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Aesthetics of Displacement in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

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Abstract

This study is a new exploration of Lahiri’s fiction through the lens of postmodern aesthetics with reference to the main text The Lowland and the secondary text The Namesake. The Lowland is a narrative of home, displacement and a vague attempt of resettlement in a new world, yet the prime objective of this thesis is to explore how the desire to break with the barriers of tragic past and seeking survival in another world gives a new perspective of Diaspora. The Lowland and The Namesake explore the aesthetics of displacement, rather than touching upon the pains of displacement and dislocation. It is not the existence in the new world which causes the disaster of individuals; rather it is the tragic past which destroys their lives totally. Moreover the rejection of old habits, traditions and conditioning, and a merging with the culture of the new context is an existing issue of the post modern transcultural world. The new world not only offers professional opportunity and financial betterment, but also provides a chance to oblivate the haunted memories of the tragic past. And immigration or displacement is a kind of rebirth in a new culture. The feeling of home is like something haunting and dark which frightens the people. Their quest of survival in a transcultural world, and their will to sacrifice their relations for that reason is an insight into situations of fast changing social fabric in India. This research explores how the male and the female agency works in order to build an individual identity, and it constructs individual realities based on personal experiences of the old world and the changing perceptions of the new world.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Jhumpa Lahiri is a renowned diasporic writer. She was born in London to Indian immigrant parents. In her childhood her parents moved to America, and Lahiri spent rest of her life in America as a second-generation immigrant. This study is a new exploration of Lahiri’s works. This research is going to explore the aesthetics of displacement that is an individual experience of the search for fulfillment in another world by obliterating the past. The term ‘Aesthetics’ refers to an individual perception of beauty, art, culture and nature. According to D. Henrich, the aesthetic attitude can be more closely described as “complex, succinct perception,”…. “The aesthetic experience lies at the base of all higher functions in the development of human life. The life process, basically experienced as a constant fluctuation in the interaction with the environment, acquires an “aesthetic quality” with the moment of recovered unity” (qtd. in Jauss 112).

Through displacement individuals experience a new and fresh perspective on language, and life. It is no more a shared experience of migration-stress and psychological-cultural issues, but an individual experience of the search for accomplishment in a new world by forgetting the harsh realities of the tragic past. As, it is described in Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics that “the aesthetic attitude disposes the individual more strongly to adopt a model than does a model set by religion, tradition, education, or a life pattern called for by the abstract affirmation of morality” (Jauss 93).

This study is going to explore how the desire to break the barriers of past and seeking survival in a new world gives a new perspective to diaspora in postmodern
trans-cultural world. Lahiri’s fiction “does not really touch upon the pains of displacement and dislocation”, (Joshi 83) but the aesthetics of displacement; and the question that how the strife to get themselves “free from the traditional authority and a past which acts as a prison in both action and thought” (Sim 111) turns the ultimate truth into an ever-changing reality.

Lahiri points out that, it is not the existence in the new world which causes the disaster; rather it is the tragic past which triggers this disaster. The characters do not face cultural shock, but they suffer due to the tragedy that is associated with their native land, and has shattered their lives totally. This study explores the keen desire to mingle personal self within a new world, rather than discussing any psychological-cultural issues.

Aesthetic experience does not seem to develop “organically,” on a field of its own, but to progressively expand and maintain its area of meaning at the expense of bordering experiences of reality, and this by usurpations and compensations, the crossing of boundaries, the offer of competing solutions. (Jauss 112)

