



Analyzing the trajectories of trauma and crises in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction with special reference to the lowland and the namesake

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri happens to be one of the finest authors of twenty first century English fiction with several remarkable pieces of work that are definitely considered to be the milestones in the genre of world fiction. Her characterization, transcendence, in depth analysis and layering of different shades and hues throughout the story speak volumes about the literary talent this author possesses. The current paper aims to delve deep into these layers of her fiction and bring to the surface the tensions, crises and traumas that are recurring throughout her plots and render a totally different dimension to her fiction. Keeping in view particularly her famous works *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, the paper attempts to scrutinize the fault lines and their repercussions on the trajectories of plot and subsequent evolution and transcendence of characters.

Keywords: Trajectories, Trauma, Crisis, Repercussions, Narrative

Introduction

Twenty first century has witnessed several literary luminaries In the sphere of world literature, who have, time and again, left their indelible mark through their literary masterpieces, and have successfully shaken and stirred consciousness across the globe; have transcended the borders, disseminated the philosophies, challenged the world order and above all spread the tales of hope, resilience and valor in the face of adversity. Novel writing specially, as a craft, has seen a massive shift. The boundaries are blurred, the characters along with the narratives and forms are totally different; the literary landscape and the imaginative canvas knows no bounds and is abuzz with pace, and eccentricity of all sorts. Commenting on the pulse and pace eminent scholar Peter Boxall aptly elaborates:

Our own time is bent and crafted by the computer, the mobile phone, the satellite the internet; by electronic communication at the speed of light. It is for our generation of contemporaries, electronic speed that draws the blurred horizon of our possibilities that conjures dizzying cahoots between virtual time and weightless space. (4)

Various writers across the globe have contributed to the enrichment and elaboration of this literary canvas by adding a variety of hues and shades to it in their own uncanny ways, but of all one writer that truly stands out and deserves a share of her recognition is Jhumpa Lahiri. She has been traversing her literary journey with élan and composure and her contribution to the world literature in the twenty first century literature is certainly mammoth. Her dexterity and craftsmanship in storytelling is par excellence. As writer, apart from other set of

skills that she possesses, what remains the essential hallmark of her portrayal is the handling of the subtleties and nuances throughout the script. Emotions and sensibilities are layered and presented forth with utmost deftness. As such, Jhumpa Lahiri, remains a towering figure in the domain of world literature through her inspiring and exemplary craftsmanship as a writer and stands apart in weaving the tales of wonder and awe out of the ordinary. What sets Lahiri apart from other authors is the literary canvas on which she weaves complex identities and tales of crisis; most of the times her focus is on the immigrant struggles and their experiences in the foreign land. The crisis thus faced by the characters and the traumas encountered as well as the repercussions confronted—all are splendidly showcased in her works. In this regard eminent scholar Shaista Bee and Dr Kavita Agnihotri aptly observe:

Through her narrative Lahiri explores immigrant struggles and identity crisis alongside the challenges that arrive from cultural relocation. Numerous works by Lahiri present characters who suffer from feelings of loneliness because Diaspora communities experience isolation between their past and present dwellings. (157)

Her literary journey, most of the times, revolves around the experiences of diasporas and the tug of war faced by second generation immigrants around the world. Up rootedness, a sense of alienation and grappling for identity remain the hallmark of her works most of the times. The intricate details and the nuances of the Diaspora experiences are finely captured in her words; the canvas that she develops is soul stirring as well as heart wrenching at times. Eminent scholars and critics

have time and again showered accolades upon her for craftsmanship and dexterity in handling the themes and characterization. Regarding this aspect of her fiction eminent scholar Prakriti Rani remarks:

Her fiction investigates themes of dislodging, identity, cultural clash, and the intricacies of human connections. Lahiri's composing is described by an extra and rich composition style that mirrors the close to home restriction and hold of her characters. Her work frequently includes a nonlinear story structure that winds around together various viewpoints and time spans to make a rich and nuanced picture of her character and their encounters. (2)

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction most of the times seems to be foraying into unknown and uncharted territories of human psyche and strives to venture into the very layers of human emotions in orders to bring to the surface the hidden emotions and sentiments. Her novels resonate with the traumas and crises of an individual and also the tug of war involved in bringing about a sense of sanity and reconciliation. Her two outstanding novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* thoroughly revolve around the themes of reconciliation, crises and trauma. Jhumpa Lahiri subtly weaves the story of generations facing the crises in alien land after having migrated to the foreign shores in hope for better prospects. Their children too face this imminent fate and are constantly on the tumultuous grounds in terms of commitments and affiliations like their previous generation.

