

UPROOTEDNESS AND RESETTLEMENT IN DIASPORA: LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

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Abstract: This paper explores the theme of uprootedness and resettlement of Bengali immigrants to America in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*. Uprootedness and resettlement is also an important aspect in diaspora. Lahiri employs this theme in her most recent novel *The Lowland*. Lahiri is one of the most significant Indian diaspora in the present time. She was born in 1967 in London to Bengali parents. Later with her family she moved to the US. She grew up in the background of traditional Bengali culture. Often she accompanied her parents back to India, especially to Kolkata.

In the opening of the novel we meet two inseparable brothers Subhash and Udayan Mitra. After their schooling they get apart. Subhash pursues his graduate studies in Rhode Island while Udayan engages in the radical revolutionary activity. Subhash forges an independent life apart from his brother. Catastrophic circumstances compels Subhash to come back to India, where he finds that Udayan has contributed to a movement that had been misguided, that had caused only damages. Subhash has grown increasingly conscientious and self-sacrificing. He becomes dutiful, he marries, he becomes a sort of hero, providing for his family and caring for his daughter.

Key words: uprootedness and resettlement, immigrant, diaspora

Introduction:

The experience of immigration is always a vast territory for fiction. Diasporic literature can be regarded as an umbrella term for all those literary work written by the writers who have emigrated from their native land, but they deal with their native culture and background in their works. Expatriate writing or diasporic writing focuses on the lives of the immigrants and their inner and external conflicts. We can find their sense of loss and alienation, which is because of their migration from their homeland, in their works. Often in this field concepts of alienation, displacement, rootlessness, nostalgia, and quest of identity are expressed by the authors. They share their immigrant experience at foreign land that comes out of the immigrant resettlement. Uma Parameswaran writes about it as:

---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 ethno cultural issues. The fourth is when they have ‘arrived’ and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (Parmeswaran, 165)

Jhumpa Lahiri is also one of the writers who deal with something nostalgic, rootlessness, displacement, and alienation. She highlights various aspects like quest of identity, multiculturalism, cultural dilemma etc. Uprootedness and resettlement is also one of the aspects in her writings. Her fiction deals with characters of Indian origin in America. The sense of uprootedness and resettlement has been explored from her novel *The Lowland*.

Subject Matter:

In this present paper I am going to explore the uprootedness and resettlement in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*. Lahiri is one of the writers built their career in this field. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the prominent of second generation in Indian diasporic writers. One of the important facts about Indian diaspora is that, a large number of writers from the third world immigrated to the west during the last centuries. Feelings of alienation of these writers can be observed on the foreign land. They are inclined to write about the people and the events of the motherland. Of course this ‘Uprootedness’ is frequent in expatriate and diasporic sensibility. If we analyze the Indian contribution in diasporic literature in English we find a recently emerged Bengali subset in Indo-American writing to which Jhumpa Lahiri belongs as a contemporary writer. Lahiri was born to Bengali emigrants in 1967 in London and brought up in U.S.A. She started her career with the publication of her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999. The stories address sensitive dilemma in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants. The second collection of stories by Lahiri, *The Unaccustomed Earth*, was released on April 1, 2008. She published her first novel *The Namesake* in 2003.

The Lowland is the latest novel by Lahiri, it is a combination of history and family life. The novel was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2013. Story in the novel is multi-generational revolves around the personal choices and destiny. The novel reflects the multi-cultural and trans-national diasporic culture in 21st century. To some extent, this culture is different from traditional culture. The novel reveals many issues like identity, home nostalgia, sense of loneliness and alienation. Uprootedness and resettlement is also one of them. Lahiri exposes different aspects of diasporic experience. She also presents the contradictory influence of globalization on the migrants. This paper has analyzed how the novel is a collage of the experience of uprooting and resettlement, of the intermingling of personal and social histories, and many

dimensions of human life involved in transporting a culture to a new land. The Lowland is multi-generational tale covers a period of five decades set in Tollygunge and Rhode Island. The story of the novel begins with an account on lowland itself. The opening lines of the novel are in the form of guidance for a new traveler to go new place:

“East of the Tolly club, after Deshpram Sashmal, splits into two, there is a small mosque. A turn leads a quite enclave, a warren of narrow lanes and modest middle-class homes. Once within the enclave, there were two ponds side by side. Behind them was the lowland spanning a few acres”. (3)

Title of the novel refers a marshy stretch of land between two ponds. It is a neighborhood in Calcutta where two inseparable brothers grew up. These two brothers are Subhash and Udayan Mitra. They grow up in Tollygunge district of 1960s. Their childhood was happy. In their childhood they sneak into the local private golf club and listening to a foreign broadcast on a radio. After their school they pursued very different path. Udayan involves in Naxalite movement and revolutionary politics. Subhash is passive and obedient. He goes to America and becomes a graduate student in Rhode Island. He lives lonely, young, and sensitive-immigrant new life. Subhash gets a scholarship for his Ph.D. in America and thus his dream of doing Ph.D. materialized. He starts to settle in Rhode Island for his research and thus steps out of Tollygunge ‘as he has stepped so many mornings out of dream, its reality and its particular logic rendered meaningless in the light of day.’ (34) Subhash’s life in Rhode Island is completely different. He feels a sense of freedom unlike in Tollygunge. “Here was a place where humanity was not always pushing, rushing, and running as if with a fire at its back.” (34) Meanwhile he receives a letter from Udayan and he feels the loyalty to one another once again. Their affection stretched away across the world. Yet, “stretched to the breaking point by all that new stood between them.”(43) After some time he does not receive any letter from Udayan, but received a telegram which said, “Udayan killed, come back if you can”. (83) When he learns that his brother has been killed, he returns home. After returning home he discovers that Udayan has left behind his shattered parents and a pregnant young widow, Gauri. Concerned of his sister-in-law’s future in India, he marries the widow and return to America, where they starts their life as an Indian-American couple, parents to a little girl, Bela. Bela grows up thinking Subhash is her biological father.

