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CULTURAL ASSIMILATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

SAFNA.C

M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

Research Scholar, Ph.D. (English)

Bharathiyar University

Coimbatore, India

Safnasam1@gmail.com

9656383024

&

DR. A. J MANJU

M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of English

Sree Narayana Guru College

Coimbatore, India

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is a famous Indian Diaspora Writer. Her second novel *The Lowland* talks about intricacies in human relationship at the backdrop of migration. The solitude and guilty complex in the life of the central character is beautifully portrayed. This novel talks about the Naxalite movements in India. The protagonist has a direct involvement in it. The novel discusses the impact of this involvement in the life of the protagonist even after migration. Alienation and identity crisis felt by the characters are beautifully depicted by using memory as a technique. The feeling of nostalgia and longing for the past is central in this novel. The mad pursuit for identity in a totally alienated land. The diasporic life in this novel depends upon individual choice.

Loneliness and feeling of repentance are portrayed clearly in this novel. Memory plays an important role and the novel progresses through the recollection of the characters about their past life. The story goes through past and present. The central character could successfully translate into the new culture and live in the present only after she could get rid of the past.

Keywords: Alienation, Diaspora, Identity crisis, Assimilation, Memory and Nostalgia.

CULTURAL ASSIMILATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* was published in 2013. It bagged the awards like DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2015. It was once shortlisted for Man Booker Prize and US National Book Award in the year 2013. Like other fiction of Lahiri this novel also talks about the Bengali Immigrants in US. Isolation and nostalgia haunts them even though they could pursue their dream jobs in US. In the first part of the novel the writer gives more attention to the political upheavals in India. It delineates how the central characters were attracted to the Naxalite movement in the post-independent India. The impact of this Naxalite movements in the Mitra Family is the central element in the first part. This use diaspora life as a background in order to tell the story. But the diasporic settings are more elaborated in the second part. Uprooting and re-rooting are the major theme in this novel. But this novel is entirely different from all other Lahirian fiction on the ground that it focusses on the individual aspect of the character and leaves the formation of diaspora community untouched.

The novel *The Lowland* is the story of two brothers who spend their childhood together. The two brothers are different in their temperaments the elder one is Subhash who is more realistic and practical whereas his younger brother Udayan is adventurous and idealist. Udayan is rebellious also. During 1960s Calcutta has witnessed a growth in the Naxalite Movement and witnessed many chaos in its streets. The realist Subhash migrated to US to pursue higher education and American dreams and he got rid of the chaos of the city. But his brother Udayan was already moved by the ideals of justice and equality and was attracted towards Naxalite movements. He had a relationship with Gauri, a philosophy student and they married. During this time, he participated in many rebellions and was doomed to death by shooting. But at this time his wife was pregnant. Subhash returned from US and married Gauri to save her from the pitiable condition. They went to US. The remaining part of the novel reveals how choice contributed to their destiny and how they spend the rest of their lives in resentment and guilt. This novel can be considered as the intersection of political as well as personal aspects of life. This novel reveals the sociopolitical background of India during 1960s and its impact on Mitra family. Lahiri could successfully portray the dilemma in the lives of Subhash and Gauri. It reveals how they tried to cope with the situation. This novel is a perfect blend of issues like alienation, choices in life, displacement identity crisis and family relationship. This also reveals the difference in the attitude of first generation and second generation immigrants and how diaspora shapes their lives.

The characterization in the novel is quite different. All the characters except Gauri are similar and simple. But Gauri is a complex character who deliberately alienate herself from others and made her life more complex leading to identity crisis. Because she could not give away the memories of Udayan and her past. She could not escape the guilt feeling. She did not want to be a good wife of Subhash and loving mother of Bala. She is totally different from the society's concept of an ideal woman. Udayan is a person who is guided by elevated thoughts but unfortunately had a tragic end. Subhash at the same time is a practical and caring person who wishes wellness for others but became helpless. In this novel the focus is not on the usual migration experience. Because, here the trauma is not the result of migration but a personal choice. Subhash in the beginning felt alienated on the foreign land but later he successfully translated into the western life

style. On his first journey to Us in a ship he felt isolated as the ship moves away from his home land. In the early period of his life he could not contact his family through telephone since they don't have a telephone in Tollygunge.