In the novel *The Namesake* Ashima Ganguly and Ashok Ganguly are the first generation couple who grapple together to make the ends meet in a distant nation. Ashima, particularly, sweats it out since the very beginning, aiming to get into the groove in America, often failing miserably and seldom making it too. The crises that loom large at her face, apart from the homeland orientation, are that of cultural dichotomy and alienation as well. The family setup back home in India, the amazement and bewilderment of Indian ambience, the crowded streets, the bonhomie from strangers, the ethnicity issues-- all stand in sharp contrast to the shades and hues that the American landscape has to offer. The silence, the cold and the emptiness is eerie at first coupled with the lack of warmth in the absence of friends and peers at crucial junctures of life. Time and again the new alien land poses new challenges for Ashima. This feeling of detachment is finely portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri throughout the novel. At one point the novelist observes:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (51)

This cultural crisis gets mellowed down a bit as the story advances further but the traumas in the lives of major characters are endless and provide a melancholic strain to the entire scheme of things. The writer purposely comes up with the

imagery of traumas from the past to lurk and harrow the characters in their present and play a crucial role in shaping the destiny and lives of the people around. Almost every character is marked by a memory of a trauma that leaves a dark impression on the characters. For instance, Ashok Ganguly, despite possessing a scientific bent of mind and having a rational approach towards life most of the times, is unable to forgo the trauma of his railway accident and the memory stays with him for a long time. The trauma has such an impact on his psyche that he even goes on to name his first child Gogol, remembering the incident long after. The harrowing impressions thus felt by Ashok are very well portrayed by the author through a series of incidents in which Ashok is seemingly cowed down by the memories of trauma. Regarding this traumatic and crucial experience faced by the protagonist in the namesake, the author narrates:

To this day he is claustrophobic, holding his breath in elevators, feels pent-up in cars unless the windows are open on both sides. On planes he requests the bulkhead seat. At times the wailing of children fills him with deepest dread. At times he still presses his ribs to make sure they are solid. (25)

Trauma as a recurring central theme once again gets reflected in *The Lowland*, another great work of Jhumpa Lahiri. *The Lowland* is another masterpiece of Jhumpa Lahiri where she once again highlights the crisis faced by major characters and their relentless efforts to cope with them. The novel traces almost the similar lines of migration and generational shifts from India to the west. The protagonists have to go through the similar agonies and pangs of stress on the part of their settling in the alien land. The tussle, the tug of war and the crises all are voiced beautifully by the author in this novel. The novel traces its origins in the lowlands of India where two brothers are caught opting for different ideologies and vocations in their lives and it is out of these different pathways that they meet different fates. In terms of trauma and subsequent crisis the novel *The Lowland* is much ahead of the namesake. Comparatively this work by Jhumpa Lahiri seems darker and grimmer and is layered to a next level when it comes to the art of characterization. Subhash just like Ashok Ganguly seems a laborious soul who has framed his aims and priorities clear cut very early in his life but destiny has different plans for him altogether. The traumatic demise of his brother Udayan on the account of execution by the forces shatters his life completely and his well settled life turns haphazard.

Another prominent figure in the novel is Gauri, Udayan's wife. Her woes and traumas are worsened by the fact that she, at the time of Udayan's demise, is pregnant. Moreover the social stigmas associated with a young widow in the Indian society at that time are intolerable. She seems to be looking down the barrel and has got no hopes in the horizon for her. The author very effectively masters the craft of plunging the characters into the deepest pits of sorrow and then, as if to compensate for the atrocities hurled, suddenly shifts the canvas to the west with the dutiful brother-in-law Subhash agreeing to marry her and share her burden of grief. As the story develops further the

recurring theme of alienation and compatibility along with complex characters, once again take the center stage in this novel of Jhumpa Lahiri, thereby opening the Pandora's box of crisis for the couple. In this regard the eminent scholars Dipam Jentilal Joshi and Dr Seema R Gida in one of their articles aptly observe:

The lowland addresses complicated identities of the characters who possess split personalities and have become members of diaspora by their fate. Udayan's death is the starting point from when the identities major character evolve and negotiate with one another. (310)

The string of events that further unfold are eventually more traumatic as in the later half of the novel the readers witness the characters splitting away and charting their own paths in life. Subhash and Gauri eventually part their ways and opt for different routes in their lives. The two novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* eventually follow the similar trajectories of acceptance, tolerance and eventual collapse in the lives of respective characters. These two works splendidly feature the crises and traumas passed on from one generation to other, sometimes in homeland sometimes in far off shores. Ashok Ganguly, Ashima, Gauri, Gogol, Bela, Subhash and Udayan all are at the receiving ends of turmoil that hit their lives out of the blue. Another highlight of Lahiri's characters is her farsightedness in making the characters falter, stumble and evolve over a period of time. H Ramaya and Dr Shibila aptly observe the poignant transformation and evolution of characters in her novels:

The Lowland is alike to the other works that Lahiri has written: beautiful, thin accounts of people lost in new world. The reader is always struck by how she writes about the particulars of feeling odd: the bated breath of watching one's children grow up in a world so terribly different from one. (715)

Jhumpa Lahiri's both these works are thus landmarks in the genre of English fiction and her penetrating insight and the in depth analysis of the diasporic communities and their dilemmas is certainly par excellence. The nuances along with the frailties and follies; the characters and their transformations all are vividly portrayed and are there to inspire a generation of readers ahead.

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