

A Critical Peep into Identity Crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland

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Abstract

In the discourses of literary analysis the theme of identity is a prominent one. As it is the phenomenon through which a human being gets access into the physical world of existence. But sometimes he/she may suffer from uncertainties and confusions into which his/her identity becomes insecure and suffers from subsequent identity crisis. The Lowland by diaspora writer Jhumpa Lahiri is such kind of novel. It was published in 2013. The plot is centered around two significant events i.e. Marxism and nostalgic sentiment of the characters. The recollections of the characters lead the readers to feel about native land. In this novel The Lowland Jhumpa Lahiri has centered her perspectives on the political aspects of post-colonial India. The novel examines lives and conflicts across India and America spanning over fifty years, leading the narrative technique of shifting between two geographical locations and the past and present. Jhumpa Lahiri's works are a spontaneous outlet of her personal life. She was born in India; her parents were Bengali descendants, brought up on the eastern coast. This critical paper attempts to give a thorough analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland. The issue of identity is conspicuous in the novel and various characters could be analyzed with respect to this. Among many characters one such major character is Gauri, an Indian woman. She became widow and married the brother of her ex-husband. When after marriage of Gauri the couple moved to USA, she started finding her unprecedented multiple (possibly present and the future) identities. Hence, the critical paper endeavors in discussing Gauri's changes of identity and subsequent crisis throughout the narrative. The discussional article is grounded on theory of identity and its pertinent ideas. It uncovers how migration became a remarkable experience and influenced identity of Gauri.

Key Words: identity, migration, Marxism, post-colonial, nostalgic.

The theory of identity is not new, as the conceptions are chiefly product of symbolic interactionism as well as the idea of unending control. But, the critical analysis would not stress upon this, instead it would focus on specific radical ideas related to areas of sociology and socio-psychology that are employed by theory of identity. Critics opined that theory of identity was developed as a concrete theory over the past 25 years, at the same time, it has found application in a variety of fields. Critics mentioned such fields like criminology, legal areas, and educational field and so on. Although literature was not included in the subject, different concepts of the theory could be favorably used not only in discourses on real people and their behavior but also in discussions on literary works and their characters. That is the reason various characters could be analyzed on the basis of this. In this discussion, a woman named Gauri is selected with a view to focus and explore her ambiguous identity that always changed throughout the story as she moved to settle in different places. It seems all other characters in the novel follow a foreseeable line except Gauri. She emerges as the most complicated, volatile character. Critics wrote on the non-translation of identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's works and touched upon the theme of volatile identity not only

in her work but also in her own life, as she has projected herself having such a hybrid identity. Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967), who is a famous American author, has Indian background and, frequently, has written about people who migrated from India to other nations and different problems they undergo while they move or grow up in families which are immigrant community in USA. On reading the text we can think that the book and story of Gauri might have been inspired by the writer's own life in America, Rhode Island and Boston city specifically.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a descendant of Indian immigrants from West Bengal. Her family moved to United States of America when she was only two, so she considers herself as an American. Jhumpa Lahiri grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, and her father was a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Jhumpa Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up understanding their Bengali roots, and always welcomed relatives to stay with them. Her teacher called her Jhumpa because that way it was easier to tell than her full name. Jhumpa Lahiri's identity issues were the inspiration for Gogol's identity issue in this novel. Lahiri graduated from South Kingston High School and earned her Bachelor's in English at Barnard College in 1988. She obtained several degrees from Boston University: a Masters in English, a Masters in creative writing, a Masters in comparative literature, and a Ph.D in Renaissance studies. She spent two years (1997-1998) at Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, where she studied creative writing. In 2001, Jhumpa Lahiri married Alberto Vourvoullas Bush, a journalist who was a senior editor at Time Latin America. The couple recently moved to Rome, Italy with their two children. Lahiri published her first novel titled *The Namesake* in 2003. The second short story collection of Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was published in 2008. *Unaccustomed Earth* earned a number one position on the New York Times best-selling list. It seems that Jhumpa Lahiri was very firmly connected to the New York Times magazine, since she was often asked to publish short stories and non-fiction there. Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and she has projected different experiences of her life from different perspectives including herself and others.

The Lowland revolves around an American Bengali family (the Mitras). The Indian portion of the novel helps to support the plot in detail. Though Jhumpa Lahiri roots her views which are aligned with Marxism, Post Colonialism, and Ecology with men and so on. It has the historical background of Naxalbari movement in West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. There are a number of historical events represented in the piece that are connected with the rise of Communist revolution. Here we are talking about freedom from compulsions, not freedom per se. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is a novel based on the true story that Jhumpa Lahiri learned when she was a child in India. In Calcutta there are two young brothers participating in a violent anti-government campaign. They were killed brutally. The family members of the young men had been forced to witness their sons being killed. This incident sparks Jhumpa Lahiri to write *The Lowland*. This novel is a multi-generational tale that sprawls over more than half a century chronicle set in the metropolis of Tollygunge and Rhode Island. *The Lowland* tells the two sides of the author – her Bangladeshi heritage and her life in the US. The book has two distinct sections of the characters. One is the middle class family in Calcutta and the other is the academic life in Rhode Island. In the book, Bollywood has taken the real Tollygunge to life. This book is told in third person narrative point of view and in the stoic mode.

