



# Cultural Duality And Assimilation In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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## Abstract :

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* explores the complexities of cultural duality and assimilation through the experiences of its protagonists, particularly Subhash and Gauri, as they navigate the tensions between their Indian heritage and their lives in the United States. The novel examines themes of identity, displacement, and belonging, illustrating how immigrant characters struggle to reconcile their past with their present. Lahiri portrays assimilation not as a linear process but as a continuous negotiation between cultural roots and new environments. While Subhash embraces aspects of American culture while maintaining ties to his Bengali heritage, Gauri seeks intellectual and personal liberation at the cost of familial and cultural connections. Through these contrasting experiences, Lahiri highlights the emotional and psychological impact of migration, revealing how cultural duality shapes personal identities and relationships. This paper analyzes how *The Lowland* presents assimilation as both an opportunity for reinvention and a source of alienation, ultimately questioning whether true integration is possible without a sense of belonging.

## Introduction:

Jhumpa Lahiri is born to Bengali emigrants who have migrated from England to get settled in America to avail the best career possibilities and a promising lifestyle. She has achieved recognition in homeland and also globally for her heartwarming yet complicated depiction of familial relationships of emigrants from Indian origin who are struggling to straddle their dual cultures-their deeply ingrained Indian legacy and their American aspirations, in her writings. By the privilege of her birth in a displaced family, she has collected, since her childhood, ample experience of mental turmoil and psychological conflicts that are frequently experienced by every emigrant who is struggling with the surroundings and also with herself so as to explore her true identity in wasteland: the place that assigns her two different identities, one associated with the native roots of her parents which she has personally visited only on special occasions and the other

is her birth place to which she herself feels attached by virtues of her birth and upbringing. "*The Lowland*" is not an ordinary narrative of immigrant experience as it tries to explore the complexity of interpersonal relationships of man and showcases the pain of abandonment and remorse of deciding wrongly which leads to significant change in the course of their life. In her well acclaimed novel "*The Lowland*," the novelist continuously develops the motifs of cultural displacement, disorientation and identity crisis that an emigrant encounters in creating a new home in a distant country.

In the novel, Jhumpa Lahiri underlines the struggle for identity in the backdrop of cultural dynamics that help in strengthening and culmination of the self of the central characters Subhash, Udayan and Gauri. The novelist has been greatly involved in the novel to explore the themes of the development and metamorphosis of self, search for true love and value of familial relationships. "*The Lowland*" is an iconic testament to her creative powers, wherein Lahiri has cleverly juxtaposed the diverse traditions to delineate cultural clash that helps in the development of her characters and the situations more profoundly than ever before. In the novel "*The Lowland*" the author scrutinises how the identity of her characters is defined by the historico-cultural circumstances in which they live. Her protagonists are two brothers Udayan and Subhash who share troubled lives and Gauri is their connecting link. Their identities clash and confront each other against the backdrop of bloodshed in Naxalism of Calcutta spawning estrangements in the belief systems that grips them together tightly. The development of new relations due to wrong choices made under inevitable pressures build challenges for their personal legacy. The novel is outlandish from Lahiri's other novels as the dilemma of displacement and alienation encountered by her characters is not solely because of their diasporic hostility, but also owing to their personal choices and actions. "*The Lowland*" is focused around characters who traverse beyond the agony of estrangement and despair as they attempt to cast a new portion in an unknown land. Lahiri has beautifully carved human predicament in the following lines:

"Most people trusted in the future, assuming that their preferred version of it would unfold. Blindly planning for it, envisioning things that weren't the case. This was the working of the will. This was what gave the world purpose and direction. Not what was there but what was not (19)."

