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## **Diasporic Identity, Culture Shock and Hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Diasporic literature is often preoccupied with the themes of identity, displacement and hybridity, particularly in the postcolonial and globalized world. This paper analyses Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer-winning narrative style and her novel *The Lowland* in the light of diaspora studies and postcolonial theory. Drawing on the ideas of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and others, the paper situates Lahiri's fiction in the larger discourse of migration and acculturation. The novel vividly portrays the struggles of Indian immigrants in reconciling their inherited cultural values with the individualistic ethos of American society. Characters such as Subhash and Gauri embody the tensions between rootedness and assimilation, highlighting the inevitable culture shock and hybrid identities that emerge in diaspora. Lahiri's delicate narrative demonstrates that diasporic experiences cannot be understood in binary terms of tradition and modernity; rather, they reflect continuous negotiation, cultural contestation and hybridity.

**KEY WORDS:** Diaspora, Identity, Culture Shock, Hybridity, Postcolonialism, Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*.

As a result of the postcolonial movement, the diasporic phenomenon is now better understood. This occurred as the movement gained steam in the aftermath of decolonization. Nearly all of the postcolonial theorists, such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Gloria Anzaldua, Rey Chow, Felix Guattari, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, Arjun Appadurai and others, have therefore deliberated on the formation and continuation of diasporas in the rapidly globalizing world.

The significant challenge of determining one's own identity is the root of this enduring interest with the diaspora. After being highlighted for the first time in the context of newly-freed countries, the concept was immediately used to characterise the predicament of any minority group that is placed against a majority due to differences in colour, ethnicity, gender, etc. In the case of immigrants in any civilization, the culture of the nation in which they find themselves living poses a danger to their sense of identity. In addition,

"The trajectory of a migrant follows the pattern of placement, dislocation and relocation," with each of these periods being more luminal and less clearly defined than the previous one. Acculturation is a long, one-sided process (the minority seeking integration with the majority) and it is not without a feeling of loss and exile



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for the individual who is through it. It also is not a straightforward change; rather, it gives birth to hybridity, which serves to identify the many phases of acculturation. (Malik 156)

The author Jhumpa Lahiri, who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, has done an excellent job in her work *The Lowland* of bringing to light the post-colonial problems of identity and culture.

Lahiri is noted for her insight into the lives of the Indian immigrant community. She was born in the United Kingdom and raised in the United States. Her parents were born in India, but they eventually made the move to England, which is where she was born. On the other hand, they uprooted their lives and moved to Rhode Island in the United States. Jhumpa spent her childhood and her formative years of schooling at this location. Her first experiences in India were gained via her family's travels to West Bengal, which took place on a regular basis. Her debut collection of short tales, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, dealt with the lives of certain Indian people in Indian settings in addition to focusing on the experience of immigrants. She was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize as a result of this anthology. After some time, she wrote and released a book named *The Namesake* as well as a second collection of short tales titled *Unaccustomed Earth*. In each of these volumes, she explored a unique facet of the experiences of Indians who emigrated to the United States, sometimes known as the "Land of Promise," in the hope of bettering their economic circumstances or advancing their education. It is reported that:

"Her work has largely concentrated on first-generation and second-generation Bengali immigrants, addressing issues of exile, isolation and integration." This statement is accurate. "Lahiri has a great understanding into the psychology of relationships, age, maturity and loss," (Batra 50-51)

In instances like these, it goes without saying that the Indian ancestry of the immigrants is investigated in great detail. The majority of them are already adults by the time they make the move to America, where they want to spend the rest of their life settling down. They engage with the American population, which was formerly a group of immigrants themselves who travelled from various regions of Europe towards the end of the fifteenth century. These settlers arrived in the Americas around the end of the fifteenth century. The divergent cultural histories of these two populations are the primary cause of the difficulties that arise at the contact. Even though the primary topic of discussion in all three of Lahiri's published works of fiction is the diasporic experience, there is still a great deal to be said on this subject. For this reason, in *The Lowland*, she continues to focus on this topic, even though she devotes a significant amount of space to the history of the Indian characters, who are members of a family in Calcutta.

The action of the narrative takes place in Tollygunge, which is located in Calcutta. The first thing that the reader does is becoming familiar with two brothers named Subhash and Udayan.



