



## Cultural Metamorphosis: The Impact of Immigration in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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### ABSTRACT:

Jhumpa Lahiri's literary creations offer a poignant examination of the cultural transformations experienced by individuals in the face of immigration challenges. This paper endeavors to probe the profound repercussions of immigration on Lahiri's characters, scrutinizing the intricate processes through which they navigate and reconcile their cultural identities amidst displacement. Focused on a comprehensive analysis of *The Lowland* this study aims to uncover the thematic threads of assimilation, language dynamics, and the quest for a sense of belonging. In doing so, it aims to illuminate the transformative odyssey undertaken by Lahiri's characters as they confront the intricacies of adapting to a new cultural milieu.

**Keywords:** cultural, hybridity, isolation, alienation, immigrants.

"Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools."

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* 1981.

Culture, in its broadest sense, encompasses the shared beliefs, values, customs, and practices that define and shape a group of people. It serves as a lens through which individuals perceive the world, guiding their interactions, expressions, and understanding of self and others. Culture is dynamic, evolving over time, influenced by historical, social, and environmental factors. It provides a foundation for identity, offering individuals a sense of belonging and connection to a larger community.

The impact of migration on individuals is a multifaceted journey shaped by the intersection of personal identity and cultural dynamics. When individuals migrate, they navigate a transformative process that involves negotiating their cultural roots with the demands and influences of a new environment. This process is particularly profound for those with Indian cultural backgrounds, as they often grapple with the complexities of preserving their heritage in foreign lands. Migration can result in a blending of cultures, giving rise to a phenomenon known as cultural hybridity. Individuals find themselves at the crossroads of diverse cultural influences, adapting to new ways of life while maintaining connections to their Indian heritage. This fusion can lead to a rich and complex identity, where traditions coexist with contemporary practices, and individuals draw strength from their cultural roots to navigate the challenges of integration.

Literature emerges as a potent instrument for cultivating empathy and fostering understanding as readers immerse themselves in the lives of characters embarking on migration journeys. These narratives provide readers with profound insights into the universal facets of the human experience, surpassing the constraints of geography and culture. Prominent literary works that delve into the theme of migration include Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* among others. Each of these works presents a distinctive perspective on migration, contributing diverse narratives that not only enhance the literary canon but also engage in a broader discourse on the complexities of human mobility and the quest for a sense of belonging.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a highly acclaimed American author of Indian descent, born on July 11, 1967, in London and raised in the United States, has left an indelible mark on contemporary literature through her evocative and introspective storytelling. Renowned for her keen observations and nuanced narratives, Lahiri gained widespread recognition with her debut collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* which earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. Lahiri's exploration of the intricate dynamics of identity, belonging, and cultural dislocation is a recurring theme in her works. Her poignant examination of the Indian diaspora experience, often framed within the context of immigration, has resonated with readers worldwide. Tamara Strauss reflects on Jhumpa Lahiri's work, noting that the novelist delves into the experiences of Indians who have migrated overseas and grapple with an existential crisis, experiencing feelings of exile. Lahiri's narratives often depict the isolation and alienation felt by these individuals in America.

The story reflects the alienation and loneliness and subsequently dislocation that the emigrants face in a foreign land. The marriage bond, which is still considered sacrosanct in India, is gradually slithering down under the pressure of new needs under a different background. Dislocation is a kind of process,

which can be characterized as a never-ending process. It is of two types: physical and cultural. It includes psychological and personal dislocation resulting from cultural denigration as well as voluntarily chosen status. (39)

Lahiri's ability to capture the complexities of human relationships and the profound impact of cultural transitions continues to solidify her position as a prominent voice in contemporary literature. In her novel *The Lowland* Lahiri masterfully delineates the intricacies of the immigrant experience, skillfully navigating the realms of cultural clash, hybridity, diaspora, isolation, and alienation. The narrative unfolds within the framework of the Mittal family, Indian immigrants grappling with the complexities of their existence in America. Through this novel, Lahiri presents a poignant portrayal of the manifold emotions and nuanced sentiments experienced by immigrants, adding another layer to her rich body of work that resonates with the universal themes of migration and the quest for belonging.