The novel narrates the story of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, born with an age gap of fifteen months. Though the two brothers have enjoyed a very peaceful and secluded childhood at a small town called Tollygunge, their education and bent of aptitudes separated them forever. Subhash leaves for the United States to pursue his academic career while the younger Udayan, brainwashed by Naxalites, is determined to volunteer his life to the cause of his homeland. He is so engrossed in his decision to be a part of Naxal activities that he forgets about the consequences of his involvement on his family. He turns down Subhash's offer to settle down in America and become "indifferent to building up a career," he tells Subhash: "How can you walk away from what's happening? There, of all places? (30)"

Many critics disagree not to consider "*The Lowland*" as diasporic work contemplating the well-worn themes of the diasporic literature genre. Diasporic dilemmas are easily traceable here and now in the novel. "*The Lowland*" undoubtedly stands out in comparison to other diasporic works produced by the novelist as the pangs of alienation and identity are encountered by her characters not because of migration only but also due to their individual choices and actions. Subhash faces a dilemma of isolation and distress in the initial phase of his settlement in an alien soil because he consciously chooses to pursue his higher education in America instead of his homeland. On his way to America with other fellow students, he feels alone knowing he is gradually heading further from his family in Calcutta. His early days were his toughest time when he realised the need of a family. The novelist describes his dilemma:

"For a year and a half he had not seen his family. I did not sit down with them at the end of the day to share a meal. In Tollygunge his family did not have a phone line. He'd sent a telegram to let them know he'd arrived. He was learning to live without hearing their voices to receive news of them only in writing (63)."

In the initial phase of transition of their lives, both the brothers gradually learn to live without hearing familiar voices and rely upon the letters to reach each other but with time the exchange of letters also stops. Lahiri has given an emotional reference to the parents who are going through the anguish of abandonment of both the sons. Udayan cuts his ties because of his Naxalite's reputation and Subhash soon gets lost in the menacing of industrialization which leads to seclusion from others including his family. Both the sons distanced themselves from their parents in pursuit of their fantasies which led to an unquenchable feeling of deprivation and isolation in the heart of their parents. The loneliness of Subhash intensifies in alien life and in such a catastrophe he gets involved in an immoral act of drawing physical pleasure from an older married woman, Holly, a mother of a boy living separately from her husband. On one such freakout with Holly in her house, Subhash, looking at the calendar, realises tomorrow is the 15th August, the Independence Day, the most celebrated occasion for him during his school days. The significance of the day intensifies his loneliness. He compares how he celebrated this day in school with the loneliness of his present life and feels homophobic. Lahiri describes his mental agony as:

"The following day was August 15, Indian Independence. A holiday for the country, lights on government buildings, flag hoisting and parades. An ordinary day here (78)."

He is aware that his loneliness has pushed him into such a filthy relationship which will be discarded by his parents. He also knows that his sense of displacement and uprootedness in an alien soil forced him to find some ground in a relationship which is not permanent. His tragedy of exile is a live commentary on the inability of people of the Indian diaspora to adapt to the new life.

Lahiri has described the character of Gauri who is experiencing the agony of an exile in her own marriage. Gauri realises that her marriage with her lover Udayan is nothing more than a medium to foster Naxalite ideologies of Udayan which, in the end, ruined her and her in-laws' lives. One bad day, Udayan is found dead behind their house in a police encounter for his collaboration in murdering a police officer. Udayan's death affects the whole of the family. Subhash is unable to believe the words written on the telegram, "Udayan killed. Come back if you can (107)." Death of Udayan is no less than a call of duty for Subhash. He returns to India in a state of utter shock and confusion after a long gap of three years to take care of his bereaved parents, unaware about what has happened in Calcutta. His confusion intensifies when he comes to know that Udayan dies in a police encounter due to his involvement in Naxal activities. The pain of his brother's death is doubled by the indifferent behaviour of his parents towards him. The depression and disoriented behaviour of his parents disturbed him:

"His parents asked no questions about America. Inches away, they avoided looking Subhash in the eye. He wondered whether his parents would ask him to remain in Calcutta, to abandon his life in Rhode Island. But there was no mention of this. Nor was there any mention of the possibility of their arranging a marriage for him. They were in no position to plan his wedding, to think about his future. An hour often passed without them speaking. The shared quiet fell over them binding them more tightly than any conversation could (96)."