In the postmodern world there is no fixed meaning and reality, and the world can be constructed and interpreted in different ways according to individual perception. There are no boundaries between facts and fiction, and one person’s fiction is another person’s reality. “The Simulacrum is never what hides the truth----it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The Simulacrum is true” (qtd. in Baudrillard 1). The reality varies from person to person. It is through their perception and experience that individuals construct their own reality. And, moreover, the perception of the world is not dependent on observation, but on the experiences of
relationships between people; “Truth and reality are products constructed between people within relationship” (Sim 112). In Lahiri’s fiction the characters’ individual perception of the new culture makes sense to them. In The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism, it is stated that “Sense-making is perceived as a process through which people reduce the complexity of their environment to a level which makes sense to them” (Sim 113). Their “rejection of old habits, traditions and conditioning, and a merging with the culture of the new context” (Joshi 84) is an existing issue of the postmodern trans-cultural world. For them, “home is a contradictory site of nature and also dark” (84). It is surprising that they prefer their American present upon their Bengali past. The new world not only “offers professional opportunity and financial betterment,” (84) but an opportunity to reconstruct their social world by obliterating the haunted memories of the tragic past. For them immigration or displacement is a kind of rebirth in a new culture, and the feeling of home is like something haunting and sinister which frightens them. Their quest of survival in a trans-cultural world, and will to sacrifice their relations for that reason is “an insight into situations of fast changing social fabric in India” (Jain 2312). Displacement is an attempt to construct individual reality. The new world gives the opportunity to get freedom from the old traditions of Indian life. As, in his article “That Third Space: Interrogating the Diasporic Paradigm”, Satchidanandanand argues that “the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (53).

In The Lowland, Subhash’s experience of the subaltern in Indian postcolonial society wheedles him to raise his voice through mimicry. He leaves India in quest of identity. He adopts the new culture as if he has always been a part of it. He does not
want to remember his past and refuses to go back. He adopts new cultural practices, assumptions, traditions and morals. As, a critic Catherine Belsey defines a human being as; “not a unity, not autonomous, but a process, [is] perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change” (qtd. in C. Butler 53). In a new culture he feels free of any social and ethical constraints of the old world, and the cultural hybridity is a source of alleviation, enchantment and self transformation.

Lahiri’s characters perceive America as an idealized promised land which will cure all their wounds of the past, and fulfill their dreams and desires. Living in America is like a new birth for them. “As the statue of liberty proclaims so eloquently: ‘send me your poor huddled masses yearning to be free.’ It is the nation created as a refuge for all the world; and a nation made up of immigrants” (Sardar 16). They perceive displacement as an opportunity to start a new life on the other side of the world by rejecting the values of the old world.

What immigrants know is that wherever their parents or grandparents came from was nasty, brutish and tyrannical—that’s why they made their way to America. So the rest of the world by definition is inherently flawed, unable to compare with America, and is, in a fundamental way, not worth knowing. (Sardar 16)

The title of the novel *The Lowland* is also symbolic of the above statement. The Indian land is represented as muddy low land which is reflective of colonized Indian society. This perception of the old culture motivates them to live in a new world with courage and determination by breaking with the barriers of past.

In the postmodern world “the self is an ever-changing and flexible entity, especially in feminist circles, where the notion of an essentialist self is regarded as
part of the system of patriarchal oppression” (Sim 230). So in Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction
displacement, as seen from the female perspective, is a chance to get freedom from
the patriarchal Indian values. In *The Lowland* Gauri, being a widow, was oppressed
by the society, and her in-laws as well. She gets freedom from the patriarchal Indian
values when she marries to Subhash, and enters into a new culture. Again, when she
leaves her husband and daughter, it is a sign that she wants to break with the barriers
of past in order to merge herself into a new world. She seeks pleasure in dislocation.
She becomes more an American in her manners and living style than a Bengali when
she crosses the national boundaries. “America, for example, began as a declaration of
identity: a new world emptied of meaningful past and ready for migrants who would
build an identity based on the power of a new territory” (Sardar 96).

In *The Lowland* the relationship between Subhash and Gauri is destroyed not
due to ‘the psychological cultural issues’, as, “several diasporic novels have focused
on the failure of the marriages to indicate the failure of the immigrants to integrate
into the new life” (Joshi 88). It is all due to Gauri’s great desire to get rid of her past,
and to absorb the new culture for self-transformation. In *The Namesake* Moushumi’s
denial to marry a Bengali man is an expression of her desire to get rid of traditional
authority, or a denial to accept the Indian patriarchal values. Her involvement in
American, German, Persian and Italian men indicates that she wants to take refuge in
other cultures. “The clash between traditional patriarchal Indian values, and the more
emancipated needs of the younger generation influenced by western view; the clash of
opinions between older and younger generations of immigrants is a familiar theme in
Indian fiction” (Joshi 85).

