

Diasporic Identity and Ethical Choice in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract: All the immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* suffer from overwhelming and almost universal uprootedness, which might be interpreted as an embodiment of the diasporic existence of both fictional characters in the novel and Lahiri in real life. The ethical choices of the major fictional characters in *The Lowland* are not only their efforts of deethnicization to reject their Indian heritage and establish themselves in American culture, but also the author's attempt to become a "normal" mainstream writer by moving away from her diasporic identity, which might be difficult missions—if not impossible—as shown by the inconsistency exhibited in the life experiences of the novel's central characters.

Key words: Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*, Diasporic identity, Ethical choice, Deethnicization

As a second-generation Bengali American writer, Jhumpa Lahiri has been included in many categories, such as an Indian writer, South Asian

writer, Asian writer, and diasporic writer. So far the central characters in her works have been Bengali Americans, mainly of the first and second generations. No writer, ethnic or not, likes to be labelled, but a label is always unavoidable. Despite any accusations of her choosing middle-class academic immigrants as the focus of her writing, Lahiri continues to tell the stories of this particular group. She admits that she has no choice as they are the ones with whom she is most familiar. In a broader sense, the life of immigrants is what immigrant writers are most familiar with. As a writer who enjoys writing itself and strives for higher achievements of the arts, Lahiri has the tendency to write "universal" things (Leyda 2011: 74). However, as a writer working for a market, she is forced to commercialize her diasporic identity and ethnicity. Her divide between the two conflicting desires can be easily discerned in her second novel, *The Lowland* (2013).

1.

In Lahiri's works, private homes, instead of public spheres, are always the place for personal trauma and social conflict. For Lahiri, the immigrants' ceaseless quest for cultural consciousness and assimilation is mainly carried out and embodied in the limited space of a family. It is more so in *The Lowland*, in which almost all important events take place between family members. However, a big difference exists between *The Lowland* and Lahiri's previous works. In her previous works, the immigrants are torn between two cultures. The first-generation immigrants are not ready to relinquish their native culture when living

in a host country. As Safran says, “they continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (1991: 85). The first generation lives constantly with double consciousness. Their attachment to the native culture coexists with their never-ending struggle for assimilation with the adopted culture.

But in *The Lowland*, the situation is quite different. Gauri and Subhash, as the most important characters, are first-generation Bengali immigrants. They are not living in the cultural conflicts and are rarely torn between their loyalties to the competing cultures. Their anguish is caused by family or personal issues that have nothing to do with their ethnic identity. However, both Gauri and Subhash suffer from estrangement, which is not from the native or host culture, but from other family members or themselves. Even before their self-imposed exile in the United States, they are living in families without belongingness. Gauri has lived with her grandparents since childhood. She only visits her parents and sisters in their countryside house from time to time. Her short stay with them does not lead to an intimacy between them or a sense of belongingness. She does not belong to her grandparents' family while living there either. We, as readers, know nothing about the relatives in her grandparents' house or their attitude toward her except for her brother, who is also living with the grandparents. When the stories begin to unravel in the novel, her grandparents have died and her uncles and aunts are not emotionally connected to her.

In her two collections of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), as well as her debut novel, *The*

Namesake (2003), arranged marriage is common even among the immigrants to the West, not to mention those living in India. However, when Gauri grows up, no parent or other relatives pay attention to her marriage. She is totally on her own to marry herself off, and she gets herself ready to live an unmarried life before meeting Udayan. The estrangement from her family turns out to be some kind of freedom, which makes an independent ethical choice possible. When Gauri chooses to marry Udayan, a Naxalite revolutionist, she is taking both an ethical and political action. Her marriage to Udayan means having an indirect involvement in the Naxalite extremist movement, which might potentially bring harm to her family and herself. She confronts no ethnic dilemma in making up her mind to marry Udayan due to her aloofness from her family.

When married, although her parents-in-law accept her as their daughter-in-law, no intimacy develops between Gauri and her in-laws, who are greatly disappointed with Udayan's decision to choose his own wife instead of letting them do it for him. She is supposed to fulfill the household requirement according to the tradition and nothing more. She does not develop affection for or attachment to the family at all. When Udayan is killed, she becomes a stranger to her parents-in-law, and they totally ignore her existence. The parents-in-law even wait to take away the baby Gauri is going to give birth to and let Gauri leave the house. One might say that the oppressive parents-in-law and suffering daughter-in-law are a reaffirmation of the stereotypes of Indian culture, but their narrative function is quite ethical. When Subhash offers to marry her and take her to the United States as a way to escape the unpleasant situation, Gauri is in no position to reject the offer. Although Gauri is newly

widowed and there is an expectation among Udayan's comrades and parents for her to remain unmarried to pay homage to him, no emotional intimacy prevents her from accepting Subhash's help. Once again, her ethical choice is readily defined, and no dilemma is involved.