The novel traces the transformative journey of the Mittal family, liberating them from the confines of their tradition-bound life in Calcutta and immersing them in the challenging milieu of American society. Through meticulous character development, Lahiri focuses on individuals such as Gauri, Bela, Subhash, and Udayan, encapsulating the profound tribulations faced by immigrants in contemporary societies. The characters in *The Lowland* grapple with the intricate web of cultural identity, each contending with the potent forces of modernization that pull at the fabric of their traditions. Concurrently, they strive to preserve the emotional tether binding them together.

Lahiri skillfully weaves a narrative that delves into the struggles inherent in maintaining a delicate balance between the demands of the present and the echoes of the past. In essence, *The Lowland* transcends its narrative scope, offering a profound exploration of the immigrant experience and the dislocation of identity. Lahiri's storytelling unfolds within the framework of the Mittal family, Indian immigrants navigating the complexities of their existence in America, providing a poignant portrayal of the manifold emotions and nuanced sentiments experienced by immigrants.

The novel serves as a canvas illustrating the intricacies of displacement, alienation, and adaptation within the Indian diaspora. Radhakrishnan emphasizes: "diasporic Indians should not use physical distance as an excuse for ignoring happenings in India" (15). Moreover, Lahiri, through her characters, illustrates that the feelings of displacement and alienation, as well as the processes of adaptation, are distinctly experienced and nurtured by the female protagonists in the narrative.

In *The Lowland* Gauri's life reflects this idea very well. In Calcutta during the 1980s, as a young widow, she faced challenges following the expectations set by her mother-in-law, restricting herself to the traditional norms of society. Her struggle to break free and find a new identity in the USA can be easily understood through the discussions about diaspora. Gauri and her daughter Bela become role models for diasporic females, highlighting their efforts to adapt to a new culture and lifestyle, which forms the core of the entire narrative. Jhumpa Lahiri, born in 1967 in London to Bengali immigrant parents, experienced a life shaped by diverse cultural influences. Raised in South Kingstown and later moving to Rhode Island, she attended Barnard College and, despite facing rejection from various graduate programs, eventually earned her Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. Lahiri's teaching experiences at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design further enriched her understanding of literature and culture. Having extensively travelled in India, Lahiri observed the impact of colonialism and diaspora issues, fostering a deep connection to her ancestral homeland, the US, and England. This multi-country upbringing left Lahiri with a sense of homelessness, feeling unable to fully belong anywhere. Elsa Dixer says, the book explores the familial bonds between parents and their child, unfolding the narrative of two brothers and two female characters who experience alienation and isolation in the United States.

The central theme of the text revolves around the diasporic experiences of individuals who migrate to the United States for resettlement. Lahiri delves into the lives of Indians who have established themselves abroad, highlighting their sense of exile. In their consciousness, these individuals grapple with an inability to fully sever the umbilical cords that tie them to an existential crisis, a sentiment poignantly expressed by Lahiri. (8)

Upon their arrival in America, Subhash and Gauri grapple with culture shock, navigating unfamiliar lifestyles and customs. Gauri's initial morning in Rhode Island unveils a stark departure from her traditional routine, realizing the absence of servants and modern cooking methods. Campus visits further highlight cultural disparities, particularly the lax security measures at American universities compared to the stringent protocols in Calcutta. Subhash's revelation about ready-made clothing surprises his parents, initiating their disapproval, which intensifies when he marries a widowed woman outside their preferences. As second-generation immigrants like Bela find themselves in a state of discomfort in America, they confront cultural disparities that emphasize their unfamiliarity, a notable contrast to their experiences in India.

In the serene, walled streets, interruptions are frequent. Passersby halt, prompting Deepa to explain Bela's presence and purpose. Once fond of outdoor strolls, Bela now yearns to retreat indoors, displeased with neighbors pulling back curtains to observe her as they retrace their steps (182).