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Udayan is older than Subhash by a period of fifteen months. They are inextricably bound to one another and cannot be separated. These two brothers are represented by the two ponds that are located in close proximity to their home. After the rainy season, when they are completely submerged in water, they give the impression of a single, elongated pond. However, as soon as summer arrives, the water evaporates and the ponds give the impression of being two smaller, distinct bodies of water. In a similar vein, the two brothers have certain similarities but also have some key distinctions in terms of their abilities and mentalities. They continue to demonstrate their exceptional intelligence throughout their academic careers. While Udayan is fascinated by physics, Subhash finds his niche in the field of chemistry. Nevertheless, they both have an interest in electronic gadgets and they are always carrying out little experiments and making repairs to electronic items in their own homes. After some time, Subhash is awarded a scholarship to continue his physics education in the United States and he goes there.

Udayan, who is attending college in India, becomes engaged in the Naxalite movement, which is a covert political organisation. This uprising, which started in the 1960s, gets its name from the hamlet of Naxalbari, which was the site of a landless labourers' armed revolt against the local landowners. The theory that was thought to be behind it was recognised as extreme Marxism, which was espoused by Chairman Mao-Tse Tung of China. This ideology advocated for the violent destruction of government, as it was believed that governments were an adjunct of capitalism. Udayan evolved become a stalwart defender of the movement's goals. He would take part in clandestine party gatherings, disseminate subversive information and assist in the organising of violent activities that were intended to threaten the authority of the state.

At around the same time, Udayan begins to feel drawn to Gauri. Her home was located close to his college and Udayan quickly made friends with her brother, Manash. As a result, Gauri gets in touch with Udayan and finds herself dragged more and farther into the Naxalite cause. After some time has passed, Udayan is murdered by the authorities in a staged confrontation. In order to participate in the last rites for his brother, Subhash travels all the way to India. It is at this location that he gives serious consideration to the idea of relocating Gauri, who is Udayan's wife. In direct defiance of the desires of his parents, he weds Gauri and then moved her to the United States in order to start a fresh chapter of her life there. He is under the impression that she would be able to put the tragedy that occurred with Udayan behind her and start a new life in the United States.

However, the events unfold in a different manner. Gauri can empathise with him in a physical sense but not on an emotional level. In later chapters, this subhash-specific physical union is no longer maintained. She has several partners, but she never forms an emotional connection with any of them. Despite this, she continues to accept lovers. Then, she spends all of her time and energy to either the teaching she does or the romanticising she does as a way to pass the time. She ends up emotionally bankrupting herself. After a significant amount of time has passed, during



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which her daughter has matured into a young woman and given birth to a girl who has been given the name Meghna, she pays them a visit. However, she is not there to rekindle their relationship; rather, she is there to have Subhash sign the divorce papers. This demonstrates how inflexible she can be. On the other side, her emotional tie to her late husband emerges and she makes the journey to Calcutta as if it were a pilgrimage, only to return home empty-handed. The visit was a waste of time.

The degree to which she assimilates American society while letting go of the highly regarded Indian sentimentality reveals a lot about the tension that exists between the two civilizations. This brings up the subject of the cultural differences and the culture shock that is experienced by individuals of diaspora wherever they may be in the globe. The anthropologist Kalervo Oberg defines culture shock as the psychological bewilderment encountered by individuals who abruptly join radically different cultural situations in order to survive and work. The stress that arises as a result of losing all of our customary signals and symbols associated with public interaction might hasten the onset of culture shock.

The period of time it takes for the effects of culture shock to fade after moving to a new society may range anywhere from a few weeks to several years or decades and in some circumstances, the effects of culture shock may never go away at all. It takes a very long time for Indians to migrate to western countries and even after all that time has passed, the culture that they create is a hybrid one because they adapt the characteristics of the culture of the place where they settle to suit their own preferences. Concerning the factors that bring about this phenomenon, one plausible hypothesis is that the fact that India is such an ancient civilisation has a profound effect on its population. The importance of symbolism and ritualism in our society cannot be overstated. There is always some kind of ceremony or practise taking place, therefore the calendar never skips a day. However, Lahiri's technique is characterised by delicacy and refinement and as a result, the reader is scarcely given the impression that they are experiencing culture shock. The personalities, however, undoubtedly reflect the cultural differences that exist. As a result, we see in *The Lowland* what appears to be a relatively gradual dismantling of the cultural barrier in Gauri. She does, over the course of time, become a subscriber of American society and she develops into a person who is fiercely autonomous; but, something of the old culture remains in her and this is what ultimately leads her to return to Calcutta at the end of the novel.

