

Unpacking Cultural Hybridity and Diasporic Femininity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to illustrate the traumas, moral quandaries, sorrows, and, in the end, the cultural hybridity of diasporic women found in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. Her novel helps us understand the psyche of these women of a new age since it resonates to them. Lahiri depicts a fusion of politics, history, and their impact on a family's life in *The Lowland*. The novel has been loosely drawn on a large canvas to depict the multigenerational tale of personal goals and choices. This novel portrays the international diasporic culture of the twenty-first century as well as the multiculturalism and metamorphosis of the immigrants. Because her female protagonists accurately depict the diasporic difficulties that affect them in daily life - such as cultural tensions, marginalization, family relationships, customs, rituals, a sense of not belonging, transformation, and adaptation - this study is extremely important.

Jhumpa Lahiri, the most influential Indian American Diasporic author, is the ideal person to interpret cultural plurality. She is accurate enough to portray Indian customs and culture in a realistic manner. Her writing is a sharp critique of the ties, commitments, and human relationships that people have to both their home country and the place they have relocated to. People who are cut off from their birthplace both geographically and culturally suffer from a sense of alienation in their hearts. In her made-up universe, she deftly blends three nations: America, her current residence, England, the nation of her parents, and India, the land of her ancestors. Her characters heroically deal with this cultural displacement as they alternate between two cultures on a regular basis.

When Lahiri discusses the inspiration for *The Lowland*, she says that it stems from the most tragic event she ever experienced as a teenager in India, which she learnt about while staying at her grandparents' home in Calcutta. Two young boys who were involved in a violent political movement in their neighbourhood were put to death. The smeary landscape between the two ponds in Tollygunge, Kolkata, near the Mitra family's home, is implied by the title, *The Lowland*. On rainy days, the overflow of rainfall unites these two ponds, but on hot, sunny days, evaporation separates them once more. The two ponds represent the two Mitra brothers, who are different in viewpoint but similar on the outside. It is a multivocal story about making the decision to go into exile in the pursuit of identity and self. It tells the story of Subhash and Udayan Mitra, whose fates diverge greatly - Subhash goes to the United States to get his doctorate, while Udayan becomes increasingly extreme and joins the Naxalite Movement.

Through letters, Subhash stays in touch with his brother Udayan. Subhash receives word in one of the letters that his brother wed Gauri in secret against their parents' wishes. He sends him a picture of her as well. Udayan eventually faces consequences for his Naxalite Movement involvement, and after a police confrontation in the lowlands of Tollygunge, he is executed. For the first time in three years, Subhash returns to India after receiving a telegram announcing Udayan's passing in the hopes of comforting the bereaved family. There, he learns from his brother's widow, Gauri, the main character of the novel, the cause of his death. Out of a sense of familial duty and affection for his brother, Subhash marries Gauri and

brings her to Rhode Island, USA, after seeing his parents' callous and uncaring treatment of a five-month pregnant widow, Gauri, and repeated police enquiries over Udayan's death. They do not, however, have any romantic feelings for one another.

The Naxalite Movement, a genuine political movement that occurred in several post-independence regions in the 1960s, is portrayed in the novel's first section. The extensive effects on the Mitra family are described in the second section. As a result, several reviewers reluctantly reconsider *The Lowland's* status as an immigrant literary tale. It tells the story of the experiences of diasporic characters who, over the course of five decades, alternate between their adopted country, America, and their place of birth, India. The political unrest in the motherland and the challenge of acclimating and assimilating in a distant country serve as the backdrop for the narrative. It tells the story of Indians who migrate to another country in search of better job prospects, higher education, or other reasons. The novel's two main characters both move from Calcutta to Tollygunge at the same time, but neither do so physically.

