

Between Home and Displacement: A Study of Diasporic Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri stands out as one of the prominent voices in South Asian diaspora literature. As a second-generation immigrant, she skilfully portrays diasporic themes in her works. This paper examines the themes of dislocation and identity formation in Lahiri's renowned novel *The Lowland* through a diasporic lens. The novel intricately explores the intersection of the political and the personal, spanning nearly fifty years of Indian and American history through the lives of a single family. Set against the backdrop of post-independence political turmoil in Kolkata, the narrative weaves together the past and present, offering a nuanced portrayal of displacement. By analysing the lives of the two brothers, Udayan and Subhash, and the impact of their divergent paths—one rooted in radical politics and the other in the American diaspora, this study explores how physical, emotional, and cultural displacement shapes both individual and collective identities. Additionally, it delves into the dilemmas and conflicts faced by Gauri, as a woman living far from her homeland, and the complexities of her daughter's life as a second-generation immigrant. Through a diasporic framework, the paper investigates the psychological and personal impacts of transnational relocation and identity formation, focusing on the fragmentation and identity crises often experienced within the diaspora. This study aims to deepen the understanding of the diasporic experience as depicted in Lahiri's work, shedding light on the complexities of identity in a globalized world. It highlights the characters' struggles

with memory, belonging, and heritage, illustrating how displacement not only challenges but also reshapes personal and cultural identities.

Keywords: Displacement, Diaspora, Migration, Identity.

Diasporic narratives have assumed a significant position in contemporary literary discourse, particularly as they reflect the complexities of hybrid identity and multicultural existence. Authors who navigate transnational experiences often depict lives shaped by migration, cultural dislocation, and the negotiation of dual or multiple identities. Among the prominent voices in South Asian diaspora literature are Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amitav Ghosh, and Jhumpa Lahiri.

The term *diaspora*, derived from the Ancient Greek word *diasporá*—meaning "scattering" or "dispersion"—originally referred to the movement of people away from an ancestral homeland. In the context of globalization, the term has evolved to describe communities that reside outside their country of origin while striving to retain cultural continuity in foreign environments. Diasporic literature frequently engages with themes of migration, displacement, cultural negotiation, and identity reconstruction. It offers insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of exile, belonging, and the continuous tension between cultural heritage and the forces of assimilation.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a second-generation immigrant and a distinguished figure in South Asian American literature, explores these themes with nuance and sensitivity. This study aims to analyse Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* through a diasporic lens, focusing on the intertwined themes of dislocation and identity formation that characterize her representation of immigrant experience.

Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, widely known as Jhumpa Lahiri, was born in London in 1967 to Indian immigrant parents and relocated with her family to the United States at the age of two. Her literary corpus is characterized by a nuanced interweaving of fictional narratives

with autobiographical elements, mediated through a dual cultural lens. The diasporic sensibility that permeates her characters' experiences often reflects Lahiri's own negotiation with cultural dislocation and identity fragmentation. In her autobiographical essay *My Two Lives* (2006), Lahiri articulates the complexities of growing up as a second-generation immigrant in Rhode Island during the 1970s, expressing a persistent sense of in-betweenness: "Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen". Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another" ("My Two Lives" 2006). These personal experiences of cultural ambivalence and fragmentation inform the thematic core of her fiction, where Lahiri intricately explores issues such as displacement, marginalization, identity crisis, cultural hybridity, and the continual process of identity reformation.

Diaspora and Displacement in *The Lowland*

Set against the backdrop of post-independence political unrest in Kolkata, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* narrates the intertwined lives of two brothers, Udayan and Subhas, tracing their trajectories from a shared childhood to markedly divergent adulthoods. The narrative structure oscillates between past and present, offering a layered depiction of displacement and its enduring effects.

In their youth, the brothers pursue contrasting paths. Udayan becomes deeply involved in radical leftist politics and ultimately loses his life at the hands of the state, a casualty of the government's suppression of political dissent. In contrast, Subhas, distancing himself from his brother's revolutionary activities, chooses an academic path and emigrates to the United States for higher education. The brevity of Udayan's life serves as a testament to passionate, if tragic,

commitment to one's homeland, while Subhas's diasporic existence highlights the alienation and dislocation often experienced in migration.