After Gauri arrives in the United States, her rootlessness does not undergo noticeable change. It is she who makes the decision to marry Subhash, but she is not ready to share her life with him. Although living in one house, they live in completely different worlds. Even after Gauri's daughter, Bela, is born and Gauri agrees to sleep with Subhash, no affection develops between them. Home for Gauri is only a place to stay, and she herself does not belong to it. For a third time, her aloofness prepares her for a serious ethical choice: leaving Subhash and Bela once and for all. When she leaves them, she remains alone all her life and never becomes a member of any family. Her dislocation from her families is complete.

This alienation from one's family is not limited to the most important character, Gauri, but also experienced by the secondary characters Subhash and Bela. In contrast to his rebellious younger brother Udayan, Subhash is always obedient to his parents. Since childhood, Subhash has followed every order of her parents while Udayan has continually disappeared. Subhash is expected to follow the rules while Udayan worries and draws attention from their parents. Consequently, Udayan becomes the favored son and Subhash becomes the neglected one. When Udayan dies, their parents almost stop giving Subhash any affection or attention at all. There is even less intimacy between them. Despite the fact that Subhash has been absent for a long time, questions are never asked about his life in Rhode Island. No exchange of information or

feelings takes place between them. He is called back for his brother's death, but his presence is resented by his parents. He does not belong to the house where he used to live. His married life with Gauri in Rhode Island does not result in a warm family, and they never share the feeling of being one family because of Gauri's rejection of him. Bela becomes Subhash's biggest concern when she is born and his only family when Gauri leaves. However, traumatized by her mother's leaving, Bela remains emotionally distanced from Subhash and physically distant when she graduates from college.

Bela, as the only second-generation immigrant in *The Lowland*, is uprooted not by the division between her parents' culture and the American culture, but by the lack of maternal affection and presence. At a very young age she realizes that she is different from other kids, who can easily please their parents whereas she is incapable of making her mother happy. Gauri never shows involuntary and spontaneous affection to Bela, which is supposed to be a natural part of being a mother. The traumatic experience of losing her mother so suddenly completely immerses Bela into isolation. Although she seems to recover gradually from the shock and returns to her routine life, she has lost her attachment to her family and become rootless. She refuses to share her feelings with Subhash and distances herself from him. After graduating from college, Bela leaves home and roams across the United States. She never stays in one place for a long time and never develops intimate relationships with anybody. She is constantly moving and belongs nowhere. Even when she is pregnant, she refuses to let the baby's father know and decides to raise the baby on her own. Her rootlessness becomes the most salient characteristic of her life.

2.

They are immigrants, and all of them are living lives of uprootedness. On the textual surface, the sense of uprootedness has nothing to do with their diasporic identity. If we take a step back, however, and view the uprootedness from the level of the narrative, this overwhelming and almost universal uprootedness might be symbolically interpreted as an embodiment of a diasporic experience. Struggling with deracination and assimilation, the immigrants are always suffering from pangs of loneliness. The situation of isolation within a marriage or a family might also be the expression of the isolation within a strange country. As a second-generation immigrant, Lahiri is quite conscious of the sense of uprootedness. In an interview with Julia Leyda, Lahiri stated that “completely possessing and belonging to the place where you live” is “the luxury that a child of immigrants will never feel.” In Lahiri’s words, for an immigrant, “there’s always a sense of an abyss very close. Sometimes it’s harder to focus on the more pleasurable things in life” (Leyda 2011:78). The chronic anxiety caused by uprootedness is the reality an immigrant has to negotiate.

Though the possibility exists that an immigrant can define his/her identity through the practice of native culture, such as many characters in Lahiri’s previous works do, the real belongingness can be achieved only through acculturation and assimilation. As an ethnic writer, Lahiri hates to be considered as a spokesman for her ethnic people. In addition, the theme of conflicts between the native culture and the host culture has become a cliché for both diasporic fiction and studies. It is understandable that Lahiri makes characters in *The Lowland* suffer from

rootlessness, but avoids the cultural conflicts as the underlying causes. It is both a shift from her previous writings and a challenge of diasporic literature. It is also Lahiri’s effort to be a deracialized writer instead of an ethnic writer, and the characterization and plot are the product of the author’s deethnicization.