Subhash is perturbed to see miseries of widowed Gauri who becomes a widow in the prime age of twenty three only. The family members hold her responsible for the tragedy and consider her an ill-omen who foreshadow the life of their son and bring adversaries in the family. Her concept of freedom abruptly gets stalled. Udayan's parents turned indifferent to her presence in the house. Gauri is thwarted and becomes an object of ignorance. Her existence in the house of her in-laws is dwarfed until Subhash visits Calcutta. At the prime age of her life, Gauri has to fall in line with other widows who are not allowed to be part of any sacred ceremonial functions. Gauri's exile and neglected status is shown with sympathy by the author as:

"The vermillion was washed clean from her hair. The iron bangle was removed from her wrist. The absence of these ornaments marked her as a widow. She was twenty-three years old....She was given white saris to wear in place of coloured ones so that she resembled the other widows in the family. Women three times her age (108-109)."

As time grows, Subhash becomes familiar with Gauri; he feels more empathetic towards her. He starts harbouring the thought of taking her to America along with him so as to endow her a dignified life and other basic requirements needed for a respectable existence and this is only possible by getting officially married to her. He withstands dissent from every corner yet is determined to provide Gauri, pregnant with his deceased brother, what his brother failed to give when he was with her. Subhash holds the opinion that the advanced culture of America is receptive and would offer Gauri better prospects to assimilate with future dreams. A widow will always be helpless while facing the challenges and rigours of traditional Indian culture. Modernity of America will make her go into oblivion and support her start life afresh.

"The reality that Gauri had Udayan's child in her womb doesn't deter Subhash's determination to marry her though in a small gathering, at the cost of several whispers making the rounds. While Subhash married her on humanitarian grounds, Gauri had her own beliefs since in her isolated moments, she felt thankful for his independence and at the same time she was bewildered (126)."

The novelist describes her feelings in the following words:

"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 (127-28)."

Gauri anticipates the fears of vacillation in America where she would be abandoned both in the absence of her memories of her deceased husband Udayan and a sense of belongingness in homeland, making her life an exile in the true sense. Her evacuation reminds the readers of the observations of Edward Said about exile and the delirium that almost every migrant encounters in a new culture of a new country.

"It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the achievements of exile permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever (121)."

In America, Subhash tries his best to provide a congenial environment for Gauri so he takes her on outings to familiarise her with the surroundings, but instead of appreciating his efforts she alienates herself from her present life and from Subhash. They posed as a couple in society but lives apart under the same roof. His choice of marriage with Gauri and bringing her to America with a hope of providing her a better life turns out to be futile. It rather aggravates his alienation; this marriage gives him nothing but mere loneliness. Soon after her arrival in Rhode Island, Gauri cuts her hair short and discards saris and prefers to wear American clothing. When enquired by Subhash, she brushes off his doubts saying that she is bored of them. Manju Kapoor talks about the awareness of emigrants regarding their sense of clothing as a tool to assimilate with their new culture in "*The Immigrant*" (2008) in the following words:

"As immigrants fly across oceans they shed their old clothing because clothes maketh the man and new ones help ease the transition. Men's clothing has less international variations; the change is not so drastic. But those women who are not used to wearing western clothes find themselves in a dilemma. If they focus on integration, convenience and conformity they have to sacrifice habit, style and self perception(62)."