Rather of focussing on the fundamental components of the diaspora specifically, the novel defines the situation of an individual's fate. Gauri is presented as a contradictory character in *The Lowland*; while she is seen as a strong, independent lady, she is also shown to be a self-centred, opportunistic woman. Gauri is a very nuanced and capricious persona. She plays a self-centred, obstinate, smart, and open-minded character. Gauri has been described by Lahiri as a girl who is distinct from the average girl in modern Indian society. She appreciates independence and remains with her grandparents as the youngest member of the family. She does not care about her relatives and is preoccupied with her education; "she prefers books to jewels and saris" (46). She defies the customs and culture of an Indian girl, who is often conscious of her appearance and enjoys wearing saris and jewels. She is the girl who, rather than taking on the duties of a wife and mother like an Indian woman would, deliberately chooses to pursue her dreams of more education and a successful profession. She seizes the chance to further her academic and professional goals when she relocates to the United States following her second marriage to Subhash.

The author has sought to define the conflicting principles of self-actualization of an Indian immigrant woman through the character of Gauri, focussing on how she defies cultural norms, rituals, traditions, and standards to pursue her own interests. The author aims to capture the metamorphosis of an Indian immigrant woman living abroad. Gauri relocates to Rhode Island after getting married to Subhash, leaving her troubled history in Tollygunge behind. Although they do not currently share affection, their connection is based on "a shared awareness of the person they'd both loved" (115). Their bond serves as a channel for communicating with the past and envisioning a shared future in America. Gauri enjoys the quiet, isolated life in America. Like other of Lahiri's female characters, Gauri appears to integrate into the Indian community after arriving in the United States. This is evident from her happiness at the dinner party hosted by Narasimhan and his wife Kate, two other Indian immigrants. She likes the other women's company during the party as well. When Subhash discovers Gauri's friendships with other Indian women, he is ecstatic.

In her other works, Lahiri has portrayed this kind of gathering to support and empower immigrant women in a new area and to foster a sense of belonging. However, Gauri falls short of Lahiri's strategy for adapting in a foreign land. This is insufficient to help her adjust to her recent psychological and geographic upheaval. In contrast to the traditional utopian image of a diasporic immigrant woman who protests to the uniform understanding of woman in representation and fulfilment for individual woman existing within a particular setting, Lahiri has depicted Gauri's character.

Gauri extols the virtues of the American environment, particularly its independence and seclusion. From her perspective, it is a cosy friend. She does not spend much time outside the residence. She eventually begins to explore the university. Twice a week, she goes

to the philosophy lectures and the library. She currently wears a "sari," a traditional Indian garment, and a student on college compliments her outfit nicely. The woman is Indian. An Indian woman's "sari" is a priceless article of apparel that symbolises her Indian identity. However, Gauri has a disgusting yearning to be like other women on campus: Gauri felt awkward as she watched the girl go. She started to desire to seem like a lady Udayan had never seen, like the other women she saw on campus.

According to Lahiri, Gauri saw her sociocultural and geographic limitations as a barrier to her development as soon as she realised them. She believed that these restrictions would physically and mentally imprison her, trapping her in the homely collocation. Gauri believed that she would be limited to her family's needs and her own house after Bela was born. Her ideal life could not be fulfilled. Her range of motion is restricted. She saw her house as a jail and acknowledged her own poverty as an Indian wife and mother. Gauri's home was not loving and secure, but rather a gendered place moulded by diverse and unequal relations of power. It made her feel alienated and miserable.

Gauri, like most Indian immigrant women, is totally dependent on Subhash for financial support; "she was a student, without an income... Without him, Gauri could not survive" (176). She wants to start her schooling in the hostland, thus he won't let her employ a babysitter. Even though he had encouraged her to pursue her education prior to their marriage, he now rejects her desire and expects her to care for Bela on her own, much like a mother would. She understood that he did not view this as her work, even though he had encouraged her to occasionally attend lectures and to spend her free time at the library. He informed her that Bela should come first, even though he had previously told her that she could continue her education in America if she accepted his proposal of marriage.

According to Subhash, Gauri only needs to be a wife and mother, reflecting the patriarchal influence on the development of female Indian identity. Although Gauri has never expressed her displeasure, perhaps because Subhash has been reluctant to meet her unique needs and goals, her daughter Bela has come to understand later in life that her mother had sent a constant, fixed ambient signal of unhappiness. It was communicated without using any words.

