

A Study of Self-actualization in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract

Identities are a significant part of everyone's life as they give substance to one's existence. However, identity evolves or displaces itself due to temporal and spatial reasons. Migrants undergo a transformational identity when they migrate from one place to another. The paper aims to traverse Gauri's journey and how she asserts her identity as a transnationalist. Further, the paper explores the reasons that create transnational identities within the host country for migrants focusing on Indian women and how feminist identity shifts across borders under the lens of Maslow's theory of self-actualization.

Keywords: Asserted identities; Feminism; Hybridity; Multiculturalism; Self-actualization; Transnationalism.

Introduction

The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri is her fourth book and the second novel. The novel explores diverse themes of diaspora, alienation, transnationalism, feminism and postcolonialism. Written in the millennial age, Lahiri writes the novel by giving the readers a postcolonial view point. According to Maewan the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri's novels "...are often caught in a cultural indeterminate" (99). Lahiri as a second-generation migrant often uses this identity as a basis for the formation of her characters. She explores the various dimensions of transnational identities through these characters. Being a Bengali women writer, Lahiri is "...concerned with the complexities of expatriate experience and the traumas of cross-cultural adjustment" (Laddha and Bhatt e407). Lahiri's writings are evidence of her "...existential struggle to establish her identity and assert her individuality in the diasporic space surfaces" (Laddha and Bhatt e407). Under the lens of postcolonialism, "Women are being portrayed in various manifes-

tations by Indian women novelists” (Nagaraju et.al 141). Moreover, she empowers women belonging to transnational spaces through her written expression asserting an evolved feminist identity.

The narratives of Lahiri have identity as one of the main themes explored. In the novel *The Namesake*, it is the crisis of identity that are explored, whereas, in *The Lowland*, identity has been explored from a distinct perspective, that of identity being asserted. The novel has been critically analyzed via the lens of Maslow’s theory of Self-Actualization. The term self-actualization was first coined by Kurt Goldstien. However, Maslow examines the term explicitly, he says, self-actualization “...refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially” (Maslow 10). The theory as explained by Maslow in his paper is not limited to a specific gender and stands applicable on the other genders as well. He further states, “What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization” (Maslow 10). The paper aims to traverse the character of Gauri and her journey in which she asserts her identity as a transnational feminist.

Formation of Asserted Identities

Migration is not only limited to the movement of people, rather it takes with itself all that the migrants are related and connected with. According to Laddha and Bhatt, “While shifting from one place to another, not only food habits, clothes, living style, language undergoes a transformation, but a complete behavioral transition takes place” (e404). These factors are elementary in defining the identity of a person. Identities are an important part of everyone’s life. People absorb and adopt various identities in their life. Some of the identities are self-adopted while some are forced upon people. Migrants invariably are given another identity when they migrate from one place to another. Being a migrant in the host country is a common identity absorbed. While exploring what goes into the making of transnational identities, it is important to know what leads to the creation of transnational identities. Mambrol in his article talks about the migrants’ move “...across the geographic, cultural and political borders to build” (Mambrol 1) transnational communities. It is within these communities that we see migrants assuming hybrid identities. While specifically referring to migrants with hybrid identities i.e. migrants who are able to inculcate both cultures i.e., one of their country of origin and the other of the host country. Laddha and Bhatt attribute that hybridity is constructed as “...multiculturalism creates a new path of change” (e404). Also, according to Mambrol, “Transnationalism integrates diverse cultures to bring about

assimilation". Some migrants are willing to assimilate and embrace the new culture, however, some continue to carry on the values and culture of their country of origin. It is generally observed that it is the "...parents or the first generation tries to maintain ties with their home country" (Mawwan 99). The first-generation migrants do not have "...smallest intention of 'giving themselves without reservations' to the new country" (Bourne). For the first-generation, giving up their home culture brings a feeling of guilt. They are bound to acculturate themselves into the culture of the host country, therefore, as Terry Eagleton writes in *The Idea of Culture* "... that the very word culture contains a tension between making and being made". Furthermore, multiculturalism surely leads to the creation of a new fusion, it is the migrant who undergoes a crisis in this fusion. Even though the first-generation migrants resist this fusion as much as they can, the second-generation are more likely to embrace it.

The Journey of Gauri

Gauri is a first-generation migrant to the United States. She is a modern woman in post-colonial India who is drawn towards education unlike most women around her. She considers herself as an independent person. She didn't see much of her parents during childhood and they died soon after. Her life in Calcutta is not that of a meek girl who prefers to stay within the four walls of her house. Even as a child, she found the noise of the streets more calming than the silence inside the rooms. Gauri,

...was used to the noise as she studies, as she slept; it was the on-going accompaniment to her life, her thoughts, the constant din more soothing than the silence would have been. Indoors, with no room of her own, it was harder. But the balcony had always been her place" (Lahiri 65).

Gauri was always drawn towards books and studies. Since the very beginning she had created a space i.e. her balcony where she felt that she was a part of the crowd. The balcony here is a metaphor for the space she created for herself. Gauri always felt the need to be on her own. In this context, Maslow says, "...peculiar characteristic of the human organism when it is dominated by a certain need is that the whole philosophy of the future tends also to change" (5). For Gauri, the need to be free and be on her own is the dominating need all through her life. Eventually, this particular need to be free influences all the decisions she makes. Gauri's quest for 'utopia' becomes the need Maslow defines in his article. He says, "Utopia can be defined very simply as a place where there is plenty of food...if only heis

guaranteed food for the rest of his life, he will be perfectly happy" (5). It is in this search of happiness that Gauri spends her life making unconventional decisions. The need to be alone and happy is the new utopia in a transnational community.

