

Trans Nationalism or Trading Nationalism? Identity, Borders and Narrative Ironies in Jumpa Lahiri’s ‘The Lowland’

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Abstract: *Transnationalism with reference to Randolph Burne’s 1916 essay ‘Trans-National America’, discusses the history of the formation of national identities. Globalization is a homogenizing force that is rooted in economics and often overrides anything to do with cultural values, traditions, heritage and art. Whereas, Transnationalism in the context of cultural policy, embraces differences and takes in the arts and culture under its rubric along with economic concerns. De Vereaux and Griffin claim that while globalisation might seem to do away with the notion of boundaries, transnationalism works to secure the idea of a nation. The present paper attempts to analyse how narratives like Jumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* affect cultural policy and what transnationalism and globalisation have to offer to practitioners in the field of narrative. Challenges of immigration and exile, questions of identity and belonging and issues of rootlessness, loneliness and inbetweenness all coagulate into the writer’s own experience as a Diasporic writer; the outcome of which is *The Lowland*, a masterly novel of fate and will, exile and return.*

INTRODUCTION

“We are but creatures of our origins and however stalwartly we march, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off.”

M.G.Vassanji (25)

Transnationalism is often discussed as opposed to and different from Nationalism. While Nationalism is defined as the source of National identity or the adoration of one’s Nation, Transnationalism is defined as a new “social phenomenon”, something that affects a significant part of a group or community, where immigrants live and work in one country, but, at the same time, participate in ethnic social events of the countries of their origin. Nationalism is the concept of a shared community, one which Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983:15) which had enabled post- colonial societies to invent a self- image through which they could act to liberate themselves from imperialist oppression. According to Franz Fanon, “a national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence”. From the point of view of literary theory, Nationalism is of special interest since its rise as Brennan and Bhabha note, is conterminous with the rise of the novel as the most dominant modern literary form. In this sense, the story of the nation and the narrative form of the Modern novel inform each other in a complex, reflexive way.

It is here that Lahiri’s *The Lowland* defines itself as a part of a National literature all the while molding the consciousness of a diasporic generation giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility of the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space.

The contact of the people (characters like Gauri) with the new movement of Transnationalism gives rise to a new rhythm of life giving the storyteller free rein to her imagination as he creates a work of art. Challenges of immigration and exile, questions of identity and belonging and the issues of rootlessness, loneliness and inbetweenness have constantly engaged Lahiri’s creative imagination.

The exile is a universal figure and changes taking place in the expatriate’s lives do not imply a total rejection of their homelands or a complete denial of the past. The past often remains a part of the immigrant consciousness. The imprints of this past life haunts the present, like living ghosts, that rip-apart the carcass of personalities and their lives. This seems to be the predicament of almost all the diasporic characters in *The Lowland*.

The novel begins with the description of Lowland, situated between two ponds, in the outskirts of Calcutta. During Monsoon, the two brimming ponds and the lowland filled with rain water coalesce, so as to form a flooded plain. But in summer, the flood water evaporates, exposing the swamplands again. The lowland is a symbol of the complex relationship that exists between the two brothers, Subhash and Udayan in the novel.

Just like the two ponds which remain apart in summer and at other times merge, Subhash and Udayan are opposites entwined together. Subhash is cautious, obedient and diligent whereas Udayan is impulsive, adventurous and “blind to self-constraints”(11).

Detached from Udayan and his parents, Subash feels alienated and isolated, which creates a mental strife in him, which Homi Bhabha identifies as, “the tension of the difference, the difference of the historical and geographical past and present”(177). Even though he learns to live without seeing his family and hearing their voices, he feels “doubly alone”(63) and finds it impossible “to fathom his future severed from his past”(63). Meanwhile in Calcutta, Udayan falls in love with Gauri who “prefers books to jewels and saris” (46). Udayan, without a job and not yet twenty five years old, marries Gauri, defying his parent’s wishes. Lahiri comments, “on his own he’d taken a step that Subhash believed was their parent’s place to decide”.(47)

Subhash develops an illegitimate relationship with Holly, a married American woman but their intimacy does not last long. He believes that Udayan, after his marriage, has turned his passion towards Gauri and his commitment to the party has cooled. But during his third autumn in Rhode Island, Subhash receives a telegram: “Udayan killed. Come back if you can”(83). On his return to Calcutta to console his parents and to find out the reason for Udayan’s death, Subhash discovers that Udayan’s involvement in the Naxalite movement had led to his death.