Colonialism, obviously is an enormously problematic category: it is by
definition trans-historical and unspecific, and it is used in relation to
very different kinds of historical oppression and economic control. Nevertheless like the term ‘patriarchy’, which shares similar problems in definition, the concept of colonialism … remains crucial to a critique of past and present power relations in world affairs. (qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 170)

‘Colonialism’ and ‘Patriarchy’ from the above stated explanation are similar in their treatment of their subjects. Both cause ‘oppression’ and ‘exploitation’ of the subaltern, however it seems clear from the history of popular revolts, that “exploitation and oppression have been a perennial source of revolts” (Ludden 46). Gauri’s character in The Lowland truly represents the feminist circle in postcolonial India where the women are doubly colonized. Their oppression by the colonizers and Indian patriarchy inflicts them to break the barriers of traditional authority, and to take refuge in another culture. In a new world they construct their own social network or agency. “The notion of agency is defined as initiating an action by one’s own choice… a continuous flow of conduct or a stream of actual or contemplated casual interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world” (Jain 2312).

It is through this individually constructed social world of a woman that one can see her potential and abilities which remain hidden under the patriarchal oppression. They create a space for themselves in a new culture or society by building up new relations and adopting new language. As, Shobhita Jain has discussed in her article “Women’s Agency in the Context of Family Networks in Indian Diaspora” that she knows about such women who come from rural parts of India, they usually migrate to Australia after their marriages and try to adopt English language in Australian accent. According to Jain this act is an indication of their repressed desire
to mingle themselves within a new culture by communicating in the language of that culture. By adopting the new language they actually want to construct their own individual social world and new relationships. “Aspirations and the capacity to aspire for a better future may be thwarted by constraints that restrict the capacity to aspire, whereas equality of agency, which is built on equality of opportunity, has to consider the outcome of interaction between individuals within the socio-cultural settings of their operation” (2314). So this ‘desire’ or ‘aspiration’ has changed the whole meaning of dislocation or displacement. Instead of transforming their identity they build up a new identity in a new world which gives them an opportunity to show their hidden talent which was suppressed by the Indian patriarchy.

Lahiri writes in an easy and simple manner, and at the same time her writing style is autobiographical. She is not a type of author who writes a gaudy and conceited narrative. She always chooses a simple writing style for her prose, and tells a story in an effortless manner without using an ornate language. She likes to write in a plain language and always tells a story succinctly. In her works there is a great impact of the experiences of those people with whom she has a connection, like her parents, friends, and other contacts in the Bengali communities.

My connection with India is fundamental, she said in an interview in her publisher’s Manhattan office. But at the same time it is very slippery and confusing. It has been a cause of bewilderment and sometimes strife and frustration within me. It’s a messy thing. But it’s been a blessing for me and my writing. (Rothstein 2)

Lahiri is well known for her immigrant fiction writing. She is regarded as a diasporic writer because she was born to an Indian immigrant family in America, and
her experience of living in America as a child of immigrants has had a great impact upon her writings. Lahiri’s works articulate in a very subtle manner the mental distress of the children of immigrant families who often face these traumas and feeling of estrangement due to dislocation or displacement. Lahiri feels obliged to recount the stories of the migrants and refugees who have a strong emotion of un-belonging and alienation due to immigration. For precisely this reason, “scholars and critics have dubbed her [Lahiri] a documentalist of the immigrant experience” (Friedman 111). Lahiri’s works portray a world where there is a sagacity of existence in isolation, a failure of communication, the immigrants’ powerlessness to adopt the new changing world, complexity in social standings, and problems in sustaining the relationships. On the whole Lahiri discusses the different experiences and intricacies that first and second generation of Indian immigrants encounter in the United States.

Lahiri’s contribution as a South Asian American / Postcolonial literary figure, which demonstrate a range of experience, by privileging “neither connection to nor distance from cultural roots, stressing, instead, the distinctiveness of individual experience”. (qtd. in Dhingra and Cheung 172)

Previous research on Lahiri’s fiction has been limited to the exploration of the themes of Migration-stress and psychological trauma in result of dislocation or displacement. It highlights the difficulties in building up new relationships and immigrants’ inability to integrate with new cultures. As;

Some studies have shown that language barriers, disconnection from family and friends, and exposure to new and different customs and tradition can lead to difficulties in adapting to a new country: