Bengali, "a language she stopped hearing after her mother left" (*The Lowland* 256). She thinks about the past she shares with the Bangladeshi workmen: "Ancestors for what was once a single country, a common land" (256). Motherless and rootless, Bela concentrates all her efforts on her work. She dislikes the cultures of consumerism and scolds Subhash for buying fruits and vegetables from supermarkets: "What we consume is what we support, she said, telling him he needed to do his part. She could be selfrighteous, as Udayan had been" (*The lowland* 224). Subhash accepts Bela for what she is but cannot help being worried for her future: "She had eschewed the stability he had worked to provide. She'd forged a rootless path, one which seemed precarious to him. One which excluded him. But, as with Gauri, he'd let her go" (*The Lowland* 224-25). Bela is miraculously able to be reborn and discover meaning in her life dedicating all her time and effort to the prosperity of the community.

Immigration changed Gauri also radically. In Calcutta she had been devoted to the collective good whereas in the United States she leads a hyper-individualized life, focusing only on her research. Ironically, her American-born daughter takes up organic farming instead of pursuing higher education, and supports an anti-capitalist lifestyle. At thirty-four, Bela is “brown, sturdy, unadorned” (*The Lowland* 261). She gets pregnant but does not tell Subhash who the father is, nor does she want to involve him in the child’s upbringing. Still, she takes Subhash’s help in raising her baby.

She gives birth to a daughter and names her Meghna, after a river that flows into the Bay of Bengal in India. The cold relationship between her parents, Gauri and Subhash, prevented Bela from having an enduring romantic relationship of her own. She cannot imagine herself in a solid and happy relationship: “Bela will never marry, she knows this about herself. The unhappiness between her parents: this has been the most basic awareness of her life” (258). However, she meets Drew, a farmer whose family had lived on the same homestead for several generations. Bela has traveled to India and even across America, while Drew is rooted in Rhode Island since generation. They become close friends and, after initially telling a lie to Drew that her mother died of an illness in India, she confesses that Gauri abandoned her. She admits that this is the reason she avoids being with one person. The ‘home’ that Subhash built for her in Rhode Island, reminds her too much of her mother’s absence and she leaves home frequently trying to forget her past with a tendency to get lost in the multi-ethnic and pluralistic society of America.

The issues of race, colour and ethnicity are the ones that the expatriates share without any matter of generational gap. It reveals the racial apartheid against Indian immigrants. *The Lowland* offers certain immigrant experiences. Subhash's dilemma reflects, “Here each day he remembered how he'd felt those evenings he and Udayan had spent into the Tolly Club. This time he'd been admitted officially, and yet he remained vigilant, at the threshold” (36). Subhash desperately wanted to leave his place. After succeeding in it, he got struck with the thoughts of his homeland. The feeling of not belonging to America provokes him to utter the same to his friend. American and Indian family life are totally different. Generations grow under their ancestor's shade in India, whereas America believed in open relationships, and family never became a matter of commitment that thwarted individual freedom. Geographical distances became a barrier to him. “It was the distance between America and India; that now separated him from his family” (65). Americans and Indians follow quite different cuisines. It was unlikely to merge into the taste of the land in the beginning. “They ate pieces of chicken cooked in mushrooms and wine, served with bread warmed in the oven instead of with rice. The taste was complex...” (71). Apart from all these, first generation immigrants wanted to live their rest of the life back in India. “And yet they preferred India, not wanting to retire here” (250). Life witnessed a change in case of Subhash, with the passage of time. The memory of the parents seems to fading away from his active mind. As Lahiri observes:

He was learning to live without hearing their voices, to receive news of them only in writing... and wrote that he was eager to see them. And yet, day after day, cut off from them, he ignored them. (*The Lowland* 63)

It shows Subhash's attempt to be an assimilated immigrant in the American society. Lahiri further shares Subhash's state of mind:

The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them, he was the sole link. Here life ceased to obstruct or assault him. Here was a place where humanity was not always pushing, rushing, running, as if with a fire at its back. And yet, certain physical aspects of Rhode Island . . . corresponded roughly to Calcutta, within India. (*The Lowland* 34)

The suffocation of being caught between two altogether different cultures is visible in all the expatriate characters. Then life is never so smooth as it seems especially when one has to fight against the mental agony. Lahiri shares with the readers that this is how Gauri endeavours to get assimilated with the host culture:

And yet she remained, in spite of her western clothes, her western academic interests, a woman who spoke English with foreign accent ... still unconventional. (*The Lowland* 236)

Although expatriates will never be considered as natives for the reason of their identity, yet as they mature, they give up themselves to the circumstances and become insiders. For the first generation immigrants, the landscape of memory and homeland are more significant. As one shifts, one assesses the geographical dislocation and analyses the socio-cultural boundaries. Diasporic persons live simultaneously in two cultures, forming a 'third-space'. The psychological movement from one state to another causes dilemma, nostalgia, sense of alienation and loss. Yet for the sake of comfortable living in the new nation they crave for an American identity for themselves. For the second and the third generation Indian-Americans the 'Third-Space' is a postcolonial concept of identity. It explains the position of each person as a hybrid. It is the space where both the cultures come to meet together. Being in 'third-space', as felt by the hyphenated society, depicts the conflict of the mind of immigrants. Their lives are submerged beneath the boundaries of culture and nationality. "A jellyfish had drifted up from the Caribbean, spread like a flattened chrysanthemum on the hard sand" (*The Lowland* 66) exemplifies the process of being forced to root in an alien soil, almost reluctantly. While answering to a question, in an interview, about how different the experiences of Indian immigrants to the United states are different from those of their America born children, Jhumpa Lahiri herself says:

The question of identity is always a difficult one for those who are culturally displaced, as the immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously as is the case for their children. She spells out that the older she gets, the more aware she is that she has somehow inherited a sense of exile from her parents, even though in many ways a superficial one largely. She feels that she is more American than they are and yet not fully American. For



immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness and the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. (Web)

America is still a place where the rest of the world comes to reinvent itself, accepting it with excitement and anxiety. It is the mix of ethnicities, languages and cultures that co-exist within this society. Known for her unique prose style and penetrating insights, Lahiri attains new heights of artistry, flawless transparency and intimacy with characters. Her characters tend to be immigrants from India but their America-born children, who straddle two countries and two cultures belong to neither. They are used to freedom to accept the rituals and conventions of home, and yet steeped in tradition to embrace American way of life fully. The Indian-American parents want to fulfil the 'American Dream' for their children namely brand schools, a prestigious job, a large house etc. But they are anxious about the pitfalls of life in this alien land and feel isolated due to their difficulties with language and customs. Their children-the second and third generation Indian-Americans-often feel outsiders having grown up translating the mysteries of the United States for their relatives. They are fluent navigators of both Indian and American cultures but feel at home with none.

Subhash comes to deliver several lectures at the University of Calcutta, so Bela is left with her grandmother and Deepa, a servant. In Tollygunge, the girl is not permitted to leave the house alone. In Rhode Island, her mother had allowed her since third grade to wander the campus which seemed “enormous to her, with streets to cross, cars to be mindful of” (203). At first she is afraid of the Indian metropolis, “at once ramshackle and grand” (195). Then Subhash starts taking her out for shopping, or to visit the Zoo and eat at Chinese restaurants. Bela records the heavy traffic, noise, and pollution. Her twelfth birthday is celebrated inside the Tolly Golf Club. She swims in the pool, rides a pony, speaks English to other children. Subhash walks with her across the Golf Course and tells her how they had to sneak in when he and his brother were little. He lies that Udayan had died of an infection. Ironically, they have access to a space, previously out of the reach of the Indians, particularly the lower classes. Subhash has returned as a foreigner and Bela was born in the United States. Had Udayan been alive, he would have surely disapproved and accused Subhash of siding with the enemy.