In Lahiri’s other works, such as *The Namesake*, first-generation immigrants always cling strongly to their native values. Indian culture is in many cases a point of reference for them. It is the second-generation immigrants who begin to view themselves as Americans instead of Indians and to regard America as their country instead of the country of adoption. However, in *The Lowland*, almost every important character—immigrant or not, first generation or second generation—never holds on to native culture. It seems that they are determined to deethnicize themselves.

Marriage, especially the wedding ceremony, for example, is one of the most important elements of a culture. The first-generation immigrants from India tend to give their children a traditional Indian wedding ceremony in Lahiri’s previous works, while in *The Lowland* such a traditional ceremony is not practiced by any of the major figures. There are three marriages, but no Indian ceremonies. The marriage of Udayan and Gauri is recorded secretly, in the absence of families from both sides. It is only a registration monitored by Udayan’s comrades. The essence of the registration process is to pay homage to the party by answering questions and making vows to observe the rules. It is interesting that Udayan puts his hand over a copy of the Red Book when they sign the papers. This deethnicized marriage is understandable as Udayan is a revolutionist determined to change the status quo of India. The second

marriage in the novel takes place between Gauri and Subhash. As Subhash's parents are strongly against the marriage, which takes place immediately after Udayan's death, a traditional ceremony is unthinkable, and once again there is only a registration for it.

The third marriage of the central characters occurs between Subhash and a white woman. This time, finally, a formal wedding ceremony is held, but in a Christian church, and nothing Indian or Bengali is involved. Subhash's Western-style wedding with the white woman is symbolically significant. In immigrant literature, the desire for a white body often symbolizes a common desire for a successful negotiation of one's complicated cultural affiliations. As Sheng-mei Ma claims, white female bodies for Asian immigrants embody "the disadvantaged group's fallacy of assimilation. White bodies...become not only an exotic physical entity whose fair skin and corporeal features captivate... Asian American men but also a political symbol within which lies the promise of power" (1998: 67). Subhash's dream of complete assimilation has seemingly come true with this marriage. Coincidentally, a Christian church is located near Subhash's home in Calcutta and another one near Subhash's house in Rhode Island. Both churches keep reappearing in the narrative and claim Subhash's admiration, while no Indian counterparts, such as Hindu temples, draw Subhash's attention.

Ethnic groups wish to reaffirm and consolidate their identities and differences through cultural symbols of the native country, including material ones such as culinary habits and dress codes as well as non-material means such as religious beliefs, literature, language, routine habits, and traditions. Indeed, the characters in Lahiri's works previous to *The Lowland*, especially the first-generation Bengalis, try to define

themselves by sticking to their native culture while adapting to the recipient culture. Cooking, dressing, and language traditions are among the most important means. However, in the immigrant family of Subhash, Gauri, and Bela, nothing Indian or Bengali can be discerned. Gauri discards her saris shortly after she arrives in the United States and dresses herself as other Americans do. Their food is American, and no ethnical meaning is attached to it. No Indian religious rituals or festival celebrations are observed in their family. Indian culture has no place in the individuals' independent lives, and nothing like cultural conflict ever bothers them. Each one of them is living a "pure" American life.

Stuart Hall holds that unproblematic assimilation into a host country is as impossible as fully retaining the native culture. He claims: "Diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing anew, through transformation and difference..." (1993: 401). The three immigrants in Lahiri's novel, however, enjoy their American lives without heterogeneity or hybridity, which are believed to be the characteristic of the diasporic cultural identity. Contrary to Hall's understanding, in the novel the Bengali family's assimilation into American culture is complete and unproblematic. In another words, their deethnicization is complete.

3.

For the fictional characters in *The Lowland*, deethnicization can explain their most important decisions. After leaving her home in Rhode Island, Gauri lives a peaceful academic life free from any serious anxieties,

