

# Quest for Homeland in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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## Abstract

The present paper is a critical analysis of various problems associated with physical displacement and psychological dissociation of people who move from one country to another for better prospects of life. The paper deals with numerous experiences of immigrants who in search for imaginary homeland generally feel the pangs of alienation, rootlessness, loneliness, and nostalgia. The study focuses on the quest for homeland of two major characters, Subhash Mitra and Udayan Mitra in Jhumpa Lahiri's famous novel, *The Lowland*. The paper explores Udayan's feelings of homelessness even while living in his homeland and Subhash's feelings of alienation, identity crisis, cultural disorientation while living away from his homeland. In addition to this, the dilemmas of female characters, Gauri and Bela, have also been studied here.

**Key words:** Quest, Homeland, Alienation, Nostalgia, Cultural disorientation

The concept of Homeland relates to the feelings of rootedness and belongingness. Over the centuries, owing to various economic, social, political, and environmental factors, people have moved away from their homes and gone out in search for better prospects of life. The experience of migrating out of homeland and settling in some foreign lands is never easy for the migrants since homeland holds a sentimental value for them. Being dispersed from their homeland, they think of it with fond memories, thus feeling nostalgic and emotional at the same time. They have a "strong attachment to and desire for literal return to a well-deserved homeland"

(Clifford 305). Such dispersed people aspire to return to their homelands but when they cannot, they face the problems of rootlessness, alienation, identity-crisis, estrangement, and lack of belongingness in their lands of settlement. Their experiences are typical because they all have to face the problems of adjustment with the Self as well as with the new, unfamiliar environment. Memories of their native homelands tease, agonise and vex them. They create problems for them when they try to make new memories in the new land. This duality of experience hinders the process of their successful assimilation into the new country. Voluntary or involuntary migration and myriad experiences of the exiled people have drawn the attention of the creative writers all over the world, who, in their works, deal mainly with the issues, such as, quest for the homeland, identity-crisis, existential uprootedness, problems of cultural assimilation, social adjustment and psychological adaptation. According to Dr. Malti Agrawal, expatriate writings largely “give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers when they are on the rack owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo.”

Writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bapsi Sidhwa, etc. have personally experienced the expatriate feelings and strong cultural clash in the foreign lands where they have settled after migrating from their homelands. Their expatriate experiences have helped them create such fictional characters who are exiles both physically and psychologically and these characters are constantly in search for their homelands while dealing with the problems of alienation and rootlessness. Pulitzer Prize winner, Jhumpa Lahiri is one such Indian writer in English who has given a powerful presentation of immigrant experience in her four brilliant works [two short-story collections, viz., *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and two novels, *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013)]. Lahiri’s oeuvre of fiction deals with the themes of hybridity, identity-crisis, quest for the self, search for the homeland, problems of attachment and detachment, etc. In an interview entitled “A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri”, she

records her experiences of being a second-generation expatriate living in America by saying that for immigrants, “the challenges of exile, the loneliness, ... alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. ...As a young child, I felt that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged, and therefore somehow neglected.... I felt that I led two very separate lives.”

This is exactly what she portrays in her works. Her famous novel, *The Lowland* (2013) depicts the conflicts of cultural disorientation, assimilation, alienation as well as identity issues of its characters living away from their homeland. Lahiri expresses her views in an article published in *The New York Times* by saying, “From the beginnings of literature, poets and writers have based their narratives on crossing borders, on wandering, on exile, on encounters beyond the familiar. The stranger is an archetype in epic poetry, in novels. The tension between alienation and assimilation has always been a basic theme.”

The book, *The Lowland* revolves around two brothers, Subhash Mitra and Udayan Mitra belonging to “modest middle-class homes” (Lowland 3) of Tollygunge, Calcutta. The brothers, though intimately connected, have contrasting natures. While Udayan is “blind to self-constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors” (12), Subhash strives “to minimize his existence, as other animals merge[d] with bark or blades of grass” (12). Udayan is an idealistic man of radical thinking who likes to take decisions of his life on his own. He joins a gang of communist radicals to give his revolutionary ideas wings of freedom. In contrast to his brother, Subhash is more of a precautionary, subdued, and progressive type who migrates to Rhode Island to pursue his dreams of making a career in Marine Chemistry and Oceanography. Lahiri showcases the dilemmas of her characters through the choices they make in their lives.