Police considered Udayan as an extremist of an illegal political party. They raid his house and the neighborhood in Tollygunge; placing the rifle at Gauri’s throat, Udayan is threatened to surrender. “Udayan appeared. Amid the hyacinth in water up to his waist.....bent over, coughing, grasping for air”(104). The police walks Udayan to the lowland where he is shot dead.

Gauri watched Udayan “his arms flapping, his body leaping forward, seizing up before falling to the ground”(105). Udayan’s body is not returned to his family. The widow Gauri, big with child, is not welcomed by her in-laws; she remains isolated and nobody talks to her. Subhash decides to marry Gauri and to rescue her from her unhappy life. He offers to take her to America where she can continue her studies. Gauri marries Subhash and flees to America.

At first in Rhode Island, Gauri is not at ease with her unfamiliar surroundings. But after a few days, she begins exploring different parts of the university campus. Eventually, she begins attending classes in the philosophy department. Gauri is awed at the affluence of life around her but is unsure of all new experiences that this new life has given her. One day, she enters a grocery shop, buys cream cheese and consumes it mistaking it to be chocolate. This incident throw light on the confusions made by the expatriates due to their ignorance and unfamiliarity of their new land. At times the highly individualistic lifestyle of the Americans perplexes Gauri; But at other times she wishes to look like other women in the campus. She gives birth to her baby, Bela, and tries to raise her with the help of Subhash. Even though Gauri feels immense gratitude towards Subhash, she maintains a distance from him. She reminds herself that “Bela was her child and Udayan’s. She does not feel any love towards Subhash and realizes that “her heart and her body were different things”(162). Later her intimacy towards the child also weakens. As a mother she fails to love Bela passionately because “a growing numbness”(164) inhibits her and impairs her feelings.

Subhash, along with Bela, arrives in Tollygunge, three months after his father’s death in order to perform the ceremony in honour of his dead father. After staying there for a few days, Subhash and Bela return to Rhode Island, only to realize that Gauri has severed her ties with them and walked away from them. Cut off from her mother, Bela becomes distracted and depressed. However, in course of time she learns to live without her mother and becomes resilient and starts pursuing social service activities.

Subhash, now over sixty years old, becomes distracted by visions of childhood. Images of Udayan reappear and reconstitute his mind. Subhash, still pretending to be Bela’s father, does not muster courage to reveal the secret. To make matters worse, Bela informs Subhash that she is pregnant. She refuses to reveal the identity of her lover and informs him that she wants to stay with him and give birth to her child in Rhode Island. The coincidence baffles Subhash; A pregnant woman, a fatherless child.....arriving in Rhode Island needing him. It was a reenactment of Bela’s origins. Aversion of what had brought Gauri to him, years ago”(264). Subhash realizes the necessity of revealing the truth to Bela. He confesses to Bela that he is only her stepfather and uncle. Bela refuses to believe him at first but later tells him that she loves him more after this revelation.

Meanwhile Gauri after her first job in California had moved north, to teach in SantaCruz, and then in San Francisco. In spite of her promising career and life in America, she craved for lost moments and lost love, thus leading an isolated life. Lahiri writes: “Isolation offered its own companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of her evenings.....it greeted her at the end of each day and lay still with her at night. She had no wish to overcome it.” She regrets her action of abandoning Bela: it had been her own act of killing....it was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed” (242). Bela does not pardon her mother but decides not to interfere between her mother and her daughter, if they wish to have a relationship. Thus there is a ray of hope in Gauri’s life.

According to William Safran, “the intention of collective memory, vision or myth about the original homeland- its physical location, history etc” is one of the six features of Diasporas(85). The novel centers on an incident which happens at a certain place at a certain time. The pivotal event which lasts only for less than half an hour, never leaves the mind of the characters who witness it. Though all the characters are haunted by their pasts, it is

Gauri who feels the death of Udayan most deeply. The lowland and what happens there one evening linger even in the minds of the readers.

The epigraph of the novel adopted from “Saluto a Roma” by Giorgio Bassanio beautifully expresses the expatriate’s longing for their hometown: “Let me return to my hometown entombed in grass as in a warm and high sea”(n. pag). Expatriates consciously resist total inclusion in the new host society and continue to consider their motherland as their true home. They yearn for lost moments, lost loves, and try to retain the traditions, customs, values, languages, and religions of their homeland. Gauri’s nostalgia becomes toxic, making her lead a mechanical and lonely life in an alien land and slowly loses her grip on life.

All living creatures are constantly in flux and open to influences from elsewhere. Books like Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* may be treated as creole texts that mirror Liberalism’s cultural pluralism. They search for a new globalism, simultaneously asserting local independence and global interdependencies, seeking to cooperate without cooption, and define differences sans homogenization, trading their nostalgic memories for something new and meaningful.

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