

## Traversing the ‘Glocal’ Space in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Lowland*

Dr. Kamala Gopalan

“The only journeys that have acquired heroic proportions in our times are the ones that sought to alter the cartography of the self”

Ashis Nandy

There is ample socio-historical literature that records the experiences of the Indian Diaspora. The word ‘diaspora’ today facilitates the inclusion of such disparate historical events such as African slavery and the activism spurred by the white man’s oppression among Afro Americans, as also the history of Indian indentureship which proved to be just as exploitative. The term has evolved into a more benign one today to include large populations migrating from their home countries for bettering material conditions and/or education and career prospects.

Peter Van de veer, referring to diaspora, calls it “the dialectics of belonging and longing” (qtd. in Paranjape, 161). Elaborating on this notion further, Gijsbert Oonk opines, “Here the theme of belonging juxtaposed rootedness with uprootedness, and establishment with marginality. Longing then was related to the desire for change and movement”.

Although Pulitzer prize winning writer Jhumpa Lahiri does not wish to be called an immigrant writer, her oeuvre does evince these qualities and themes. There is a tug between the local and global elements in her writing.

More than looking at the diaspora in general and Jhumpa Lahiri’s latest novel *The Lowland* in particular from a socio-historical view, this paper seeks to examine the female consciousness in diaspora, especially since *The Lowland* also covers the inter-generational dimension.

Steven Vertovec refers to the diaspora as a “type of consciousness [that] emphasizes the variety of experiences, a state of mind, and a sense of

identity”. He further clarifies in the following words: “First, it refers to the experience of discrimination and exclusion, and at the same time the positive identification with the highly praised heritage of the Indian civilization. Second, the awareness of multi-locality – belonging here and there...”(8) However, in *The Lowland*, “the historical heritage of the Indian civilization” itself causes dramatic tension and heartbreak for the protagonists. Lahiri traverses the ‘glocal’ space with the protagonists literally trying to straddle both spaces at times and escaping to one or the other, sometimes literally and at other times in spirit when unable to confront realities in one of the two spaces.

While Lahiri resists being ghettoized as an immigrant writer, it stands to question as to what extent she would be considered mainstream, although her writing has proved to be exciting enough to attract the Pulitzer. America is known to be a land of immigrants. Even as Indian Americans today constitute a significant number and wield enough influence, Vinay Lal expresses his doubts as he writes, “Even as Indian American voices have been added to that vast canvas known as American literature, it remains an open question to what extent such voices, even allowing for the cascading effect in the future, will appreciably alter alter the main contours of American literature, contributing to the celebratory conception of multicultural America, likely to alter the fundamental ideas of what constitutes “America”? (111) Yet, Lal concedes that Indian American literature has arrived.

As critics located in India, looking at second and third generation writers writing about ‘home’, there is a need to be wary of glorifying these “imaginary returns to imaginary homes”. There is a need to be aware of the political nuances of our very decision to study this area of Indian diaspora as Appadurai raises the essential question in these words: “...we might well ask ourselves if there is more than mere coincidence that the flourishing of diaspora theory comes in an era of free trade and globalization, an era where the virtues of fluid and border-crossing identities are endorsed not only by radical scholars, but sometimes even

more earnestly, by the powers-that-be” (qtd. in Chariandy, para 9, lines4-7).

Informed by such words of caution, one could still look at the works of JhumpaLahiri, fully aware of the limitations of a second generation Indian writer depicting the ‘local’ when admittedly her visits were confined to a few households and only the city of Calcutta. Questions of authenticity, location and depiction of characters could become problematic, given the reality of globalization and quick mobility. Makarand Parajape points out that “there is no ‘pure’ belonging; there is no ‘pure’ diaspora. What we must contend with, instead are types of belonging and uprooting, affirmations and denials of identity, sameness and difference”(11).

Diaspora has become a negotiable space today and diasporic subjects are selves-in-process, not rigid or fixed entities, capable of traversing local and global spaces even simultaneously. Within the framework of these notions *The Lowland* can be read as not just a tale of two brothers but two ways of being, the choices that are perennially present... Subhash and Udayan, the two sons of the Mitras are academically focused but feel marginalized from the elite/mainstream life represented by Tolly club, which is an archaic colonial remnant.