Udayan makes radical choices in his life. He gets married to a young philosophy student, Gauri, against the wishes of his parents. He even involves Gauri in his leftist activities. However, after joining the Maoist Political Organization in Naxalbari, he suffers from alienation, loneliness, and constant fear of getting

caught by the Police. The narrator notes Udayan's sense of isolation in the following words: "He complained of feeling alone even though they were together. Feeling isolated is the most basic way" (128). On the one hand, Udayan feels existentially disconnected even while living in his homeland, on the other hand, his brother Subhash feels the pangs of rootlessness and isolation in the new land. During the initial days of his arrival in America for higher studies, Subhash fails to assimilate into the American culture. He suffers from loneliness as the memories of the homeland haunt him. The omniscient author-narrator notes his homesickness, saying:

Sailing even slightly east reminded Subhash of how far away he was from his family.... Isolated on the ship with the scientists and other students and the crew, he felt doubly alone. Unable to fathom his future, severed from his past. (76)

He is engrossed with the fond memories of the faraway homeland whenever he encounters a contrast between his past life and his present life. For instance, when he is reminded of the celebration of Independence Day in India, his mind automatically starts comparing the two countries and it accentuates his sense of alienation. He muses nostalgically:

The following day was August 15, Indian Independence. A holiday in the country, lights on government buildings, flag hoisting and parades. An ordinary day here. (94)

He is racked with the pain of homesickness in the foreign land and this creates problems in his assimilation into American way of life. Due to the lack of telephonic conversation with his kith and kin in Tollygunge, he expresses his nostalgia for the homeland in the letters written to his brother, Udayan. In one of his letters, he confesses:

As strange as it sounds, when the sky is overcast, when the clouds are low, something about the coastal landscape here, the water and the grass, the smell of bacteria when I visit the mudflats, takes me home. I think of the lowland, of paddy fields. (53)

The childhood memories of his Calcutta days force him to

compare the lifestyle, work, culture, and society of America with those of India. Such a comparison is a trademark of diasporic experience since it forms a major part of immigrant identity. For instance, on the occasion of Durga Pujo, it becomes almost impossible for Subhash not to miss his people back in India. The narrator expresses Subhash's wistful feelings as follows:

He thought of Durga Pujo coming again to Calcutta. As he was first getting to know America, the absence of the holiday hadn't mattered to him, but now he wanted to go home. (99)

Through these words, the novelist renders symbolically the predicament of all immigrants living away from their native countries who are unable to cut off completely from their roots in their consciousness. They keep searching for their homelands and in their quest, they undergo various agonies, pains, and sufferings which make their search even more difficult. Unless their minds reconcile with the thoughts of accepting the lands of their settlement as their own, they keep looking back, searching for their roots in their homelands.

Along with the male characters like Udayan and Subhash, the female characters like Gauri and Bela also search for their homeland while suffering from the pangs of isolation and nostalgia in the homes of their husbands. Udayan's wife, Gauri feels tormented when she experiences the feelings of alienation, loneliness and insecurity after the killing of her husband at the hands of the police. When the pregnant Gauri witnesses the police encounter of her husband, her whole life is shattered. She feels all alone in the whole world. Her sense of loneliness does not mitigate even when her brother-in-law, Subhash, offers to marry her and take her to America with him. Even in America, Gauri finds it an uphill task to contend with her inner sense of insecurity and alienation. She is unable to forget her past life in the lowland of Tollygunge which in turn stops her from getting assimilated into the present life in Rhode Island. She is haunted by the memories of her life with Udayan and the secret of his death. Such memories play havoc on her psychological health, thereby exacerbating her sense of aloofness. She behaves like a stranger even with Subhash. His home does not

give her the feeling of being at home, staying connected or rooted. She does not enjoy mingling with other immigrant Indians. When Subhash offers to invite some Indian friends to their place to alleviate her sense of isolation and to help her adapt to the American social environment, her reply is nonchalant:

Should we invite a few of them to our place sometime?