Bhabha's discourse on liminality directs our attention to the in-between spaces of cultures, situated on the edges or borders. He labels this space the "liminal," signifying its location on the threshold or border (Huddart 4). Consistent with Bhabha's perspective, the middle ground emerges as our inherent locus (13). Bhabha defines this intermediary realm as the space between dichotomies, encompassing distinctions like "self and other, chartered and unchartered territory" (Durrant 75). This exploration adds depth to our understanding of the characters' experiences as they navigate the cultural thresholds and borders in the intricate tapestry of immigration and assimilation.

Within Lahiri's literary realm, Indian identity takes center stage, decidedly not relegated to the peripheries. Lahiri's characters embody a profound sense of themselves as essential contributors to the society they actively participate in constructing, thereby retaining a significant degree of agency (Werlock 391). This perspective seamlessly ties into the introduction of the concepts of the pedagogical and the performative in Lahiri's narrative landscape. Introducing the notions of the pedagogical and the performative, Bhabha argues that individuals exist in a liminal space, simultaneously serving as

pedagogical objects in the ongoing process of identity formation through historical context ('the pedagogical') and as performative subjects undergoing the dissolution of identity within the dynamics of cultural identification ('the performative'). (*The Location of Culture* 219).

In essence, pedagogy delves into individuals' existing essence, while performativity revolves around their continuous evolution into what they are "becoming" through the perpetual negotiation of new identities (Huddart 73). Bhabha asserts that the pedagogical and the performative are intricately intertwined, resulting in a nuanced blending of distinct categories and eroding their clear-cut boundaries. The stability of the pedagogical is never as resolute as it aspires to be, with the performative assuming significance in its own educational trajectory (73).

In *The Lowland* Lahiri delves into the intricate exploration of the profound sense of marginality that pervades her characters' lives. The narrative commences with a meticulous depiction of Tolly Club, a British golf club in Calcutta. Despite the characters' affection for the place, they are denied entry due to British ownership. This exclusion leaves a lasting impact, with Udayan referencing it years later as an "affront" (29). Remarkably, even in a different setting, the golf club remains a notable reference point. In a conversation with Subhash, Narasimhan, a professor familiar with American cities but not Indian ones, mentions Tollygunge and the golf club (41). Lahiri strategically employs this recurring reference to illustrate the enduring impact of marginality, where characters feel compelled to access a place not considered "theirs."

Bhabha's assertion that colonialism induces displacements and uncertainties, creating an "affective experience of marginality" (quoted in Bertens 166), resonates in Lahiri's narrative. Postcolonial studies emphasize that 'marginal' isn't merely oppositional to a specific 'center'; instead, power relations between 'center' and 'margin' operate in a complex manner, signifying the limitations of a subject's access to power (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 135).

The novel intimates that this sense of marginality undergoes transformation to some extent when Subhash immigrates to the United States. In America, he gains official entry into golf clubs. However, Lahiri contends that the issue isn't permanently resolved; it remains a lifelong companion for immigrants. This enduring impact is vividly portrayed in Gauri's experience. Even in her old age, she finds it inconvenient to return to India, facing challenges such as standing in separate lines, undergoing extra questions, and fingerprinting upon re-entry to the U.S. from abroad (216). The narrative underscores how the state of marginality persists, evolving rather than dissipating over time.

Udayan said that golf was the pastime of the comprador bourgeoisie. He said the Tolly Club was proof that India was still a semi-colonial country, behaving as if the British had never left. He pointed out that Che, who had worked as a caddy on a golf course in Argentina, had come to the same conclusion. That after Cuban revolution getting rid of golf courses was one of the first things Castro had done. (30)