The Lowland is the love story of two Bengali brothers. Udhayan is optimistic and brave while Subhash is a coward and is apprehensive of problems. Udhayan wants to make Singapore a more open country but Subhash does not have broad support for revolution. Subhash is fifteen months older than Udhayan. Even

Subhash cannot make any decision without Udhayan's approval. I knew Subhash without Udhayan. "Subhash was thirteen, older by fifteen months. However, I did not know Ashwin without Udhayan. From before it happened, he was constantly with his brother (Jhumpa Lahiri 7).

They have started hearing about Naxalbari in 1967; it is one of the villages of the Darjeeling district. Most villagers were plain peasant folk. They were employed in tea plantations and plantations on vast farms. The peasants suffered under the dictates of the feudal system for centuries. Most of these victims were misled by rich landowners. People died because there was not enough food. They stole their bull and ploughed, etc. They conquered the territory of their own. Udhayan researched on Naxalite movement when he was in jail and published many pamphlets. Under his mattress, Udhayan secretly found the pamphlets. Due to the Naxalite movement of CPI (ML), he wants to be a member of CPI (ML). He cares for the interests of laborers and peasants. Jhumpa Lahiri has clarified her point of view on Naxalite movement through the character of her fictional character Udhayan. One day Subhash found pamphlets embedded within his bunk. The essays were lengthy and detached. Subhash, upon immigration to America, sent letters to Udhayan. Lee Kuan Yew also wrote that he joined the Communist Party (ML). By the late 1970s, the campaign started to show signs of awakening. These rebels lived in the jungle. Their key goals were affluent business people, some educators, and a particular cluster of policemen. Udhayan even fired upon a policeman. After that he was searched by police and was arrested, discovered and killed. Udhayan gave his life to the Naxalites cause but he has failed to be an ideal husband. He may be from any nationalities, follower of Marxism or Naxalite dissenter but he is not a good husband and son. Gauri gave his complete loyalty to country, even betraying his family. Gauri showed how much she loved Udhayan by these following words:

"Nor was her love for Udhayan recognizable or intact. Anger was always mounted to it, zigzagging through her like some helplessly mating pair of insects. Anger at him for dying when he might have lived. For bringing her happiness, and then taking it away. For trusting her, only to betray her. For believing in sacrifice, only to be so selfish in the end". (Jhumpa Lahiri 197).

Udhayan's body was not returned to his family after he passed away. Gauri's husband's father visited the police station to inquire about the location of his dead body. After the death of her husband, she was ordered to conduct such rituals in the house for ten days. She was just twenty three.

"For ten days after his death there were rules to follow. She did not wash her clothes or wear slippers or comb her hair. She shut the door and the shutters to preserve whatever invisible particles of him floated in the atmosphere. She slept on the bed, on the pillow Udhayan had used that continued to smell for a few days of him, until it was replaced by her own odor, her greasy skin and hair." (Jhumpa Lahiri 129)

After eleven days, the priest came back for a final farewell, and arranged a ceremonial feast. Deceased Udhayan's portrait was standing in a position of honour behind a glass partition set in the corridor. His wife was also unable to look at his face in the frame. After the funeral of his aunt, the uncle's family kept her from eating some kind of meat and fish again. They wanted her to only wear sarees in a single colour, that is white saree. Gauri's in-laws started eating fish and meat after the wedding. She was allowed to wear white sarees instead of the bright colours to honour the passing of her husband. She was given white saris to wear in place of coloured ones, so that she resembled the other widows in the family. (Jhumpa Lahiri 131). Her family mistreated her. Subhash and Lakshmi agreed to tie the knot. And, Gauri agrees to his plan in order to defend herself and her daughters from her in-laws. She married someone who looks

like her late husband, sounds like him, and even dresses like him. She clearly recognizes him as her husband; he was the brother of her husband. Gauri says, they look exactly the same height and body build. She tries her level best to cope up with her new condition she is thrown into. Subhash was a mild type of rage. Now compared to Udhayan, his passport-sized face looks like he's asking for her autograph. (Jhumpa Lahiri 149). Even though she married Subhash, she did not have any affection or love for him. She feels he would be able to offer protection from her sufferings. The Lowland superbly blended the author's tale in history, politics and personal event to meet the needs of the modern reader.

Conclusion

In essence, Gauri tries her level best to rediscover her identity in America. Moving from city to city, country to country and the change in values and beliefs, she is evolving. This transformation seems to be deliberate to become rid of an old self that was no longer appropriate. Her most meaningful characteristic is to be a university professor and working in an American university. But, while she is an educator, she wants to travel to America and not to India in the future. Bela and Subhash become more and more remote. Gauri spends much of her time in New York. But at the end of the book, Gauri starts to think that she is much less American than she had first thought. She has become an example of the cultural subculture (American and Indian). Of course, the ending of this novel offers encouragement that some of the identities that Gauri had given up on could be reconnected and filled again. The very definition of identity can be best articulated in the first sentence. Gauri blends her identities between New York and India, between her home land and foreign country. She realises that she had to negotiate some of the aspects of it, but on the other hand, she doesn't regret the choices she had made. So this spectacular narrative is an excellent study of identity crisis in diaspora literature and at the same time it has paved the way of its own how an individual can achieve his/her own roots in an alien culture and land.

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