especially cultural matters common to other immigrants. It seems that the immigrant dream of assimilation has been realized. Just like Lahiri's deethnicization, Gauri's seemingly realized American dream is a deethnicized situation as a result of conscious ethical choices. There are mainly three critical decisions that result in Gauri's life condition. First, her pursuit of an academic degree guarantees her economic safety, which is required for an independent life. Without a degree in philosophy, she cannot be economically independent, which will lead to the impossibility of her next step. Second, she leaves Subhash and Bela to live on her own, which severs her from the Indian culture. If she keeps living with them, she will inevitably be connected to the history back in India and the Bengali culture she and Subhash share. She will also encounter generational issues concerning the two cultures. Her abrupt departure from her Bengali family ensures that she will live outside the Indian communities and that nothing will require her to remain loyal to the native culture. Third, although she engages sexually with many people, both men and woman, when living in California, she avoids attachment to anybody. As shown by the characters in Lahiri's other works and Lahiri herself, cultural issues are inevitable in a deep relationship between an immigrant and a person from another ethnic group. Gauri's strategy minimizes the cultural confrontation commonly experienced by immigrants. Through her voluntary choices, Gauri creates a deethnicized utopia where she enjoys a free life. Gauri's success in seeking a satisfactory life seems to show that it is possible for an immigrant to get rid of the bicultural disturbance to have a pure existence in the adopted culture, while a close reading of her three choices leads to a different conclusion.

Her first choice is her academic profession. She is an Indian Bengali who speaks Bengali. When she first arrives in the United States, she cannot understand English well. As she prefers to stay at home, it can be easily concluded that it is not easy for her to attend an English class, let alone a philosophical one, which is undoubtedly one of the most difficult disciplines for a foreigner. The first time she attends a class, she has no difficulty at all. Instead, she is totally engrossed in it. Afterwards she registers for the class. "The women in the philosophy department were secretaries. The professor, and the other students in her class, were men" (Lahiri 2013:164). Gauri, however, turns out to be the most talented student in the class. Her professor is so impressed by her ambitious course paper that he recommends her for a Ph.D. program. It seems that Gauri does not face real difficulties in the program, nor does she have difficulties in seeking a university job after she earns her degree. She is also more than qualified for her job and enjoys an easy professional life.

Her pursuit of professional achievement, however, is too successful to be representative and too ideal to be exemplary. It seems that her only obstacle to her studies is Bela. She hates to stay at home with her daughter, who is a constant distraction and makes it difficult to concentrate on her reading. Once Subhash compromises and changes his schedule to give her time, nothing stands in her way to success, be it lingual, academic, or cultural. Between her family and her profession, Gauri chooses the latter as the objective of her devotion without hesitation. Feminists might regard Gauri's ethical choice as a significant step for her individual freedom, but her experience of professional success can hardly be an example for other immigrants to follow in similar situations.

Gauri's second choice is her decision to leave home. Gauri's abandonment of Subhash and Bela is the most important event in the novel and changes the lives of all three of them irretrievably. It is also the biggest ethical choice ever made by Gauri, which reminds us of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The house might work as a metaphor for marital confinement for Gilman, and in the context of diasporic literature, the house can be interpreted as a symbol of cultural confinement, especially from the native country. However important it might be for one's independence, abandoning one's family is neither an easy choice nor expected of anybody. It should be even more difficult for Gauri, as her husband—unlike the stereotypically patriarchal South Asian men common in immigrant literature—is industrious in work, indulgent of Bela, and considerate of Gauri. Subhash is a saint-like person who betrays almost no personal shortcomings and commits no moral mistakes. It is Subhash who redeems Gauri from a hopeless predicament and who never stops supporting Gauri in her academic pursuit, even after he gives up on her because of her perverted irresponsibility exhibited in her relationship with Bela. Subhash is also a talented scientist who provides the family with an economically comfortable life, which is not experienced by many Southeast Asian immigrants. Therefore, Gauri's lack of hesitation in leaving Subhash cannot be convincingly justified.

A bigger unreasonability or inconsistency exists in Gauri's abandoning Bela. The narrative throughout the novel seems to stress that Gauri is occupied with her love for and memory of Udayan until her "epiphany" near the end. After Udayan's death, Bela becomes the only link she has with him. She does feel an attachment to Bela before her birth and worries that the air travel from India to the United States

might result in the disappearance of the baby in her body. When Bela is born, she wants to keep the baby to herself and is even reluctant to have Subhash help raise her. When she holds Bela, she is constantly worrying that any mishandling could result in catastrophic damage to the baby. It can be safely concluded that Gauri does not lack concern for Bela from the very beginning. As Bela grows up, she needs less and less attention from Gauri. In other words, Bela is gradually being removed from Gauri's path in achieving her individual pursuit. There is no consistency in Gauri's early attachment to Bela and later abrupt desertion of her. If the target she is after is feminine independence, she can easily obtain a divorce and get rid of the "patriarchal power" represented by Subhash; in their situation, Subhash will surely give it to her. Then she can live happily ever after with her daughter. It seems that in her old age Gauri regrets leaving Bela, although this does not result in any actual effort from Gauri to reclaim what she chose to lose.