It's up to you. They might be helpful, after the baby comes.

I don't need their advice.

I meant as companions.

I don't want to spend my time with them.

Why not, Gauri?

I have nothing in common with them, she said. (167-68)

She is constantly in search for her lost home and homeland where she used to feel safe, rooted and connected. In Subhash's home in Rhode Island, she feels connected neither to Subhash, nor to her baby, nor even to her own self. She has an antipathy even to her motherly instincts since the baby in her womb unceasingly reminds her of her life with Udayan and she feels an acute sense of spatial as well as temporal loss in her husband's death. The novelist informs:

She felt as if she contained a ghost, as Udayan was. The child was a version of him, in that it was both present and absent. Both within her and remote. She regarded it with a sort of disbelief, just as she still did not really believe that Udayan was gone, missing now not only from Calcutta but from every other part of the earth she'd just flown across. (149)

Gauri suffers the agony of an identity-crisis and as such, she is not able to acknowledge her new role as Subhash's wife. In fact, her marriage with Subhash is also her way of staying hitched to the memories of her first love, Udayan:

She had married Subhash as a means of staying connected to Udayan. But even as she was going through with it she knew that it was useless, just as

it was useless to save a single earring when the other half of the pair was lost. (153)

By clinging on to her past life memories, Gauri's mind keeps searching for her lost home and homeland. She is not able to break her ties with the past. Memories of her happy married life with Udayan keep haunting her even in Rhode Island. Her mind keeps traversing back to the good times spent with Udayan at Tollygunge. Her pain and anger for having lost her first husband prevent her from adjusting with her new husband. She becomes disoriented and psychologically dissociated from the family life, her husband and her daughter, Bela. As time passes, she becomes increasingly detached from family ties and joins the Philosophy classes in search for peace, poise and harmony of her sequestered self. She cuts her hair short, tears her sarees and blouses as if to seek a new identity. Her distressed, perplexed, and alienated self causes her to grow indifferent even to her child. This leads to her shedding of all familial ties. Her decision of moving to a new city, leaving Subhash and Bela back in Rhode Island, gives a clear indication of her problematic identity and her efforts to overcome its ensuing fall out. Her quest for homeland is never ending since she does not feel connected to her own blood, Bela. A mother's disconnection with her family and her incessant quest for homeland has adverse effect on young Bela's psyche.

The writer also reveals the warped psyche of Bela, emanating directly from her mother's carelessness. In her adolescence, Bela tries to apprehend the actions of her mother, but fails. This failure severely impairs her growth process and renders her a rootless and alienated person. Her individual identity and self-confidence receive a shock when Subhash reveals the truth about her real father, Udayan. This fact becomes evident from what transpires between Subhash and Bela:

I'm not your father.

Who are you, then?

Your stepfather. Your uncle. Both these things.

She refused to believe him. She thought something had happened to him, that he'd lost his mind, ...

Stop saying that, she said. He sat, passive, in her clutches, and yet he felt as if he were striking her. He was aware of the brute force of the truth, worse than any physical blow. (325)

This revelation shatters Bela emotionally. Her inveterate sense of belongingness receives the biggest jolt of her life. She starts feeling homeless and rootless. It is through various characters and their life choices, Lahiri showcases how the nativity of characters pulls them back to their roots.

Major characters of the book are constantly searching for their homelands and deal with various problems of living in a foreign land, viz., alienation, loneliness, identity-crisis, nostalgia, and lack of assimilation into the foreign culture, etc. Lahiri also discusses the role of memory of homeland in making the immigrants feel rootless. She delves deep into the psychology of her characters and tries to find answers to these complex problems.

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