This study undertakes a critical analysis of Subhas's life within the American diaspora, examining how physical, emotional, and cultural displacement contributes to the shaping of both individual and collective identities. It further interrogates the internal conflicts and gendered dilemmas faced by Gauri, a woman negotiating exile and selfhood in a foreign land. Additionally, the novel's exploration of Bela, their daughter, exemplifies the psychological fragmentation and identity crisis commonly encountered by second-generation immigrants. Employing a diasporic theoretical framework, this paper investigates the psychological toll and identity reconfiguration prompted by transnational mobility, with particular focus on the intergenerational transmission of displacement and cultural hybridity.

The novel starts with an appealing minute description of growing up of the two brothers in Tollygunge, Kolkata. The reference of Tolly club and different kind of lives inside there anticipates the cultural distance between diverse roots. In his youth Subhash, unlike his radical brother Udayan, chooses to move to the U.S. for academic purposes. Initially Udayan insisted his brother not to leave his own country and inspires Subhas to find a purposeful living in his own country. But hoping to carve out a life that is more stable and less politically tumultuous Subhas finally leaves the country for pursuing higher studies. But as a migrant he feels immense difficulty to cope up with American lifestyle. Although Subhash's life in the U.S. is outwardly successful, marked by his academic career, his inner conflict revolves around the alienation that many diasporic individuals feel in a foreign land. Subhas's inner psyche becomes the representative of expatriates who confront alienation and in betweenness wherever they are. A contrast nature of Subhas's character is drawn as a child He was introvert and loved to be alienated. "He waited for chaotic games to end, for shouts to subside. His favorite moments were when he was alone, or felt alone." (Lahiri,10) But there is difference between

living in his own world in own country surrounded by parents, siblings, relatives, culture and customs. Such kind of inward natured person too suffers the anxiety of detachment and cultural dislocation. Such is the power of rootedness. Living in own country it is not apparent that our individual identity is deeply connected to our collective identity. Subhash's sense of identity is deeply influenced by his roots in Kolkata, but he is also faced with the challenge of adapting to the U.S. Subhash feels dislocated and caught between two worlds, never fully feeling at home in either place. In the U.S., he struggles to embrace the American way of life completely, as he remains connected to the culture and traditions of his homeland, which he holds dear but cannot fully express in the diaspora.

Hybridity and Crisis of Identity

Homi Bhabha in his influential book “The Location of Culture” (1994) explores how colonial and postcolonial subjects negotiate their identities in contexts of cultural difference and displacement, emphasizing hybridity as critical site for the formation of new, fluid identities. His theory highlights how the interaction between different cultures can lead to the creation of new hybrid identities that don't adhere to traditional, fixed notions of ethnicity or nationality. This process, according to Bhabha, is vital in deconstructing rigid cultural categories and offering a more dynamic understanding of identity in a globalized world.

Subhas being an ambitious academician who wanted to have a peaceful prosperous life in abroad, remained unable to deconstruct the rigidity. His soul was stuck between home and displacement facing a constant struggle to form a new identity. The inability to completely belong to either the homeland or the adopted land is seen in Subhas's continued nostalgia for Kolkata and the emotional distance he feels from his life in America. He does not fully integrate into American society, nor can he return to Kolkata in any meaningful way after his brother's political activities and death. After the death of his brother during his visit to homeland Subhas felt an aloofness in his own city. This realization is seen in the line “Though he looked like any

other Bengali he felt an allegiance with the foreigners now. He shared with them a knowledge of elsewhere. Another life to go back to. The ability to leave.” (Lahiri,112) His personal sense of home becomes a fluid, elusive concept that he can never truly grasp. In America, Subhash is confronted by the demands of learning a new language, adopting new habits, and reconciling his intellectual and emotional needs with those of his new environment. His sense of self becomes more cautious, muted, and introverted. In this crisis of identity, he felt the pain of loneliness instead of forming a new identity. Before and after taking responsibility of Gauri “There was no one there for him in Rhode Island. He was tired of being alone.” (Lahiri,116) He struggles with understanding what it means to be both Bengali and American, and his identity in the U.S. is shaped by an ambivalence toward the “American dream” and a longing for home that he cannot easily return to.

