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Ashu Rani

Research Scholar, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak, Haryana, India

Dr. Garima

Supervisor, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak, India

Corresponding Author:

Ashu Rani

Research Scholar, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak, Haryana, India

Nostalgia and cultural assimilation in the work of Jhumpa Lahiri

Ashu Rani and Dr. Garima

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is a well-known author who writes about the Indian immigrants. In her second novel, titled *The Lowland*, she explores the complexities of human relationships against the backdrop of migration. The main character's life is beautifully portrayed, particularly his periods of solitude and the guilty complex that he experiences. The Naxalite movements that occurred in India are discussed in this novel. The protagonist is involved in some way with the situation directly. Even after the protagonist has moved away from his hometown, the novel explores the lasting effects that this involvement has had on his life. The use of memory as a technique creates a stunning depiction of the characters' feelings of alienation as well as their struggles with identity crisis. The emotions of melancholy and homesickness for times gone by play a significant role throughout this novel. The frantic search for one's own identity in a land that is completely foreign to one. In this text, each character's life in the diaspora is determined through their own choices.

The Lowland cannot be defined as diasporic literature in the fullest and most traditional sense of the word, one can undoubtedly see a diasporic problem in which the people involved in various connections negotiate their own personal choices and fate. The paper will attempt to analyse the nostalgia and cultural assimilation, identity crisis and family relationships, and intergenerational gap.

Keywords: Nostalgia, cultural assimilation, identity, diaspora, alienation

Introduction

Nostalgia has undergone significant evolution over time. Since its Greek roots still mean 'homecoming' and 'pain,' nostalgia has been thought of for centuries as a serious medical condition that expresses extreme homesickness. According to the current paradigm, nostalgia is a common, independent, and even positive emotion. Occasional nostalgia serves a variety of purposes, including elevating positive self-esteem, fostering social connections, and providing factual meaning. Numerous nostalgic thoughts serve multiple purposes and, overall, appear to be beneficial to the people who experience them. Such advantages may result in an enduring disposition towards nostalgia in one's personality. The issue of uprooting and assimilation is addressed in the narrative, and there are attempts to establish connections between the characters. It is clear from the novel's concentration on people and their fortunes that the diaspora as a whole is not given much attention.

Assimilation happens gradually and slowly. It requires time. For instance, it takes time for immigrants to blend in with the majority group. Assimilation is the process through which one culture is absorbed and integrated into another. The term 'assimilation' is once more widely used, and it is most frequently used to describe the process which numerous immigrants from Europe were assimilated into the American population in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Assimilation is a term frequently used to describe immigrants and different ethnic groups who have established in a new country. Contact and communication allow for the acquisition of new practises and attitudes. Each immigrant group offers some of its own cultural characteristics to the culture in which they have settled. The transmission of customs is not only a one-way street. Assimilation typically occurs gradually and to varied degrees; it occurs when new members of a society can no longer be distinguished from older ones.

In this novel, loneliness and a sense of regret are well-depicted. The novel advances through the characters' memories of their past lives, which is a key theme in the book. Past and present are both parts of the story.

Only after letting go of the past was the main character able to successfully adapt to the new culture and live in the present. In *The Lowland*, immigrants' cultural assimilation is addressed against the backdrop of political events. One of the novel's main protagonists, Subhash Mitra, is from a middle-class Bengali family from Tollygunge, Calcutta, and he immigrated to the United States to finish his doctoral studies. Subhash's love for his younger brother, parents, and Calcutta eventually waned once he moved to the United States. He initially demonstrates his resistance to assimilating into American cultural norms. He also expresses his thoughts of longing for Tollygunge, the lowland, and Calcutta in general. As he writes his letter to Udayan, he expresses these sentiments of nostalgia:

As strange as it sounds, when the sky is overcast, when the clouds are low, something about the coastal landscape here, the water and the grass, the smell of bacteria when I visit the mudflats, takes me home. I think of the lowland, of paddy fields (39).

Gauri's thoughts of rage serve as warning flags for the emergence of nostalgic feelings when she is in America, preventing her from fully integrating herself not only in a marriage relationship but also in the unfamiliar cultural setting. Gauri never feels at peace because of her nostalgic feelings; therefore, she abandons Subhash and her daughter Bela in the vain hope of finding spiritual peace. Due to her sentiments of nostalgia, Gauri is discovered to be a negligent mother and a mentally reclusive wife. The narrative demonstrates how Subhash, Gauri, and Bela adjusted into the foreign culture of America except from these few episodes of nostalgia.

Subhash first encountered Madras-born professor of economics Narasimhan during his first few days on the university campus. American woman Kate is the spouse of Narasimhan. He is shocked to learn that Narasimhan, a fellow citizen, married an American. He wonders what kind of lady his parents would like for him based on his ethnic traditions. He psychologically disagrees with his brother Udayan's decision to wed before his older brother and select a female based only on his preferences rather than those of their parents. His Indian cultural ethos begins to fray when he meets Holly, a French-Canadian nurse who was born in Massachusetts. He first exhibits hesitation to team up with Holly. They are ten years apart in age, and he finds it difficult to picture himself being married to her. But as time passes, he becomes closer to her and engages in sexual activity with her.

Holly asks if he'll be going back to Calcutta after getting his degree. But being close to her forces him to adopt American society as a whole. He believes it would be quite difficult for him to return to Calcutta in her company. When he wishes to be like Narasimhan and have children like him from an American wife, it appears that he is assimilating into American culture. Holly, in his opinion, would continue their extramarital relationship with him. He even considers marrying her to consummate their romance. Holly, however, ends this romance quickly. Subhash experiences thoughts of attachment after a chance contact with foreigners during one of his visits to Calcutta, thus illustrating his integration in a strange country as the text describes.