Poignant passages etch their childhoods running a parallel course symbolized by the two adjacent ponds in the lowland which only merge after heavy rains. The distinction between the ponds remains and emerges when water dries up. Udayan’s life takes on a different and intense trajectory with him joining Maoists and actively being part of a plan to overthrow the government. Subhash, who is always overshadowed by and incomplete without his brother is the one who chooses to migrate. Migration far from liberating him from being a shadow of his younger brother almost turns Subhash into a footnote to his brother’s life. As Udayan’s daughter Bela’s surrogate father Subhash points out a banyan tree to her on a visit to Tolly club while in India. “Her father explained that it was a tree that began life attached to another, sprouting from its

crown. The mass of twisted strands hanging down like ropes, were aerial roots surrounding the host. Over time they coalesced, forming additional trunks, encircling a hollow core if the host happened to die". (207) The symbolism of one tree growing out of another signifying Subhash's life is unmistakable.

To begin with Udayan marries Gauri, a student of philosophy and inducts her peripherally into the party's activities. Gauri plays a crucial role in the murder of a policeman and carries the burden of guilt through life. She, along with her in-laws witness Udayan's execution in the lowland for the act. The violence and trauma of this episode haunt the entire novel. Gauri feels betrayed by Udayan's death, especially since she is carrying his child. She agrees to marry his brother Subhash (much to the dislike of his parents). This seems to be a way out of the oppressive life of a widow and having to spend her life with abusive in-laws.

Subhash is much more than a biological father could be to Bela, Gauri's daughter, who in turn grows alienated from her as she grows. Gauri abandons Subhash and Bela and goes to California to teach at a college. Subhash brings up Bela and does not reveal the truth of Udayan's paternity till the last part of the novel. Ironically it is when Gauri returns to Rhode Island to sign papers for Subhash, signifying his release from her, that she secretly harbours hope of an actual comeback into their lives. However, Subhash discovers himself and mature love in Elise and finally is able to set himself free from having been trapped in the role of Udayan's shadow all his life.

Bela rejects Gauri and there is a suggestion that the troubled mother-daughter relationship possibly finds reconciliation after Bela's daughter Meghna inquires after her grandmother whom she meets briefly. Simultaneously Subhash, albeit in old age finds himself in love. The novel ends on a hopeful note for all relationships.

Lahiri says the character of Gauri was key to her exploration of how early events haunt and shape her characters for the rest of their lives. Referring

to Gauri's witnessing her husband Udayan's execution, she says in an interview, "I wanted to understand what it might have been to witness something like that, and what the consequences would be of witnessing something like that", she continues, " I mean she's a twenty-three year old woman. She's in love with her revolutionary husband. She watches him shot in cold blood. She discovers after the fact that she is carrying his child. How does one move on from that?" (para 8, lines 1-4) Referring to Gauri's state of mind after she goes to the US and in the aftermath of her involvement in the violent act, Lahiri says, "To be living with this day after day and then suddenly to be in a part of the world where it might as well not exist, because it is not on the radar of anybody you're around, and just simply the silence – I imagine for the characters, I imagine for Gauri, it was both a relief and deeply unsettling" (para 10, lines 1-6).

The US signifying global space and the act of migration itself becomes one of liberation to begin with, for Subhash and later Gauri, bringing with it myriad possibilities – opportunities for unfettered growth in education/career, a broadening of horizon, freedom to choose a life-style among other things. This space offers political peace, although there is a suggestion of past violence with the history of massacre of native Indians at a pond in Rhode Island later in the novel. The 'local' space signified by Calcutta of the early post Independence years literally invades the reader as also the now 'foreign' visitors with the sights and sounds of the Tollygunge area. The Tolly club is a constant and powerful signifier of the highly stratified, post-colonial society of newly independent India with an extreme divide between poverty and affluence in co-existence. The political backdrop is that of a disturbed city with the Naxalite movement at its peak on college campuses – a period in which political idealism was the dominant mood, the youth genuinely concerned about the direction the country would take. This discourse becomes a part of the alternative narratives that writers of non American origin create, that which constitutes a significant narration of the American and the Indian nations.

Referring to shaping of diasporic communities, Chris Berry writes, "...it is a discordant and dynamic conjuncture, constituted when different cultures (themselves may be less unified than we think) with different histories and different trajectories meet, intersect, overlay, fragment and produce hybrid forms within a certain geographical space" (qtd. In Paranjape, 4). Diaspora is marked by the celebration of multiplicity of locales, identities and narratives often reflected in the texts' structures.