Bhabha's writing talks a lot about how cultures are mixed, and how every identity is a bit of a mix (Huddart 4). According to Bhabha, we should not just see people's everyday lives and struggles in terms of clear opposites (Eakin). He uses the example of a stairwell to explain that the time it takes to go up or down it prevents identities at either end from being too fixed. This in-between time opens the possibility of a mix of cultures, which he calls "cultural hybridity" (*The Location of Culture* 5). Lahiri masterfully illustrates hybridity in various facets of her novel. The recurring mention of two ponds in Tollygunge culminates in their merging after a wet monsoon, symbolizing the fusion akin to hybrid identities formed after exposure to multiple cultures. The narrator notes, "The two ponds across the lane would overflow and become one" (180), mirroring the amalgamation of hybrid characters. Gauri's attempts to fit into American society are visually portrayed through her clothing choices. When she wants to go for a walk in Rhode Island, she dons the dress her husband bought for her over her sari—a blend of American and Indian attire, illustrating her cultural hybridity. However, Gauri starts feeling the severity of being different when she interacts with an American girl on campus, highlighting the pressure to conform. As Gauri evolves, she adopts an identity in the U.S. transcending national boundaries. To simplify her life, she contemplates becoming fully American, even adopting Western customs like wearing a wedding band during the day. Gauri's transformation is profound; she looks only slightly like mainstream women in Tollygunge, and her daughter Bela marvels at her stylish appearance (187). This evolution showcases Lahiri's exploration of hybridity and the complex process of adapting to a new cultural identity.

And yet she remained, in spite of her Western clothes, her Western academic interests, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and, against the backdrop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had wed. (217)

For Bhabha, hybridity is not about saying there were already cultures that became mixed. Instead, he thinks cultures come from the mixing processes that happen later, not before (Huddart 84-5). Bhabha posits that cultures exist in a perpetual state of interaction (4), rendering them intricate entities that defy simplistic categorization or binary distinctions (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 52). He contends that the significance of hybridity extends beyond merely identifying the amalgamation of two original elements to create a third entity. Instead, hybridity embodies a conceptual 'third space' where novel ideas and perspectives can emerge. This transformative 'third space' disrupts and redefines the historical narratives that shape it, giving rise to fresh structures of authority (Huddart 85). Positioned in the 'third space' the protagonists grapple with their diasporic condition and strive to assimilate. Gauri, demonstrating a willingness to embrace her adopted land, chooses to make the United States her permanent home, stating, "California was her only home. Right away she had adapted to its climate" (216). Gauri's readiness to integrate into the new community is evident from the early months of her American life. Narasimhan's life as an Indian immigrant in America symbolizes this idea. A professor at Subhash's campus, Narasimhan has an American wife and two sons who defy expectations. Lahiri uses Narasimhan's narrative to showcase how hybridity generates something entirely new and unexpected. Subhash's transformative experience in the U.S. is revealed when he visits India and realizes he can never revert to his former self. Walking through Tollygunge, he feels an allegiance with foreigners, sharing a knowledge of elsewhere and the ability to leave (107). While Subhash and Gauri manage to embrace aspects of Western life, their cultural appropriation comes at a significant cost, leading to the erosion of their motherland's rich cultural tapestry and values (Alfonso-Forero 32). Once deeply rooted in Indian traditions and rituals, their relocation to the United States sees a gradual adoption of American customs.

Subhash's venture into an affair with an American divorced woman epitomizes this cultural shift. Engaging in seemingly mundane activities like grocery shopping, an act unconventional in Calcutta before marriage, becomes a norm in his American life. This relationship, deemed taboo in India, flourishes in the physical distance that shields Subhash from the watchful eyes of his relatives (74). Gauri, upon arriving in America, appreciates Subhash's independence, a stark departure from Udayan's expectation of servitude. She observes Subhash's morning routine of leaving out frozen ingredients, a departure from the elaborate Indian cooking rituals. Gauri, in her Californian old age, abandons traditional Indian fare for Western cuisine, relishing fast food and the novelty of cream cheese, unfamiliar in her early days in the U.S. (253). Their approach to parenting, as evidenced by their daughter Bela's unconventional upbringing, further illustrates their rejection of Indian norms. Bela, despite having successful scholar parents, lives independently, choosing a nomadic existence and engaging in farming rather than pursuing further studies. Subhash refrains from interfering in her marriage, acknowledging the cultural differences between Calcutta and America. Gauri, unlike typical Indian mothers, prioritizes her studies over maternal responsibilities, treating her Ph.D. dissertation with the same concern as one might a vulnerable infant (188). In a display of individual liberty unique to America, Gauri later initiates a homosexual relationship, a freedom inconceivable in the societal constraints of India. The cultural metamorphosis experienced by Subhash and Gauri in America underscores the transformative impact of their adopted environment on their lifestyles, values, and personal relationships.