As a result of her imprisonment, Gauri's bitterness and confusion surface in her escapism, which causes her to permanently part from Subhash and Bela while they were in India. At the beginning of the novel, Gauri makes unconventional but constrained decisions about her marriage and remarriage, showing her violation of the law both times. The author also confuses Gauri's pregnancy with being foreign. Gauri's pregnancy at the time of her move to America marks her as an Indian diasporic woman who is expected to uphold her local culture in the homeland, even though this is also presented as an unusual movement.

Lahiri transforms the stereotype of women in *The Lowland*, reshaping the constrained classifications and precincts that surround them. For Subhash and Bela, Gauri's leaving for California was a blow. Upon returning to America, neither of them was able to locate Gauri. Her leaving her house is a violation of the stereotype of an Indian mother living abroad.

Like other female protagonists from the Indian diaspora, Gauri views her birthplace as a source of oppression rather than an avenue for empowerment. By choosing her over ambition, rather than the husband-wife or mother-daughter relationships, she subverts the selfless image of the mother. Her rejection of the obligations and bonds of family life traverses the sociocultural roles that patriarchy and nation have defined for women. Gauri's choices for her unique subjectivity and Lahiri's attempts to re-portray the Indian lady as anything other than the stereotypical immigrant mother in her earlier works through the story of *The Lowland*. Yasmin Hussain states that "two types of women are presented in Indian women's fiction, the conventional and the unconventional" (*Writing Diaspora*, 56). In contrast to Gauri, who portrays the unusual image of a woman by her life's choices and preferences, Lahiri's early works depict the traditional picture of a woman.

Unconventional women suffer because of questioning and breaking social standards. They feel as though their unusual choices and decisions have isolated them from both their family and society. In *The Lowland*, Gauri makes the decision to separate herself from all external restrictions to create a space in her life that is more appropriate for her to occupy. She understands that staying in the house will force her to live up to Subhash's expectations and wishes because he brought her to America and then, like a short-lived caged animal, released it. As far as the circumstance is concerned, Subhash is not to blame for her leaving, but he has not tried to get her back either.

Gauri therefore breaks through societal and ideological barriers and departs from preconceived ideas about what a woman ought to be. She does not identify with the stereotypical portrayal of an immigrant Indian woman. She is a unique girl because of her search for a place of her own, both mentally and physically, in a place of estrangement and displacement. She had painted herself into a corner and then out of the picture with her own hands. Going out shows Gauri's increasing independence. Nevertheless, Gauri starts a new life after Subhash and Bela leave her, but she is immediately isolated and alienated, which allows her to renegotiate her existence - but on her own terms and circumstances. She goes on to discuss how her flight from the family and her obligations affected the entire unstable family.

Gauri has attempted to physically distance herself from her family and her future life in a foreign nation, but her story is unsettled by the past trauma that has caused her psychological distress throughout her life. The author has conveyed Gauri's engagement in political movements in Calcutta and in the plot involving the assassination of the police officer, which ultimately led to Udayan's demise, through her account of her back-and-forth travels. Her entire life was impacted by the terrible trauma of her husband's death and her unidentified role. She has been moved twice to start over due to her mental restlessness, but her troubled history prevented her from finding comfort. She often glances back at her past, but she physically tries to put distance between them.

Lahiri has emphasised how the political settings subjugate Gauri's existence. In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, Dhingra and Cheung have defined, "Lahiri's fiction neither highlights the racial identity or the cultural politics of her characters," which suggests that "they live in more de-radicalized and de-classed US political landscape than is the socio-historical reality" (xvii). The political landscape of Lahiri's *The Lowland* is depicted throughout, with Gauri, the female protagonist, being a politicised figure who stands in stark contrast to the stereotypical picture of a political immigrant woman. She understands the political movements in India and America as well as what it meant to be a woman, a gay, or a Black person in America. She pondered whether Udayan would have disapproved of their self-indulgent behaviour: for prioritising claiming and bettering their own lives over modifying the lives of others. Gauri's political participation and terrible past make it simple to understand the novel's contextualised plot.