According to the review published by Knopf,

"The middle half of *The Lowland* portrays a particularly dry stretch," the book does in fact include some oblique references to cultural differences. We are familiar with the fundamental elements of the integration narrative, including the perplexity over American norms, the insurmountable loneliness and the feeling that one has made a terrible mistake by moving to such an arrogant and boastful



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nation. In *The Lowland*, however, the protagonists are even less receptive to their new surroundings since they are mired deeper than ever in their own insurmountable melancholy.

Allow me to spend a little time on the definition of culture before I go on to the topic of cultural differences, which is the primary focus of this piece of writing. The term "culture" comes from the Latin verb *colere*, which may be translated as "till," "foster," "care for," "give attention to," "honour," or "worship." The English word "culture" is a participial version of the Latin verb. In the context of anthropology, when we talk about a culture's or a society's way of life, the fundamental concept incorporates all that is important to us in our everyday lives. It encompasses the way in which people consume food, dress and go about their daily lives. Additionally, this refers to their traditions, rites, taboos and fetishes, as well as their beliefs and ideals. Understanding how a group or an individual might react to a certain circumstance at either the collective or individual level requires an understanding of their culture.

The interpretation of culture "that predominated use from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century's (and the definition that Eliot wanted to preserve) concentrated on the growth of the noblest and most holy components of society" (Snoeberger 3). The modern theories of culture, such as cultural materialism, do not challenge our view of culture as it has been elucidated here; rather, these theories strive to bring out the activities of ordinary people, which are neglected owing to the elitist bias in our understanding. In general, we have been socialised to believe that only members of a society's ruling class are responsible for maintaining its culture. This perspective on culture has been held by intellectuals such as Mathew Arnold and T.S. Eliot, but the Post-Marx approach tilts the scales more in favour of the average citizen. The Marxist perspective on culture is that it is a "superstructure" that is ultimately defined by the "foundation" or "structure" of the economic system. According to them, a culture and its literary outputs are always conditioned by the material forces and relations of production in the relevant historical age. This is true regardless of the textuality of history. (Malik 138)

It should go without saying that in the process of seeing the cultural expression of a certain people—in this instance, the Indian diaspora in the United States—we allow ourselves to be directed by the behaviours that individuals on the level of Subhash and Gauri engage in. They were regular folks from India who made the journey to the United States in order to start a new life there. When Subhash moves to the United States, he is exposed to a lot of new experiences that end up having an impact on the way he lives his life. When he first arrives in the United States, the first thing that captures his attention is the stunning landscape of Rhode Island, which has been further enhanced by the work of human hands. He was hypnotised by the sight of the steel piles of the two bridges that stretched over the water as he looked at them.





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"The rise and fall of the Newport Bridge, which had just been finished being built, was symmetrical and it featured arched portals and cables that would light up at night. [...] It was explained to him that the wires of all of the dangling cables would reach somewhat more than eight thousand kilometres when laid end to end. It is the distance between the United States and India; it is the gap that now separated him from his family (65).

He thought he had found the most beautiful spot on earth when he came upon a lighthouse that had three windows arranged in a pattern that resembled the buttons on the placket of a shirt. "the sound of a fog-horn pierced the air at intervals, like conch shells were blown in Calcutta to ward off evil," the author writes on days with clouds (38). The contrast was very clear: in the place they had left behind, they appeased the God in the hopes that he would accomplish things for them; in the new land, they relied on their own efforts to get things done.

Not only did the location appear different from what he was used to seeing in India – the two lowland ponds he remembered from back in Calcutta – but so were the people who lived there and the way they lived their lives. The disparity between the two cultures was destined to cast a shadow over his entire life.

"Subhash could not fathom the extremes of his life: coming from a city with so little space for humans, arriving in a place where there was still space for humans, arriving in a place where there was still so much of it to spare," said the narrator of the story (243).

The sparsely inhabited United States of America stands in stark contrast to the overpopulated country of India. In addition, India is a country with contrasting qualities and unique features. When it came to politics, for example, which his American friend Richard was interested in learning about, Subhash didn't know how to describe India's fractious politics, its complicated society, to an American. Subhash felt that it was difficult to explain the situation in India at times. For example, when it came to politics, his American friend Richard was interested in learning about. He added that while it was an old place, it was also a young place that was still trying to figure out who it was.

