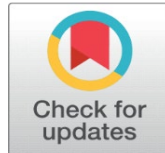


POLITICAL AND PERSONAL DISPLACEMENT IN THE LOWLAND

Ankit Jaiswal ¹



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ABSTRACT

Amidst the vast corpus of diaspora literature present today, Jhumpa Lahiri's narratives of the diasporic experience stand out remarkably from the others. Her novels not only highlight the classic diasporic issues of hybridity, alienation, and in betweenness, her novels make the reader question the very making of the diasporic experience. Her writing, I argue, is an immigrant's way of trying to trace back to her roots, trying to connect with her homeland, or at least pay homage to what would have been her homeland. In this paper, I shall try to look at displacement, both geographical and emotional, and probe into the notion of otherness that is frequently experienced by individuals inhabiting liminal cultural spaces.

Keywords: Diasporic Imaginary, Displacement, Alienation, Hybridity, Identity, In-Betweenness, Otherness

1. INTRODUCTION

A New York Times Bestseller, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is her second novel published in the year 2013 touch critical acclaim. Set in the 1960s, *The Lowland* tells the story of Subhash and Udayan who are brothers and very close to each other. However, they are both starkly different in their temperament. While Subhash is a shy, innocent and studious man, Udayan is bold, idealistic and filled with revolutionary zeal. Which later brings him close to the communist leaders and activists and gets him involved in the Naxalite movement. Meanwhile Subhash goes on to pursue his higher studies in the United States. It is in the course of his activist life that he meets Gauri, sister of Manash, another communist friend of Udayan. Gauri is a studious, philosophically inclined woman. As life would have it, Gauri and Udayan marry each other, but he is accused of a crime against the state and killed near his house in front of Gauri and his parents. He dies not knowing he was soon to be a father.

On his return from US to Calcutta after Udayan's death, Subhash finds Gauri miserable and mistreated in his home. He not only decides to marry Gauri, who is pregnant with Udayan's child, but he also moves back to Rhode Island with her. However, soon we see Subhash getting busy with his academic pursuits and Gauri finds herself spending days like a recluse. As the novel progresses, Gauri only grows distant from her home as well as from Subhash. And eventually, from her daughter, too. We see Subhash taking care of Bela. Bela's sense of identity and belonging too is complicated when she discovers the truth about her father.

The lowland, a flooded plain near Subhash and Udayan's childhood home in Tollygunge, Calcutta, serves as a recurring symbol of loss, memory, and the inescapable past. Through this novel, Lahiri examines the ripple effects of choices, the complexities of love, and the search for meaning across cultural and generational divides. The narrative

weaves between Calcutta and America, past and present, highlighting the personal costs of political ideals and the challenges of reconciling individual desires with familial obligations.

Unlike *The Namesake*, *The Lowland* moves beyond intimate familial to merge together personal loss and political history. Gauri and Subhash's migration, on one hand, is rooted in familial obligation and on the other it is a narrative of emotional dislocation.

Just like Ashoke's in *The Namesake*, Subhash's dislocation in *The Lowland* is intellectual, but Gauri's dislocation is both intellectual as well as emotional. While she struggles to integrate into American society, she simultaneously distances herself from maternal responsibility towards Bela. Her detachment, often criticised by readers, reflects a different kind of alienation—a refusal to perform normative gender roles and a withdrawal into thought and silence.

Unlike *The Namesake*, where cultural identity is central, *The Lowland* focuses on how trauma and ideology displace individuals from their emotional selves. Subhash's life in America is that of quiet resilience and sacrifice, but there is also emotional repression. Bela, the daughter raised by Subhash, is an embodiment of second-generation immigrant negotiating fragmented origins and inherited silences.

Lahiri thus complicates the idea of exile. In *The Lowland*, displacement is both chosen as well as imposed. It is political, familial, and deeply psychological. The novel reveals that migration is not always liberating—it can also be a burden, a scar, and a silence. Vijay Mishra, in his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, criticizes Bhabha's idea of hybridity for being too celebratory. He argues that for the diasporic subject, hybridity is not always liberating because it may involve pain, confusion, and cultural anxiety. He argues that the diasporic imaginary is not simply hybrid; it is fractured and ambivalent.