Gauri gives birth to Bela. People in the surroundings treat Subhash and Gauri as a couple yet the latter keeps confirming to herself that the child belongs to her dead husband, Udayan. From this point her existential journey starts. Her favourite subject Philosophy brings solace to her disturbed mentality. Her unsolved mysteries related to place, time and people pushed her to a different world wherein she endeavours to assimilate the withered threads of her shattered life in an entirely different form that she calls "a form of sustenance (151)." The novelist graphically describes the waves of her mind as:

"She saw time; she sought to understand it. She filled note-books with her questions, observations. Did it exist independently, in the physical world, or in the mind's apprehensions? Was it perceived only by humans? What caused certain moments to swell up like hours, certain years to dwindle to a number of days? (151)"

Gauri does not find herself fit for the role of a mother. Her predilection for individual freedom and passion for the study of philosophy restricts her to connect emotionally not only with Subhash but also with Bela. America and its modern culture provides her ample opportunities to fulfil her dreams of self love which could not have been possible in India where she would have been struggling as a widow lacking happiness and beauty of colours. Taking advantage of the modern culture of America, Gauri shuns all her responsibilities as a mother and a wife without any remorse and moves on in pursuit of individual explorations. Gauri's personality as an irresponsible mother constitutes the crux of the novel. Her decision to abandon her family to pursue a voyage of self realisation originates from her interest in self emancipation. Gauri's existential anguish originated from American culture where everyone strives for development of one's own self inspires Gauri to leave Rhode Island for California; leave her family for her freedom. Her fragmented self does not give her the choice to assimilate herself with Subhash who impersonates as a quasi-husband and with Bela who is ignorant of the split identity of her mother. According to Gauri, she is heading towards the diasporic identity of those who are constantly struggling to define and redefine their identity in a new cultural setup. Ultimately, Gauri decides to divorce Subhash to whom she is "an imposition, an intrusion (304)."

In quest of a free life, Gauri chooses to desert her child and Subhash. She prefers to wear western dresses, seeks interest in western studies, learns foreign languages and also loses herself in lesbian romance with a student at the University. She is so obsessed with the freedom she avails in California that she fancies getting swallowed up in the city; she wants to disappear there. After Udayan's death, she has been craving for a place to settle down as home and her search ends at California, as Lahiri asserts, "In any case, California was her only home. Right away she had adapted to its climate, both comforting and strange, hot but seldom oppressive (235)."

Gauri's sudden decision to leave them on their own burdens Subhash's life with the responsibility of raising Bela alone. Subhash suffers an acute sense of betrayal and severe loneliness in old age. When he harks back to his past, he finds himself as a 27 years old man, away from his family, struggling alone in a new world and now he is in 60s and is still deprived of the love and compassion of family, pushing him in a

state of melancholy. Lahiri has skillfully showcased that diasporic protagonists of "*The Lowland*" easily mix with cultural diversity of America as a primary demand of the diasporic community. They are global dwellers and sporty associates of multiculturalism. Regardless of their dedication to American culture, they never relinquish Indian culture and traditions. Subhash and Bela regularly visit India to perform their customary rituals. On the death of his father, Subhash along with Bela goes to India. Gauri, when tired of her stay in California, visits India to rejuvenate her ancestral association and Lahiri describes her journey to India as her pilgrim voyage seeking self emancipation. Further, the names given to their newborns by Subhash and Gauri and later by Bela show their love for their cultural heritage. They willingly choose Indian names for their children. The name 'Bela' is derived from a Bengali word referring to the "span of time." Bela calls her daughter "Meghna," which means "cloud."

Lahiri has also shown the love of her characters for their mother language Bengali as most of the letters mentioned in the novel are written in Bengali indicating that mother tongue is the best language to express our true feelings wherever we are in the world. Many contemporary writers find a strong connection of an immigrant with his native country and culture. So, it is not wrong to say that diasporans may have decided to settle abroad for a better future but wherever they stay, they consciously or unconsciously retain and cherish memories of their language, culture, traditional values and customs of their ancestral home.

In the novel, Jhumpa Lahiri has carefully treated the concept of diasporic dilemma felt by major characters in search of self in the foreign country. The intricacies entangled in the familial relationships lead the characters not only to alienation but also create an identity crisis for them in the backdrop of the diaspora. Their ability of cultural assimilation gives them access to the wasteland while their nostalgia links them to their homeland. Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri has successfully interwoven the theme of self realisation in diasporic sensibility in "*The Lowland*" by exploring intricate personalities and complicated relationships.

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