The way in which Gauri has experienced the difference sheds light on a few more aspects. In the mornings, the temperature in Rhode Island was very low and when she touched the windowpanes, it seemed like she was touching sheets of ice. When she entered the classroom, she saw that the student seated next to her was wearing long silver earrings, a gauzy shirt and a skirt that ended at her knees. Her own outfit consisted of a skirt that reached just to her knees. Her body was not weighed down by the yards of silk material that Gauri folded, wrapped and tucked into a petticoat each morning before she left the house. She had been donning these saris ever since she



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gave up wearing frocks when she was fifteen years old. What she had worn when she was married to Udayan and what she was still wearing at this point in time

It was in Rhode Island that Subhash first made the acquaintance of Holly, a lovely American lady who was a little bit older than he was and who would end up sharing a bed with him for a number of nights. It was the woman's son Joshua who drew his attention as he was playing at the beach and he ultimately served as the way to contact the lady. She had a nursing position in a little hospital in East Greenwich throughout her career. She had a nursing position in a little hospital in East Greenwich throughout her career. She and her spouse had been living in different residences for some time at this point. Subhash discovered that he, too, had an interest in birds of the water. She inquired about India and he responded by stating that his brother Udayan, who was married at the time and his wife were visiting his parents. Now, this is a method that is used in India but not in the United States. He understood that there was no way for Holly, or maybe any other American woman, to even fathom living a life like that.

They began to see one other on a regular basis at the beach. Even though he knew she was American and that she was probably ten years older than he was, he was unable to refuse her invitation to visit her house when she extended it to Subhash one day. He just couldn't say no. After arriving at the location, he saw that it was a residence that had been locked up. The fact that the other residences in the neighbourhood belonged to wealthy individuals meant that they were hardly ever occupied by residents. The subject puzzled him as to how a mother could live with her kid and a dog in such a remote and isolated part of the country.

"He was awestruck by the independent way in which she lived her life. In addition to that, he had a twinge of concern for her since she lived by herself in such a distant location without having to secure her door. There was no one else who could assist her, with the exception of the babysitter who watched for Joshua while she was at work. Even if her parents were still living, I believed they resided in the neighbourhood or in another area of Rhode Island; nonetheless, they had not come to look after her (72).

This exhibited a cultural feature that was completely foreign for an Indian, therefore it presented him with a conundrum that was worthy of the name.

On a certain Friday evening, he went to meet Holly, but Joshua was nowhere to be seen. It was revealed to him that on Fridays, he visits his father in order to spend some time with him. Following the completion of the evening meal, their innate tendencies took over and they went to bed. Holly had no moral compunctions whatsoever when it came to sexual things, in contrast to Subhash, who had some reservations. Holly asked him a provocative question as he was ready to leave: "Should I let you know, the next time that Joshua goes over to his father?" (73). He could



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tell that the manner done in the United States was considerably different from the way things were done in India.

Jhumpa Lahiri compares the dynamics of family life in the United States with India. Holly's inquiry concerning Subhash's relationship with his father prompted him to engage in some introspection on the topic for a time. The image of Joshua perched on his father's shoulder flashed into his head at that moment. His father was not very loving, but like many Indian parents, he was reliable. Although he was not particularly loving, his father was reliable. As a careful observer of immigrant life, Lahiri also investigates marriages between people of different races. The image of a joyful couple is painted by Professor Narsimhan and his wife, who is from the United States. It's possible that this is what Lahiri has in mind when she talks about the goal of a worldwide culture. Again, people in the United States are taught not to pry into the business of others because they place a high value on the right to privacy. When Gauri and Subhash go to a party hosted by Professor Narsimhan, he is worried that questions would be raised about his marriage to Gauri. However, contrary to his expectations, no one doubts the fact that Gauri is his wife or that he will soon be the father of her kid. They were wished well by the group and before they left, they were presented with a number of different items (139).

If they had been in India, both their history and their current lives would have been completely dismantled.

Holly's age, the fact that she already had a kid and the fact that she was legally married to someone else were all dissuading reasons for Subhash when it came to the prospect of marrying her. He had no idea that fate would put him in a predicament that was virtually identical to the one he had been in! It is Gauri who deviates from her commitments as a wedded wife, despite the fact that Subhash is to be commended for adhering to the Indian cultural traditions in which he tried his best to maintain his devotion to Gauri after he married her after the couple had been married. She illustrates the concept of acculturation by using the example of an immigrant. It all starts with her insatiable curiosity in the American manner of dressing. As Gauri's pregnancy progressed, it became more difficult for her to manage the yards of silk sari that she was wearing. She admired the way that young women in the United States dressed. Without consulting Subhash about the decision, she cut up her sarees, petticoats and blouses and replaced them with American outfits and hairstyles one day. She did this without telling him about the change. Later, after the birth of her daughter Bela, she expressed interest in finding a babysitter for her, despite the fact that Subhash was opposed to the idea. It was obvious that Gauri had internalised the American obsession with individualism and that she was not in the mood to make any concessions, despite the fact that he wanted to bring up the kid in the traditional Indian manner, with the care of her parents.