Lahiri skilfully employs the dress code to underscore the evolving attire of the Indian characters in her narrative. Gauri, upon arriving in America, initially adorns traditional Indian garments. However, influenced by the modern American women on campus, she undergoes a sartorial transformation facilitated by Subhash, who provides her with an ensemble of Western attire. Gradually, her wardrobe shifts entirely from traditional Indian to contemporary American clothing. Even during a visit to her hometown, Gauri's distinct Western clothing captures the attention of onlookers in Tollygunge, showcasing the impact of her American sojourn. This cultural shift is not confined to those who physically venture to the West. In Lahiri's portrayal, Udayan, Subhash's younger brother, integrates European-style shirts into his wardrobe alongside traditional Indian attire, showcasing the pervasive influence of Western fashion even without direct exposure. Beyond attire, Lahiri explores the rejection of arranged marriages as a significant facet of cultural assimilation in *The Lowland*. The resistance against traditional Asian values reflects a broader theme of cultural evolution and defiance in Lahiri's exploration of immigrant experiences.

The transformative 'third space' Lahiri introduces disrupts and redefines historical narratives, challenging dichotomies between 'self' and 'other'. This middle ground becomes a terrain of negotiation, where identities are forged and redefined amidst uncertainties, presenting a dynamic arena for the continuous evolution of cultural dynamics. (Johnston and Richardson 122-3).

Lahiri illustrates the first-generation immigrants' journey from liminality to hybridity, navigating culture shock and the loss of familiar social cues. Assimilation into Western lifestyles leads to a hybrid state, albeit with the disintegration of traditional family structures. Despite challenges, Subhash and Gauri achieve educational and career success, representing the first generation.

*The Lowland* intricately explores the ramifications of globalization on immigrants seeking a better life. The novel delves into displacement trauma, loneliness, and the cultural dilemma faced by immigrants navigating the balance between home and abroad. Lahiri portrays the ongoing struggle of immigrants to establish themselves, revealing a state of identity crisis, unable to fully embrace their native country or be recognized as pure citizens of their adopted land. This reflects the broader issues of globalization and immigration, depicting the diasporic experience with a sense of loss, displacement, and cultural conflict.

Lahiri, a second-generation immigrant herself, skillfully narrates the lives of the Mittal family. Insightfully, she shows how two generations reconcile disparate lives, overcoming resistance and alienation to build bridges. Bela's journey, marked by an unsuccessful marriage and a quest for identity, echoes the struggles of many second-generation immigrants. Ultimately, Bela finds freedom and completeness within herself, bringing a poignant resolution to her quest for identity.

In conclusion, novel serves as a compelling exploration of the intricate and profound transformations experienced by individuals navigating the complex terrain of immigration. Jhumpa Lahiri, a masterful storyteller, weaves a narrative that goes beyond the personal journeys of the Mittal family, delving into broader themes of cultural assimilation, defiance, and the enduring consequences of displacement.

Through Lahiri's lens, the novel traces the evolution of characters as they grapple with the challenges of cultural identity, belonging, and the impact of globalization. The recurring motif of the golf club in Calcutta becomes a powerful symbol, representing the enduring effects of marginality and the persistent desire to access spaces considered 'other'.

The concept of the 'third space' disrupts traditional narratives, offering a dynamic arena where identities are negotiated and redefined. Lahiri skillfully portrays the journey from liminality to hybridity, illustrating the complexities of assimilation into Western lifestyles and the consequent disintegration of traditional family structures.

*The Lowland* also serves as a lens through which Lahiri examines the ramifications of globalization on immigrants, unraveling the trauma of displacement, the quest for identity, and the perpetual struggle to establish oneself in a new world while preserving ties to the past. Ultimately *The Lowland* invites readers to contemplate the enduring impact of immigration on individuals and communities, emphasizing the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity, home and abroad. Lahiri's nuanced storytelling transcends the specifics of the Mittal family, offering a timeless exploration of the human experience in the context of migration and cultural transformation.

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