Indian immigrant women are portrayed as the archetype of biological and cultural reproduction. They are also idealised and desexualised in ideology. Lahiri has rejected all these preconceptions of Indian immigrant women by creating the queer character of Gauri. Her persona has been designed to challenge the traditional perception of Indian femininity. Gauri's brief sexual encounter with her pupil Lorna serves as a metaphor for her rejection of the convention. The line between the teacher-student connection is also broken in this instance. However, Gauri is shown to have adapted to the host culture in this instance and is exercising authority over her pupil Lorna for the first time. Gayatri Gopinath states that "...it is through women's bodies that the borders and boundaries of communal identities and formed" (*Impossible Desires*, 9). Gauri's representation as a queer persona dissolves these barriers and challenges the heteronormative, patriarchal, and conventional understanding of the diaspora.

Gauri distances herself from traditional ideas of Indian diasporic femininity by being a queer diasporic figure. The significance of emphasising the unique diasporic story of queer and unconventional Indian immigrant women who are restricted in their expression and reception has been brought to light by Lahiri. Bela tried to erase her mother from her mind when Gauri departed to California, leaving her and Subhash in a bad situation. She responds that her mother is no longer with us whenever someone enquires about her. Nevertheless, she became somewhat aware of Gauri's life's imprisonment and sorrow after learning the truth about her birth father. In addition, Subhash is astounded that her "...heart could be so cold..." (267) but also acknowledges that her decisions and deeds had been sincere. However, several analysts have voiced harsh criticism and support for Gauri. In "The Bleakest Story Jhumpa Lahiri Has Ever Told," Clare Sestanovich finds Lahiri's rough individualism "chilling" (web). Gauri reflects her surrender and her unwavering desire to follow her own path, the consequences of her previous political experience, which shaped her entire existence.

The perceptions of the characters and their deeds must change considering the character's apparent participation in political activities. Gauri failed to see that Lahiri's previous portrayal of conventional Indian women did not give their lives substance or meaning, and that Gauri's life had little purpose even before she left the home. As a result, Gauri's decision to give up her home and her duties as a traditional wife and mother ultimately left her with nothing. Lahiri has done a fantastic job capturing Gauri's sense of estrangement and nothingness that seems to be a part of her life. However, she has played her role extremely effectively to show what is left hidden for the lady who rejects norms and customs. The lives of the nonconformist women are marked by hardship and estrangement from society and family. They are outcasts, undesirable, and status-challengers. As the story concludes, Gauri muses over the idea that death is the ultimate release from pain.

Lahiri provides insight into the diasporic lady who prioritises her goals over her responsibilities as a wife and mother in *The Lowland*. Through the character of Gauri, it shows how the author has reshaped the predetermined limitations for women and portrayed an altered version of themselves. Gauri's choice to leave her family and home is a departure from the stereotype of the Indian diaspora mother. Gauri views her house as a barrier to her development rather as a source of empowerment. She will never be pardoned for the cruelty and punishment she inflicted on her defenceless daughter while living abroad.

Lahiri has skilfully contrasted the later adaptation and assimilation of the Indian women immigrants into the host country with their earlier miseries and customs in the foreign nation. As a result, her female characters constantly negotiate different aspects of their existence, face the challenges faced by immigrants in America, and imagine a third place that transcends the clearly defined lines between culture and tradition. The development of a transnational identity does not prevent immigrants from adhering to their original ethnicity. It facilitates adjusting to the multicultural population of the foreign nation. The immigrant's original identity is transformed during the assimilation process into a new hybrid identity that changes continuously to reflect the shifting nature of globalisation.

To sum-up, *The Lowland* is a multicultural and multigenerational story that explores the challenges of Indian immigrant women who discover who they are in the context of both their home country and their new one. It also describes their conflicted dual identities, cultural clash, trauma of alienation, crisis of aspirations, lack of belonging, and dilemma of uprooting. Lahiri describes the generational divide within the immigrant population in the novel. She goes into detail about the conflicts that Diasporas from both generations face as they integrate into the culture of their new home. Concurrently, the challenge faced by first-generation immigrants in maintaining their native customs causes disputes and uncertainty in the minds of their young offspring, who are second-generation immigrants adjusting to life in the host country.

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