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The fact that Gauri becomes more Americanized is further supported by the fact that she develops an obsession with a guy who was alive in the 1950s and then begins to wait for him, despite the fact that their interaction does not lead to anything. In contrast, Subhash remains devoted to Gauri even after she has abandoned him for a considerable amount of time. She fantasises about living a life free of any form of burden, whether it a kid or a husband: "Time to hypothesise that [taking up a PhD degree], without Bela or Subhash, her life would be a different thing" (174). She was genuinely dazed by the feeling of independence and she gorged herself on the experience in the same manner that a beggar gorges on food. Because of the American value of individualism, she decided to divorce her partner of 12 years so that she could exercise her right to sexual autonomy and leave her marriage. Even went so far as to start a lesbian connection with Lorna! Again, it was something that was not really prevalent and was most certainly frowned upon in India.

If Gauri, who was born in India, was able to be so free, then it was inevitable that her daughter Bela, who was born and raised in the liberal environments of America, would also be free. She, like many other Americans, had sexual encounters with a wide variety of people throughout her life, but she never had a serious relationship with anybody. In spite of this,

"She swims against the materialist stream in America and is captivated by an 18th century cult teaching celibacy and simple living," even if she eventually modifies the exhortation to remain celibate herself. This is her interpretation of the combination of the radicalism of her father and the free-spirited lifestyle of her mother. She has the same iron-clad resolve as her mother and she refuses to have any dealings with the man who is the father of her kid (Batra 2014: 221).

The situation seems bleak from the Indian point of view. The manner in which Udayan passes away and Subhash moves to the United States of America together with Gauri, while their mother, who has spent her whole life in India, is a broken person. According to a review that was published in the Khaleej Times,

"After the death of Subhash's father, his mother, who is going senile, starts to clean the detritus of the two ponds with her bare hands – the putrid waste she surfaces symbolic of her and her husband's dashed ambitions and hopes of living in a joint family with their sons and families, the modern indestructible plastic refuse uncovered, of the negligence by her sons (193).

This is the opposite half of the image - a picture of the home that the immigrant left behind and it is definitely a pitiful picture due to the intensity with which emotions are experienced in India.

Indian culture is very old and is deeply digested in the people via a rigorous and delicate accultural process that is typically referred to as instilling sanskar by the family and that continues



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throughout the life of the individual. In *The Namesake*, we witness Ashoke and Ashima, who retain their links with India throughout the story, regardless of how fragile those relationships may be. Moreover, Ashima makes a pledge to travel between the two continents on a regular basis after her husband passes away. Even in *The Lowland*, we learn that Sub-hash has followed tradition and travelled to Calcutta to take part in the last rituals of his brother Udayan, who has passed away. Even though Gauri has become a significant amount more Americanized throughout her time spent in the United States, she has a strong desire to go to Calcutta so that she may feel a connection with the spirit of her late husband. This reveals a great deal about the influence of her indigenous Indian culture, which has not been eradicated entirely. She has undergone a metamorphosis, but

"the change cannot be interpreted in terms of black and white," as "they [the immigrants] live a liminal zone of continual contestation and appropriation of culture of the chosen nation of their parents. Because the prospect of change is always there throughout the course of any acculturation process, we end up with hybrid personalities rather than completely unadulterated subjectivities (Batra 2011:68).

## CONCLUSION:

Jhumpa Lahiri's *the Lowland* offers a nuanced portrayal of diasporic experiences, underscoring the struggles of displacement, cultural dissonance and hybrid identity formation. The characters navigate complex terrains of belonging and alienation, where American individualism collides with Indian familial and cultural sensibilities. Subhash remains tied to tradition while Gauri embraces acculturation and eventually detaches herself from her family, reflecting the varied responses of immigrants to cultural assimilation. The novel demonstrates how diaspora is not a static condition but a dynamic, liminal space of negotiation where multiple cultures intersect. Hybridity becomes the hallmark of immigrant identity, as individuals simultaneously retain fragments of their native culture while adapting to new environments. Lahiri's narrative, thus, resonates with postcolonial theories of cultural hybridity (Bhabha) and identity in flux (Hall). Importantly, *The Lowland* reflects how memory, nostalgia and the enduring pull of native culture continue to shape immigrant consciousness, even when assimilation seems complete. Ultimately, Lahiri's work shows that the diasporic self is never singular but always hybrid, suspended between loss and renewal, exile and belonging.

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