Gauri's third choice was her avoidance of deep contact with anybody. Compared to the first two choices, it is much more consistent for Gauri to remain aloof from anybody else. Except for her relationship with Udayan, she is never close to anyone. When Subhash takes her to attend a gathering of Indian Americans, she is quite displeased by the Indians, who are kind and helpful to them. Avoiding Indians is a way for her to avoid paying homage to her native culture. When living alone in California, away from Subhash and Bela, she avoids any cultural confrontation by remaining aloof from everyone. Nevertheless, if we say culture is a way of living, it is very difficult to completely escape the native culture in which one is born and raised. No matter how careful Gauri is in her relationship with others, she is constantly interacting with

others in her teaching, academic activities, and—more importantly—romantic relationships. In a general sense, as a Bengali expatriate, the worldview and customs through which she sees her everyday life cannot be so easily removed, and her struggle for identity and belonging cannot be so easily and satisfactorily concluded.

When talking about Lahiri's works prior to *The Lowland*, one critic stated that “for Lahiri's characters, exile from one's birth or traditional culture results in a state of limbo” (Dalton-Brown 2011: 332). However, there is no stereotypical trope of bicultural incompatibility in *The Lowland*. The Bengali immigrants in *The Lowland* are too willing and eager to leave behind their native way of life, comforts, or restrictions and too successful in building their stable and secure American lives in their adopted land to be imitable to other immigrants. However, the fact that Gauri's ethical choices are not quite justified by the text reaffirms the inevitability of politics of identity and the difficulty of acculturation.

4.

For Gauri, Subhash, and Bela, ethical choice is always an effort of deethnicization to reject Indian culture and establish themselves in American culture. The individualism embodied in their ethical choices is in contrast to the traditional Bengali culture of familial attachment and communal interdependence. They do nothing to preserve their own tradition while leaving no effort untried in embracing Western ideas and practices. The immigrants in this novel never experience the anguished divisions between the integration and inherited mores of the native

country. Their ethical choices, especially those in the field of family, seemingly solve their questions of belongingness and identity. The novel does not have traumatic undertones of forced dispersal that are common in many diasporic works of fiction; rather, it celebrates the lives enjoyed by the immigrants in the United States compared to those in India. The open space, peaceful society, commercial products, and individualism in the United States are praised by Subhash and Gauri, who experienced worse things in India and, thus, never entertain ideas of returning. In *The Lowland*, the United States is a land of promise free of sins like racial discrimination or academic politics. Although nearly all diasporic writers place more emphasis on assimilation than inheritance in their representation of conflicting cultural loyalties, Lahiri's complete giving up of one in favor of another is rather unique and special.

As an ethnic writer, Lahiri “resists any idea that she is representing a group” (Akhter 2011: 99). However, whether Lahiri admits it or not, she is expected to be a spokesperson who says something genuine about an ethnic group. Her protagonists are always regarded as representatives of a diasporic community. Bengalis' cultural retentiveness and ethnic distinctiveness no longer concern Lahiri in *The Lowland*. Bengali festivities and lifestyle do exist abundantly in the novel, but they are rather commercialized tokens for marketing and do not concern the sensitivities of the major characters. The Bengali culture only exists in an exotic land, India, and the immigrants in the United States are not related to it. The ethical choices of the characters in the novel not only serve their purpose of deethnicization consistently, but also reflect the author's effort to become a “normal” mainstream writer by getting rid of her diasporic identity, which might be difficult missions—if

not impossible—as shown by the inconsistency exhibited in the life experience of the central characters in the novel.

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Chinese-Americans’ Confusion and Pursuit of Their Ethical Identity in *Steer Toward Rock*

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Abstract: *Steer Toward Rock*, a novel written by the female Chinese-American writer Fae Myenne Ng, presents the process of Jack’s confusion and pursuit of his own ethical identity during The Chinese Confession Program period. Because of the special historical period and his personal experience, Jack, as a Chinese immigrant, is in displacement and confusion of his family ethical identity as well as in absence of biological and social ethical identity, which puts him in an ethical predicament. The displacement and absence of Jack’s ethical identity coupled with his hard pursuit are closely related to the special ethical environment of Chinese-American immigrants in the middle of 20th century, which show the traumas and disasters caused by American racial immigration policies — *the Chinese Exclusion ACT*, and uncover the early Chinese-American immigrants’ history of silence.

Key words: *Steer Toward Rock*; Chinese-Americans; ethical Identity; ethical predicament