



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

An Examination Of Bela's Difficulties In Navigating Dual Identities And Traditional Norms In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* explores the complexities of cultural identity, displacement, and acculturation through the experiences of its characters, particularly Bela, the daughter of Indian immigrants. The novel delves into themes of cultural estrangement and hybridity, examining how Bela navigates her dual heritage as a second-generation immigrant in the United States. Drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, the analysis highlights Bela's internal conflict as she struggles to reconcile her Indian roots with her American upbringing. Her fragmented identity is further compounded by her mother Gauri's abandonment and her father Subhash's emotional distance, leaving her culturally adrift. The novel also embodies postmodern themes, such as fragmented narratives and the rejection of traditional structures, as seen in Bela's rootless existence and her defiance of familial and societal expectations. Through Bela's journey, Lahiri underscores the fluidity of identity in a globalized world, where cultural belonging is neither fixed nor singular. The study concludes that *The Lowland* portrays identity as a mosaic of experiences, shaped by dislocation, multicultural influences, and the absence of cohesive cultural anchors.

Keywords: Cultural Estrangement, Acculturation, Hybridity, Postmodernism, Displacement, Double Consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* intricately weaves together the themes of cultural estrangement and acculturation through the experiences of its characters, particularly Subhash and Gauri, who struggle with displacement, emotional disconnection, and the challenges of adapting to a new culture while navigating their ties to their Indian heritage. The novel explores how these processes shape their identities, relationships, and sense of belonging, ultimately leading to profound personal and psychological consequences.

CULTURE ESTRANGEMENT AND ACCULTURATION

Acculturation theory was formulated by scholar, anthropologist and psychologist John W. Berry who identified different strategies that individuals and groups might adopt when they encounter a new culture. The main character, Subhash, experiences cultural estrangement after moving to the US for further education and struggles with the loneliness and isolation of a foreign country. He finds it challenging to completely integrate into American culture because of his strong ties to his Indian family and customs. A crucial component of acculturation, Subhash's journey illustrates the conflict between clinging to his cultural heritage and the requirement to adjust to his new surroundings. Gauri, on the other hand, experiences a more profound sense of Cultural estrangement that intensifies after her migration. Following the death of her husband Udayan, and her subsequent marriage to Subhash, she was pushed into an unfamiliar life. Her relationship with Subhash is marked by emotional distance and misunderstanding, as their differing perspectives and struggles with acculturation creates a barrier between them. The interplay between cultural estrangement and acculturation is further evident in Gauri's relationship with her daughter, Bela. Bela is raised in a culturally mixed environment and is not conversant with either Indian or American customs. Bela experiences a psychological vacuum as a result of Gauri's emotional distance and eventual desertion, which leaves her culturally lost and unable to develop a strong sense of self.

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN BELA

The novel *The Lowland* can be analysed and interpreted with the concept double consciousness. The concept and idea of Double Consciousness was first proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The book explains the internal struggles of the marginalized groups especially African Americans face discrimination in a society of one racial or cultural group predominates. The key aspects of double consciousness are dual identity, internal conflict, social and psychological impact, resistance and empowerment. The concept double consciousness greatly suits the character Bela in the novel. This deeply shapes the character's dual cultural identity when she tried to navigate the tension between the Indian heritage and her lifestyle in the United States. This highlights Bela's internal struggle to reconcile with the cultural influences and rejection of the traditional Indian life signifies a rebellion against societal influences by the culture and identity.

"She had no memory of her mother's parents, no sense of her mother's past. She knew only that her mother had grown up in Calcutta, that she had *come to* America as a young woman, that she had left when Bela was a child." (Lahiri).

This quotation underscores Bela's disjointed comprehension of her cultural heritage. The few vague details that constitute her knowledge of her mother's past underscore her disconnection from her Indian heritage. Bela's disconnection from her Indian heritage is emphasized by her mother's absence. Gauri's choice to leave her family behind in order to chase an academic career in California means that Bela lacks a mother figure to help her navigate the intricacies of her bicultural identity. Bela thus grows up feeling disconnected from her Indian heritage and the traditional norms tied to it.

"She did not know the names of the rivers in India, or the languages spoken there. She did not know the stories her father had grown up with, the festivals he had celebrated." (Lahiri)

Bela's profound disconnection from her roots is reflected in her lack of knowledge about basic aspects of Indian culture, such as its geography, languages, and traditions. This lack of awareness stems from Subhash not having actively shared his cultural heritage with her. This struggle reflects the notion that people often define themselves in opposition to imposed roles, but they remain influenced by themselves (Fanon).

POST MODERN THEMES IN THE LOWLAND

Post Modernism is a term which refers to cultural, philosophical and an artistic movement that emerged in the twentieth century as a reaction to modernism. It mainly focuses on the universal truths, challenges the traditional ideas and grand narratives, emphasizes subjectivity and skepticism. It often uses disjointed, non linear stories, parody, irony and comedy in literature. It clearly says that there is no absolute truth whereas modernism focused in discovering the convention and indepth truths. The novel *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri embodies the post modernism themes such as fragmented identity and cultural hybridity particularly with the characters Bela and Megna who struggles with the identity in India and America. The character Bela's fragmented identity was shaped by her mother's abandonment and her father's hidden truth, which made her completely devastated at her early age when she was young. As an environmental activist she rejects the traditional structures like education and family expectations which leads her to a rootless existence as she was drifting across the United States. This way of lifestyle reflects postmodern dislocation, where traditional and important anchors like home and culture lose their meaning and its values. Her identity remains unfixed which clearly highlights that it is not fixed, singular, unified entity but rather a mosaic of experiences, relationships, and contexts in the postmodern era. Ultimately, Bela's journey illustrates the complex and evolving nature of identity in a fragmented, multicultural world. As a second generation immigrant, Bela's life represents cultural hybridity where her identity navigates between two worlds as a Indian and an American. She completely differs from her Bengali family as they strongly hold on to their Indian traditions and cultural customs.

CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* intricately examines postmodern themes through the lens of second-generation characters like Bela, shedding light on the complexities of identity in a globalized era. Bela's fragmented sense of self and her oscillation between her Indian heritage and American upbringing symbolize the fluidity and in-betweenness that define cultural hybridity. Bela's journey highlights identity is no longer fixed but mediated and constantly evolving.

WORK CITED

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