Subhash's migration to the U.S. represents a search for a new sense of belonging, but his sense of home becomes fragmented. His connection to his homeland, Kolkata, is deeply rooted in his memories of family, culture, and his previous life with Udayan. After Udayan's death, Subhash is left with a void and finds it difficult to reconcile his past with his present. His migration to the U.S. initially offered a chance at renewal, but over time, it becomes clear that neither Kolkata nor the U.S. offers him complete solace. Subhash’s sense of who he is becomes tied to memory, the memory of his upbringing, his family, and his connection to Udayan. These memories are fragmented and complex, involving guilt, love, and regret. This tension between the life he has built in America and his memories of Kolkata forms a crucial part of Subhash’s evolving identity, ultimately revealing how he grapples with belonging in both places, though he can never fully reconcile them. Subhash’s mental and emotional state in the novel suggests that the diasporic experience is not just about physical migration but involves a deep psychological struggle to maintain a sense of self. His distance from Gauri and

Bela, his emotional withdrawal, and his inability to fully integrate into either the American or Bengali ways of life reflect this ongoing emotional and psychological battle.

Gauri and Bela: Gendered and Generational Dimensions of Exile

Gauri's character can be interpreted as that of an empowered woman who seeks to forge a new identity in her diasporic life. Having left behind a life of widowhood in India by marrying her husband's brother, she attempts to escape her past. Despite this relocation, she remains unable to forget her former existence and becomes caught between two competing identities. Once in America, she readily adopts the local culture and lifestyle in order to embark on a new journey of self-reconstruction. However, her assimilation into this diasporic identity fails to bring her lasting peace. Isolated in her new milieu, she is unable to establish meaningful relationships either with her daughter or with her husband. Ultimately, she departs from her family yet continues to grapple with an ongoing identity crisis.

Bela's character as a second-generation immigrant, embodies the inherited consequences of her parent's dislocation. Born in Rhode Island, she easily acquires an American identity but remains disconnected from her ancestral roots. Because her parents never imbued her with strong ethnic customs, she remains unaware of or disconnected from her ancestral roots. This absence of cultural transmission means that she lacks the inherited anchor that might ordinarily ground a second generation in a dialectic of origin-and-settlement. At the same time, the diasporic dilemma deepens, because rather than feeling at home in the host culture by virtue of fully belonging, she remains unsettled caught between two cultural orders.

Furthermore, Bela's experience is compounded by alienation stemming from her childhood: the failed relationship of her parents creates a domestic instability that interrupts the intergenerational continuity of culture, identity, and belonging. For a second-generation

migrant, family is often the site where cultural values, narrative memory and emotional support of a diasporic identity are mediated. When those familial ties are fractured, the potential for identity coherence is disrupted, producing a form of loneliness even in a culturally familiar environment. In other words, even though Bela may adopt outwardly the host culture's lifestyle, this assimilation does not guarantee emotional integration or the internal resolution of identity. Her hybrid identity becomes less a site of empowerment than a terrain of dislocation.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* intricately captures the tension between home and exile, revealing how displacement reshapes the contours of identity across generation. Through Subhash's quiet struggle between belonging and alienation, Gauri's search for intellectual and emotional freedom, and Bela's fractured sense of inheritance, Lahiri exposes the psychological cost of migration and the persistent longing for rootedness. The novel demonstrates that diasporic existence is not a linear journey from one home to another but an ongoing negotiation between memory, loss, and adaptation. Ultimately, Lahiri portrays identity as a fluid construct where the boundaries between home and displacement continually blur. Her narrative underscores the universality of diasporic fragmentation and affirms that the search for selfhood within the global diaspora is both a struggle and a form of survival.

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