Displacement in *The Lowland* operates at multiple levels:

Geographical (migration from India to America)

Cultural (navigating two identities)

Emotional (alienation from family and self)

Political (ideological exile due to rebellion and repression)

"Though he was the older one, it was Udayan who was fearless. He was blind to self-constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors. He was blind to fear, to etiquette, to consequence. But Subhash had always been cautious."

This contrast between Subhash and Udayan marks the beginning of Subhash's displacement. His cautious temperament drives him to migrate to the U.S. for a stable, structured life, yet this decision alienates him from his homeland and family. Even though Subhash's decision to move to Rhodes Island is voluntary, it takes him away from his childhood home and family. In USA, he is an outsider. He is dislocated from his culture. And as fate would have it, as the novel progresses, he becomes a stranger in his own family. His displacement, therefore, is not just geographical but also emotional. Lahiri writes, "In the United States he had learned how to live alone." Subhash is caught in his solitude. Even though he seems to be living an independent life, at least before Bela's birth, he is socially and culturally displaced. The fact that he has learned to live alone highlights the reality of Subhash's living. He has not assimilated into the culture but has perhaps withdrawn himself from it. There is a hint at resignation rather than cultural integration.

Upon Udayan's death when Subhash returns to India, he appears to be very detached from what was once his home. "He no longer belonged. In the few years he'd been away, the city had ceased to recognize him." Therefore, we can argue that Subhash is someone who is caught up in dual alienation. He becomes a foreigner not only in the USA but also in India. This dual alienation, I argue, exemplifies the immigrant's paradox—he is perpetually the "other," never fully at home.

"It was Subhash who had borne the brunt of the sacrifice. He had married the widow of his brother. He had raised the child of another man." His emotional and familial dislocation is exemplified in the novel when he is dislocated within his "new family." Even though he marries his brother's widow out of a sense of responsibility and takes on the role of Bela's father and looks after her, it all comes at a deep emotional cost.

When Gauri migrates to the US after Udayan's death, we do not see her assimilating into the American society; rather, she retreats within. What further isolates her is her grief as well as guilt. Her emotional burden, therefore, ends up dislocating her further.

In the case of Bela, she is born into cultural and familial displacement. She is born in a land far from her ancestral roots. She is raised by a father who is not her biological father. She grows up disconnected from both Indian and American

identities, and when she learns the truth about her parentage, she experiences internal dislocation which manifests in the form of an identity crisis.

Even though Gauri and Subhash are married and live together, we hardly see any emotional warmth between them. This marriage is not out of love or companionship but out of responsibility and familial duty which Subhash thinks he must fulfill. Both Subhash and Gauri are therefore emotionally dislocated. Gauri's withdrawal from motherhood and her eventual abandonment of the family marks a severe break in emotional bonds. She chooses exile, again. Gauri fails to observe the traditional or even the emotional expectations of a mother. Her refusal to fulfill her maternal obligations represents her maternal alienation. "She felt no maternal instinct. It was not in her nature to be a mother... She was unable to give her daughter the attention she needed."

When Gauri leaves, she imposes a forced dislocation on Bela, cutting the maternal thread and creating a void that affects Bela's adult identity. "She realized that she had never been free. Her life had been stifled, constrained. Even in America, she had been burdened. Now she was free." By leaving Bela, she chooses personal freedom over familial obligation. This act of leaving marks her final, irreversible emotional and geographical exile from motherhood.

Cultural displacement is marked in the novel from Subhash's otherness as a foreigner, through Gauri's intellectual otherness, and through Bela's generational otherness. Lahiri writes, "The first days in Rhode Island, Subhash felt invisible. People were polite, but indifferent." In America, Subhash is a visible foreigner. He speaks English but feels the cultural and social gap, even in everyday interactions. And when he returns to India, he is also alienated from his roots. His values, lifestyle, and worldview have shifted, making him a foreigner at home.