For a year and 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 telephone line. He'd sent them telegram to let them know that he'd arrived. He was learning to live without hearing their voices to receive news of 'em in writing. (Lowland 63)

He tried to keep in touch with his family only through writing letters. In the beginning Udayan and Subhash shared their whereabouts through writing. Slowly he could assimilate into the American culture. Then an American woman, Holly came into his life. She was older than him and a mother too. She was living away from her husband with her ten years old child. Subhash used to visit her and make love with her. gradually he cut off his connection to his family and fully merged into the host land. This has intensified his loneliness. His relationship with Holly is against his family tradition. This alien land and its values, his loneliness, his freedom, attraction towards Holly and his carnal urge made him forget his traditional values. One day while looking at the calendar and realizing it is August 15 he became aware of his loneliness and this intensified his nostalgia. Lahiri writes thus, "the following day was August 15, Indian independence. A holyday for the country, lights on government buildings, flag hoisting and parades. An ordinary day here." (Lowland p.78)

After the death of Udayan he married Gauri and took her to America. There she gave birth to Bela. She was not a good mother because of her obsession to higher education and fondness for solitude. America was a perfect match for her individual freedom and obsession for liberty. This gave her opportunity to discard her maternal duty and tradition. She moves forward by pursuing higher education and career without any guilty complex. Her obsession to study made her discard duty towards Bela. If she were in India she would have been leading the life of a widow without any happiness in life. But America opened new opportunities in her life to live her dream. She was too close to philosophy so that she could not see her philosophy of life. Her studies and philosophies alienated herself from her child and husband. She could find solace in philosophy books. In all her life she could not forget her husband Udayan. She was living in his memories and past life thus failed to live and find happiness in her present life. She could not escape from the guilty feeling that she had a hand in Udayan's death. She discarded her Indian lifestyle and dressings. Because she felt tired of those. After marrying Gauri he became more alienated and isolated. When Subhash and Bela went to India Gauri didn't accompany them and left Rhodes Island to California by leaving a letter behind to inform Subhash about getting a job. After this incident they didn't meet in their life. Her departure from their life made his life more miserable. He had the responsibility of raising a baby. In his old age he became lonelier. He left his family at a very old age and still he does not have the warmth of a home and family life. As a result of alienation in a very young age, she became a victim of depression. Her experience displaced her emotionally. She became a nomad. At thirty-four she became a single mother. Subhash revealed the reality behind her parentage. She could not forgive her mother. Her life was really strange and devoid of love.

In this Novel Cultural assimilation became quite easy for Subhash. Because, for him, it was an escape from the problems of his native land to a world of freedom and opportunity. He enjoyed his new life without any identity. His nostalgia for Tollygunge is obvious in the novel but he preferred this new life over his life in the native place. In the beginning he used to read Udayan's letter repeatedly. He felt reconnected to Udayan. The nostalgia and memory of Subhash and Gauri is great but they were after the opportunities of American

life. Gauri could easily adapt to the new culture. She left her Indian style of living and preferred western outfits, studies, language and even had a lesbian relationship. But she could not feel at home anywhere even though she wandered in many places. At last she felt at home in California. Bela is quite different from the rest. She was born and brought up in Rhodes Island. She was brought up with foreign accent. Subhash never interfered in her life and choices. So she decided to live in her own ideals in an unconventional way. Subhash could approve this since he is very open minded. So all the characters in this novel could easily translate into the host culture. Yet their naming of children shows their connection to their past. Subhash and Gauri named their child Bela, a Bengali name. Bela named her daughter Meghna'. This also is an Indian name. all the letters in this novel are written in Bengali language. This also reveal that they want to share their feelings in Bengali. All the three character in this novel are victims of split identity, specific of diaspora life. All the characters in this novel are alienated from each other. All of them left their identity to earn a new identity which is transnational. The relationships in this novel are complicated as well as disconnected. Bela became a true Bohemian. A motherless childhood and diasporic lifestyle made her life worst. The realization of her original parent made her closer to Subhash. She was not a good student at school and didn't like school. At a very young age she left her studies and decided to lead a nomadic life. She loved farming and travelled to various places for farming. She was leading her life by planting new trees and taking care of animals. She worked to turn deserted land to better soil suitable for cultivation. All these are the product of her urge to form identity. This revolutionary attitude is similar to her father's. After twenty years of separation Gauri decided to meet Subhash and give consent to divorce. But she confronted Gauri and had to face her hatred. This made her rethink about herself. She went back to Tollygunge and could free herself from the memory of Udayan. Then went back to US and lived her life.

The Lowland is a true story of Diaspora life. Lahiri used all her characters to describe diasporic dilemma. This is the true story of assimilation. Here culture translation is more easy when compared to other fictions of Lahiri. The cultural assimilation can be considered as their urge for survival and memory is their link to their life in the homeland.

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