He got on a bus, riding with no destination in mind, getting out close to Esplanade. He saw foreigners on the streets, Europeans wearing kurtas, beads. Exploring Calcutta, passing through. Though he looked like any other Bengali,

he felt an allegiance with the foreigners now. He shared with them knowledge of elsewhere. Another life to go back to. The ability to leave (82).

In the United States, Subhash only had a few sexual connections with other women. Once Gauri finds a woman's hair elastic, he realises that there are other women in his life. This incident also shows how Subhash adapts to American culture after expressing initial hesitation. It is generally known that immigrants frequently try to construct a miniature version of India in their new country by forging local friendship networks. Subhash makes an initial attempt to somewhat adhere to the same pattern. However, he lost interest in this kind of sense of community after that. On the other hand, over time, he was able to build a relationship with a woman from a different culture. In his advanced age, he develops feelings for Elise Silva, the history teacher of his stepdaughter Bela Mitra. Bela is quietly troubled by it, but her father feels a little 'homely' after settling down with Elise Silva during his final years in the United States.

Another point is that nostalgia in Gauri is portrayed through a pain for her departed husband as the novel shifts back and forth in time as the text narrates; 'Anger was always amounted to her love for Udayan. Anger at him for dying, when he might have lived, for bringing her happiness, and then taking it away, for trusting her, only to betray her, for believing in sacrifice, only to be so selfish in the end (164).

The historical Naxalite movement was mostly discussed in the opening section of the book, which also described its history and operations. One of the most important socio-political movements to have occurred in India after independence was the Naxalite movement. This movement, which got its name from a peasant uprising that happened in West Bengal's Naxalbari in May 1967, had its heart in that state during the 1960s. The Communist Party of India, an ideological offshoot of Maoism, was led by well-equipped Communist revolutionaries who, two years later, would go on to found the party. They identified the goal of the new movement as the 'seizure of power through an agrarian revolution' under the direction of their ideology, a 49-year-old Communist named Charu Mazumdar. The strategy was to abolish the feudal system in rural India in order to free the underprivileged from the oppression of the dictatorial landowners and replace it with a new system that would implement land reforms. The peasants used guerilla warfare to overthrow the landlords as part of their plan to achieve it. Beginning in the early 1970s, Calcutta, in West Bengal, developed into the epicentre of Naxalite urban violence, which targeted police officers and political enemies.

The political past and its repercussions on the Mitra family are highlighted in the book against the background of characters dealing with the difficulties of intergenerational relationships and human interconnection. The author emphasises the characters' emotional arcs and underlines the need for a stronger emotional connection between them in order to address disputes and problems with mutual adjustment. Lahiri has done a masterful job of capturing the diasporic essence of her characters while depicting the life of the Indian immigrants to America, jumbled in various emotional turns.

The novel's title refers to a muddy plot of land between two ponds in a neighbourhood in Calcutta where two very close brothers grow up. The marsh overflows and the ponds merge during the rainy season. The floodwater evaporates over the summer. The two ponds stand in for Subhash and

Udayan, two brothers. But this natural environment contains even more hidden meaning. The narrator of Lahiri's story continues by telling us about certain critters that laid eggs that survived the dry season. While they waited for the rain to come back, other creatures survived by burying themselves in the mud and pretending to be dead.

The characters in this novel are estranged from one another. To acquire a new, worldwide identity, they all abandoned their former selves. The relationships in this novel are convoluted and disjointed. Bela attained real Bohemian status. Her life was made worse by growing up without a mother and living abroad. She felt more connected to Subhash after learning who her biological parent was. She didn't enjoy school and wasn't a good student. She decided to live a nomadic lifestyle at a very young age and quit her schooling. She adored farming and frequently visited to other rural locations. By growing fresh trees and caring for animals, she was living her life. She laboured to improve the soil on barren terrain so that it might be used for farming.

Subhash found it quite simple to assimilate to the culture in this novel. Because it provided him with a means of escaping his country's difficulties and entering a world of freedom and opportunity. He relished his new identity-free existence. The novel makes it clear that he misses Tollygunge, yet he actually liked this new life to the one he had there. He began by reading Udayan's letter numerous times. He re-established contact with Udayan. These are all the results of her need to define herself. Her father shares this innovative mindset. Gauri made the decision to marry Subhash and consent to divorce after twenty years of separation. She did, however, have to face Gauri's hatred when she did so. She had to reconsider herself in light of this. Returning to Tollygunge allowed her to let go of Udayan's memory. And returned to the US, where she lived. Since they don't have a phone in Tollygungean's letters, he was unable to call his family in the early years of his life. He experienced a sense of reunion with Udayan.

Not sat down with them, at the end of the day, to share a meal. In Tollygunge his family did not have a telephone line. He'd sent them telegram to let them know that he'd arrived. He was learning to live without hearing their voices to receive news of 'em in writing (63).

The Lowland is a real account of life in the Diaspora. Lahiri described the problems faced by the diaspora using all of her characters. This is a real-life example of absorption. Compared to Lahiri's other fiction, this culture translation is simpler. Memory serves as their connection to their life in their own country, and cultural assimilation can be seen as their instinct for survival in relation to Udayan. In the novel, Jhumpa Lahiri skilfully depicts the Indian immigrants' nostalgia, acculturation, and counter-acculturation.

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