*The Lowland* certainly demonstrates these qualities. It is globalization which has provided the stimulus for this trend as Vertovec points out, "...with reference to globalization, an interest in 'diaspora' has been equated with anthropology's now commonplace anti-essentialist, constructivist and processual approach, the fluidity of constructed styles and identities among diasporic people is emphasized" (19). This is evidenced by creolized, hybrid forms of cultural productions. Lahiri is successful, through Gauri's consciousness in exploding the myth of women as tradition keepers in diaspora. This role is reversed in the novel with Gauri abandoning home and making a life for herself. The breaking up of the stereotype is symbolized in the novel by Gauri cutting her long hair, ripping her old clothes etc. This is the turning point in the novel and in her consciousness. Having gone to a new land and enjoying anonymity affords her the choice.

Lahiri subtly enters the discourse of sexuality and desire through the very alterity of Gauri's subjectivity. This a subversive strategy effectively used. It starts with her social alienation when she marries Udayan for love. The ostracism is heightened several fold when he dies and her inability to be a good mother is commented on and it is a self-fulfilling prophecy when she later abandons her daughter Bela. Even while pregnant she feels alienated from her body and detached from the child in her womb. She feels alienated at home and in the host country with its different landscapes and geography. Yet she feels relieved from what would have been a trapped and stifling existence at home. The pent up emotions and psychological

baggage which she carries within weigh her down, not permitting her to take joy in motherhood.

Gauri's is the quintessential female psyche trapped in a joyless existence, a no man's land, refusing to partake of the new life she has herself chosen with Subhash. The world of philosophy, with its abstractions offers her an escape from a mundane existence. Her consciousness is fraught with ambivalence towards 'home' and the host country as she struggles to get past the nightmarish images of Udayan's death and the oppressive life she has left behind.

Lahiri, however, manages to draw a fine balance in Gauri's character by not allowing her a victim position. The anonymity enjoyed by the immigrant on the university campus allows her to be free of patriarchal strictures and taboos against sexuality faced at home as also by Indian women in diaspora. She feels attracted to a man who could be a professor and with whom she connects. "One day she looked back at him. Staring at him, challenging him to stop, to say something. She had no idea what she would do, but she began to want this to happen, to will it. She felt her body reacting when she saw him, the acceleration of her heart, the tautness of her limbs, a damp release between her legs" (172). Lahiri has been accused of swinging to the other extreme in portraying Gauri almost witch-like and completely callous to her daughter's needs.

Vijay Mishra, in an interesting application of Lacanian theory, sees diasporic discourse of the homeland as the return of the repressed. He writes, "Diasporic discourse of the homeland then represents a return of the repressed for the nation state itself, its pre-symbolic (imaginary) narrative, in which the nation sees its own primitive past" (9). The powerfully etched out backdrop of the novel – that of Naxalite uprising and violence of the post Independent period in West Bengal recur repeatedly as haunting images for the characters and the readers. Each of the central characters returns home at different points in the novel. Bela's visit is that of a foreigner. She feels alienated and longs for her home in



the US. Subhash's return is underscored by his parents' grief and the sadness of Udayan's death and nostalgia for the sights and sounds of childhood. It is also marked by relief on his return to the US symbolizing space free of the claustrophobia and clutter of past memories. Gauri is the last of the characters to return and her visit is intertwined with memories of the life she had and lost with Udayan.

All three of them find peace of sorts after this symbolic pilgrimage back home, as it were – Gauri reconciled with the limitations of existence in the US but liking its peace and stability, Subhash is finally able to live for himself but is still assaulted by guilt. This feeling is eloquently expressed in these words, “He had walked away from Calcutta just as Gauri had walked away from Bela. And by now he had neglected it for too long” (220). The act of betrayal is similar and cruel in both cases. Likewise, Bela moves on to carve her own identity. The return visits have graphic descriptions of the ‘local’ – the city of Calcutta. To quote an example, the reader can readily recognize, “In the taxis they sat in traffic, pollution filling her chest, coating the skin of her arms with a fine dark grit. She heard the clanging of trams and the beeping of car horns, the bells of colorful rickshaws pulled by hand. Rumbling busses with conductors thumping their sides, reciting their routes, hollering for passengers to get on.” (206)