After their return to Rhode Island, after six weeks in India, the landscape is unchanged, but their house is vacant. The windows are shut and locked, leaving the rooms dark and the soil of the houseplants dry. There is no food in the fridge and no sign of Gauri. Subhash finds a letter in which she announces that she has moved to California to teach at a college. From now onward, Bela sees her mother only in a shadow that appears briefly on her wall each day, reminding the girl of Gauri's profile:

In this apparition, every morning, Bela recognized her mother, and felt visited by her. It was the sort of spontaneous association one might make while looking up at a passing cloud. But in this case never breaking apart, never changing into anything else. (*The lowland* 213)

Gauri is now just a ghost in her daughter's room. The narrative is replete with haunted houses and ghostly presences looming over spaces and people's lives. The past perpetually overshadows the present and spoils the future. Gauri goes as far from Rhode Island as she can and lands on the opposite side of the United States, in Los Angeles. For the second time in her life she crosses a threshold and hopes to start afresh in a place where nobody knows her. Besides the spatial distance, the time gap between the two coasts also cuts her off from the people she has abandoned.

The three hours on her watch that separated her from Bela and Subhash were like a physical barrier, as massive as the mountains she'd flown over to get here. She'd done it, the worst thing she could think of doing. (*The Lowland* 232)

Still, she constantly fears that Bela or Subhash would come, "confronting her, exposing her. Apprehending her, the way the police had apprehended Udayan" (231). But they never look for her in twenty years. She moves around freely, takes up teaching jobs in Santa Cruz and San Francisco, before settling in a small, unnamed college town in Southern California. She teaches a seminar on the hermeneutics of time, and relocates for a year to Heidelberg, where she is invited as a visiting scholar. She still carries 'the shawl from Subhash' during her journeys. She has a good relationship with her colleagues and students, but otherwise lives like a widow though continuing to wear the wedding band. Gauri has brief affairs with different men and even with a woman (a graduate student at UCLA who requests Gauri to be the outside reader of her dissertation). In the United States she has had the opportunity to reinvent herself several times.

She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end. Thus, Udayan's widow becomes Subhash's wife; as Bela's mother she abandons her daughter and behaves like a "childless woman. (*The Lowland* 240)

As a woman, who is not divorced, she gets involved with other men and a woman. But her controversial choices have led her to a place where she is irredeemably alone. She has actively chosen to take these steps, yet she has failed at turning back time, and hence has lived unhappily. Walking away from Bela does not turn out to be a redemption. Instead, it "had been her own act of killing. A connection she had severed, resulting in a death that applied only to the two of them. It was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed" (242). However, Gauri often searches on the internet for traces of Udayan and Bela. As no results show up, she regrets that her daughter does not exist in the 'web' world. She does come across information about the Naxalite movement, still operating in India and Nepal, and about Kanu Sanyal, the leader whom Udayan had followed blindly. Articles call Sanyal both a hero and a terrorist. Gauri is captivated by the internet and its power to dive so into the past and come out with the desired information.

At every moment the past is there, appended to the present.

It's a version of Bela's definition in childhood, of yesterday. (The Lowland 275).

Gauri still has an Indian passport, although she never returned to India after coming to the US. Over the years, California has become her only home. She loves the climate, the familiar vegetation, and its vastness. She feels "protected by that impersonal ongoing space" (236). Although their marriage did not work out, Gauri is grateful to Subhash for having taken her away from Tollygunge. "He had brought her to America, and then, like an animal briefly caged, released her" (242). Immigration frees Gauri from societal demands of India and empowers her professionally. Yet she continues to bear an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had married. She still speaks English with a foreign accent. Her complexion is still dark and, against the backdrop of most America, she is a strange woman. Bela, on the other hand, as a second generation representative, strives to get assimilated fully with the American world forgetting the first part of her life and her connection with India. Carrying the genes of Udayan, she believes in independence and self reliance and works accordingly.

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