In the beginning Gauri tried to mingle with the mixed Indian community. For example, she was happy to meet with other women of the university at a dinner party. Later subhash finds disturbing changes in Gauri’s life style. She cuts her hair and adopted American dressing style. Gauri is haunted with some irrational fears. After Bela’s birth, Gauri knows “how the slightest oversight on her part could cause Bela to be destroyed.” (145) after many years Gauri is found to be withdrawing little by little from her role as a mother. Contrary to the earlier she used to naturally say, “I am her mother”. (146) on the contrary Subhash is just role playing. He strives to achieves implication of his promise to Gauri, “I’ll make it (Bela) mine, Gauri”. (146)

When Bela begins to go to school, Gauri spends her time at the library of university on philosophy. Her readings on the concept of time haunted but they also keep her alive: “it remained her sustenance and also her predator “(151). Many people lived willingly anticipating the future and the narrator in any story delves into its significance in the life of the major characters: “Her (Gauri’s) in-laws have expected Subhash and Udayan to grow old in the house they had built for them. They had wanted Subhash to return to Tollygunge and marry someone else. Udayan had given his life for the future, expecting the society itself to change. Gauri had expected to stay married to him, not for less than two years but always. In Rhode Island, Subhash was expecting him Gauri and Bela . For Gauri to be mother to Bella, and to remain a wife to him” (152).

After three months of his father’s death, Subhash along with Bela comes to Calcutta. They stay there for six months. After their decided period of stay at Tollygunge ended, they returned back to Rhode Island. When they reached their house, they were shocked because Gauri left the house for good to California. Gauri also left a farewell letter on the table for them. Gauri left for California because she had accepted a teaching position in a college of California as she wanted to get out of the mess. She was in, exposing “only her self interest, her ineptitude...she’d done it, the worst thing that she could think of doing”. (232) Gauri was quite unconcerned regarding their touch with one another. Although the letter was written to calm Bela’s shock, but it was Bela who comforted Subhash, holding him tightly. “I will never go away from you Baba” she said. (212)

After leaving Subhash and Bela, Gauri settled in a small village in southern California. She was not only a teacher but a mentor there. Now Subhash makes up his mind to lay bare the story of Udayan before Bela. He thought that Bela is now old enough to handle it. During this time, Bela reveals that she is pregnant for more than four months and father of the child is not a part of her life. He is simply known to her but she wants to keep the child and to become a mother. And she gives birth to a girl child. She names her Megna. When Megna was old enough to be apart from the mother for a time, Bela started working on a farm again.

Subhash was seventy, when he realized that he was entering into a phase of life when anything might happen. He planned to sell his house in Tollygunge and wanted to surrender the ownership of the house in Rhode Island to Bela. Subhash wrote to Gauri to sign papers to divorce. Gauri spent many hours in weighing the pros and cons. She decides to give papers personally. Imagining some possible encounters with Subhash in his house, she rang the bell. Bela opened the door; Subhash was not at home then. Bela was not ready to give the answers Gauri asked her. At the end of the encounter, Bela was thankful that it was she, not her father who had to confront Gauri. During her visit to Subhash’ house Gauri was on the way to London to attend a conference. Now she was not mentally at peace to attend the conference. She arranged a week’s stay at Calcutta. She visited Tollygunge, where nobody was able to recognize her and she was once again haunted by the past images of Udayan. When she returned to California she got a letter from Bela.

The final lines of the letter are as: “You’ve already taught me not to need you, and I don’t need to know more about Udayan. But maybe, when Megna is older, when she and I are both ready, we can try to meet again”. (325) The final two chapters of the novel describe Subhash’s second marriage to Elise Silva. The marriage took place at a church in Rhode Island. After a long period, the marriage breaks down because of Gauri’s dissatisfaction and restlessness and her deep remorse on her own involvement in Udayan’s activities led the death of Udayan and others. Author takes the narration style of flipping between two different geographical locations and the past and the present.

As the story develops, many secrets come out. We see that Subhash and Gauri experience a complex set of immigrant experiences. Lahiri carefully confines politics to serve as an invert source of passing spectacle, domestic tragedy and immigrant memory-spinning. We can see that there is an immense sense of immigrant in this book like Gary Shteyngar’s *Little Failure: A Memoir*. Gary’s book was published thirty years after she immigrated to America. This book is an outflow of her own life. She was also born to Bengali parents. However, placing the book in the immigrant fiction category is not sit well with Lahiri as she spoke in an interview. “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 circumstances, and therefore, write about those experiences.” (Mayfield 194) Her other works also deal with lives of Indian immigrants settled in the USA, such as *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of stories, deals with the themes of human relationship and the dissociation between first and second generation of U.S. immigrants. In this sequence her novel *Namesake* dwells upon the theme of experiencing the cultural gap of children with their parents. The novel presents before us the story of Ganguli family from Bengal. In the story Bengal-born parents moved to the USA where they face generational and cultural gap of their children. In this way we can say that Lahiri brings out in the open various issues from the lives of Bengali immigrants effectively through her works.

Conclusion:

The present paper has attempted to explore the reflection of sense of uprootedness and resettlement in diasporic writings. The latest novel by Jhumpa Lahiri *The Lowland* has been selected for this purpose. The paper has traced out the sense of belongingness to their homeland in immigrants particularly focusing on the story of two brothers Subhas and Udayan. This paper contributes to bring into notice the internal and external conflicts of Bengali immigrant people.

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