Gauri's Intellectual Otherness is marked by her seeking her freedom in academia, but she remains emotionally and culturally isolated. Her immersion in Western philosophy doesn't bring integration—it deepens her estrangement from her Indian past and from people around her. "She kept reading... Philosophy became a refuge... a way of navigating her guilt without confronting it." Gauri's engagement with Western philosophy is a form of intellectual displacement. She embraces abstract thought to escape the moral and emotional consequences of her past in India, becoming even more estranged from her role as a wife and mother. Her interest in Western philosophy—particularly existentialism and ethics—serves not as integration but further distancing. "She began to think of herself as having no past, no people, no country."

Bela represents a second-generation identity crisis—American in upbringing, Indian heritage, but connected to neither. Her adult life as an environmental activist, constantly on the move, suggests a nomadic search for belonging that never settled. "She had grown up believing something that was not true. A father who had not fathered her. A mother who had not loved her. A man she had never known responsible for her existence."

This quote highlights the devastating effects of displacement and secrecy. Bela is emotionally and biologically disoriented. She is displaced in her very sense of self. The path she chooses for herself too is marked by constant movement. She is never at rest. She never settles, perhaps because she can't tell where she belongs to. "She had chosen not to settle, not to marry. She drifted, untethered, living among strangers." Bela's rejection of roots and family echoes her inherited displacement. Her activism, I argue, is perhaps a way to seek meaning, to get out of the liminality and ambivalence, but what it does is that it reinforces her distance from a stable belonging.

The lowland and the home' in Rhode Island are both symbols of displacement. The lowland is a swath of land that is always flooded and marshy. In the novel, on the one hand, it is a reminder of Subhash and Udayan's childhood; on the other, it represents memory and trauma that is hard to escape. It is here that Udayan was killed and buried. Therefore, I believe, the lowland serves as a metaphor for the past that haunts the present. It symbolizes that the characters are trapped in their past but also displaced from it. It represents how spaces can embody loss and exile, especially when tied to political violence.

In his book *Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, Vijay Mishra gives the concept of Diasporic Imaginary. He defines it as "fantasy of return, nostalgia for the homeland, and imagined connections to a place that may no longer exist in reality." This concept can be applied to the lowland as well. The lowland now doesn't exist in reality. Lahiri writes, "The lowland was still there, beyond the wall. A place that, like so many others, had been destroyed, erased. A place that had shaped their lives, though it no longer existed." Mishra also says that this imaginary is structured by loss, melancholy, and cultural reproduction in the host land. While we do not see much of that cultural reproduction taking place in Rhodes island, we can clearly see the diasporic imaginary being structured by a sense of loss.

The homeland, Mishra argues, exists in diasporic literature more as a mythic space than a real one. He says that the idea of "return" is not necessarily physical; it is often psychological or symbolic. However, this idea of return can never be fully realized, leading to a permanent sense of exile. This stands true in the context of the lowland too as it is now no more a physical presence. It is now only a symbol, a reminder of the past. And the idea of return can't be realized as it is no longer "present." One can say that the lowland is now an absent presence.

In *The Lowland*, displacement is not just a plot device—it is a condition of life. Characters move across continents, relationships, and ideologies, yet they never fully arrive at a place of belonging. Their exile is not only physical, but internal. Lahiri masterfully shows how migration, secrecy, and loss fracture identity, and how characters must navigate the "in-between spaces" of cultures, emotions, and histories.

I must argue, *The Lowland* proves, that Jhumpa Lahiri does not treat displacement as a one-time event; she sees it as an ongoing, evolving condition. We see that every character in the novel, whether by choice or circumstance, becomes estranged from their origins, roles, or loved ones.

While Subhash is caught between two worlds he is culturally displaced, Gauri who lives in her own intellectual world, is devoid of any human connection and is psychologically exiled. Bela inherits a legacy of emotional dislocation, seeking belonging but fearing attachment. Udayan's death itself, I believe, is a kind of symbolic rupture, the point from which all others are forced into metaphorical exile. Lahiri suggests that displacement is not always a tragedy, but it comes at a high cost. It challenges identity, tests relationships, and forces the characters to constantly ask: Where—and with whom—do I truly belong? Through *The Lowland* Lahiri highlights universal truth: belonging is fragile, and exile can occur without ever leaving home.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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