The structure of the novel allows the writer the freedom to traverse the vast expanse of space between the global and local. In fact, they get intermeshed as ‘glocal’. Gauri dwells on this in these words, “Too much is within her grasp now. First at the computers she would log on to at the library, replaced by the wireless connection she has at home. Glowing screens, increasingly foldable, portable, companionable, anticipating any possible question the human brain might generate. Containing more information than anyone has need for.” (275) Ironically she does not find information about her daughter Bela, nor is there any information recorded about Udayan's contributions to the movement. The dominant discourses of the time submerge the events of the past. It should be observed that Lahiri is cautious in her approach to the Naxalite movement's history and



does not romanticize it. Early on in the novel, she writes referring to the Naxalite movement, “Echoing Paris, echoing Berkeley, exams were boycotted throughout Calcutta, diplomas torn up. Students called out during convocation addresses, disrupting the speakers” (26). There is a suggestion that the movement as so many other things is imported, its failure perhaps signaling a misreading of Indian realities. The hindsight view is always different with histories often rewritten or even erased.

As a reviewer of the novel notes, “Don’t expect an Arundhati Roy-style political activist. Lahiri is cautious and circumspect about portraying the Maoist uprising as a solution to the problems faced by India’s poor. But the novel incisively explores the various layers of society in Calcutta, and the contrast that exists in that city between extreme poverty and privilege” (Choudhury, para 7 lines 1-2). In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Lahiri says, “As Udayan’s creator, I don’t condone what he does. On the other hand, I understand the frustration he feels, his sense of injustice (qtd. In Choudhury, para 8). A non-judgemental perspective equips Lahiri to look at two different choices with their attendant consequences in an impassive and chronicling manner. She endorses this view in an interview, “ I thought it would be more interesting to set up a contrast between these two brothers, to have one involved politically and one to be aloof, because I think it creates an inherent tension between the brothers”, and adds, “. . .I wanted to show how the movement could seduce one while leaving another indifferent” (Neary, para 5, lines 1-2).

The novel does problematise both the global and local spaces by often showing an osmosis between the two. One is left with the moot question, “Are homelands imaginary spaces which authors should have the freedom to create and recreate or as Paranjape insists should they be considered as solid spaces, ever changing within the context of unfolding global realities with politics of their own?

#### **Works Cited**

Chariandy, David. “Postcolonial Diasporas”. *Postcolonial Text*, Vol.2, No.1(2006), <http://www.poco.org/index.php/pct/article/viewArticle/440/839>.

Choudhury, Uttara. "Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* Has an impressive 350k print run". <http://www.firstpost.com/living/jhumpa-lahiri-the-lowland-has-an-impression350k-print-run-104985.html>.

Lahiri Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. Noida: Random House, India, 2013.

Lal, Vinay. *The Other Indians: A Political and Cultural History of South Asians in America*. New Delhi: HarperCollins with India Today, 2008.

Mishra, Vijay. "The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora". Asian Studies Institute Occasional lecture 2, 29<sup>th</sup> August, 2005. (Victoria University of Wellington) Series Ed. Stephen Epstein, printed 2005, PDF – May 2007.

Neary, Lynn. "Political Violence in Lahiri's 'Lowland'". Author Interviews by Lynn Neary. Sept. 23, 2013. 3:38AM ET, <http://www.npr.org/2013/09/23/224404507/political-violence-uneasy-silence-echo-in-lahiris-lowland>.

Oonk, Gijsbert. "Global Indian Diaspora: Exploring Trajectories of Migration and Theory." *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*. Peter van de Veer (Ed.) <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=BkwsMTy.ShiC8pg=PAq8dq=Indian+diaspora+theory&source=Indian+diaspora+theory&source=bl&ots>.

Paranjape, Makarand (Ed.). "One Foot in Canada and a Couple of Toes in India: Diasporas and Homelands in South Asian Canadian Experience". *In-Diaspora*. New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2001, 161-170.

Srinivasan, Shiva Kumar. "Diaspora and its Discontents". *In-Diaspora*, 52-67.

Vertovec, Steven. "Three meanings of 'diaspora', exemplified among South Asian religions". *Diaspora*. 7(2), 2000, 1-31.