Gauri goes on to marry the person she loved and she goes ahead to marry Udayan as he respected her individuality. Udayan says, "Why should you leave a place you love, and stop doing what you love to do, for the sake of a man?" (Lahiri 69). Further, Gauri feels that it is her independence from her family that intrigues Udayan and draws him towards her. Gauri

"...saw that the unremarkable journey of her life thus far was fascinating to him: her birth in the countryside, her willingness to live apart from her parents, her estrangement from most of her family, her independence in this regard" (Lahiri69).

Gauri as an individual is seeking an identity of belongingness since the beginning. In quest for an identity, Gauri develops into a person who is in deep thinking most of the time questioning her past, her very existence. It could be rightly said that it is the very reason she was drawn towards philosophy and explores the subject later in life as well. Gauri,

"...in childhood, aware of her accidental arrival, she had known who she was, where or to she belonged. With the exception of Manash she had not been able to define herself in relation to her siblings, nor see herself as a part of them. She had no memory of spending a moment, even in a house in such an isolated place, ever, alone with her mother and father. Always at the end of a queue, in the shadow of others, she believed she was not significant enough to cast a shadow of her own" (Lahiri72).

Gauri had never considered herself as special and could never endure any special treatment showered upon her. This is evident when Subhash offers her marriage in order to save her and the child she was carrying. In fact, she never wanted her in-laws to accept Udayan and her as husband and wife, as they both would get the freedom she enjoyed. When the opportunity to marry Subhash comes, she agrees to it only to escape from Udayan's parents. She had never connected to her own parents and therefore couldn't bring herself to make a connection with Udayan's as well.

Furthermore, Gauri didn't want men to desire her. She was not particularly satisfied with her looks and her physical features. In fact,

“...around men she'd felt invincible. She knew she was not the type they turned to look at on the street, or to notice across the room at a cousin's wedding. She'd not been asked after and married off a few months later, as some of her sisters had been. She was a disappointment to herself, in this regard” (Lahiri72).

She also finds it difficult to accept that Udayan expressed an interest in her. It surprises her to find him waiting for so long with a sign of irritation or anger. Till the time, she was married to Udayan she didn't struggle for an identity. Her identity as Gauri-the individual was not hampered or destroyed. Whether her in-laws accepted her as their daughter-in-law or not, it didn't matter to her. She had the freedom to assume the identity she wanted to. It didn't matter to her whether the same identity was acceptable to the people she was surrounded by. Gauri's reaction is the same when Subhash tries to rescue her from the wrath of his parents. She does agree to marry Subhash but is unable to bring herself to desire him and connect emotionally with him the way she was connected with Udayan. It was the sense of duty towards family that never attracted her, rather she always has a bend towards being a recluse.

When Gauri first arrives in the United States, she tries to adapt her life with Subhash in order to survive as she is in shock and disillusionment. She is living in the phase of grief. She marries Subhash in order to save Udayan's child as she wanted to fulfil her duty towards him, “It is from here that Gauri's existential journey begins” (Mishra 62). Gauri's arrival in America was a way of escaping her traumatic past as she thinks, “This was the place where she could put things behind her. Where her child would be born, ignorant and safe” (Lahiri 150). This is the “*Phase of Adaption*: When there is assertion of the fact that they have to survive here only, so adapting takes place” (Laddha and Bhatt e406)

Gauri's second marriage to Subhash establishes her identity as a married woman- an identity that is asserted upon her. Her identity while being married to Udayan was not limited to just being a married woman, rather it was beyond that. This new identity of being married to Subhash took away her independence and individuality. Her second marriage is contradictory as “...arranged marriage could be interpreted as entirely incompatible with feminism and freedom” (Priyadarshini 54). This finding of liberation makes Gauri a transnational feminist in a new territory. It is interesting to note here that had Gauri been living in Calcutta after marrying Subhash, the road towards freedom and liberation would not have been taken. It is the adoption and assimilation of a new culture, i.e. the culture

of the host country where Gauri takes a decision that is unexpected and unconventional in context of an Indian woman as "...western ideals of womanhood and feminism can differ from that of...Asian cultures" (Priyadarshini 55). Furthermore, it can rightly be said that feminism differs across borders and it is in the case of Gauri where she asserts her identity as a transnational feminist. Therefore, Gauri could not bring herself to be in the role of a wife to Subhash and this was further evident in her role of a mother to Bela as well. Gauri was relieved to see Subhash independently doing household chores and required no help from her. On the other hand, "...Udayan had wanted a revolution, but at home he'd expected to be served; his only contribution to his meals was to sit and wait for Gauri or her mother-in-law to put a plate before him" (Lahiri 151). This act of Subash as self-reliant man puts her at ease as she is not expected to be a conventional Indian woman and makes her shift in a space of hybridity as Laddha and Bhatt define the "Phase of Hybridity: When there is inclusion of some aspects and following of one's traits as well" (e404). Gauri being a first-generation migrant continues to wear sarees in the United States as well. Her saree would be "...wrapped and pleated and tucked every morning into a petticoat" (161 Lahiri).

Gauri is surely drawn towards the American style of dressing as it is a metaphor for freedom and individuality. Gauri desired "...to want to look like the other women she noticed on campus" (Lahiri 161). She embraces the culture of the host country and acculturates herself in the environment. She makes these shifts in her life without telling Subhash which is also a way of asserting her identity as an individual. Upon coming home after work one day, Subhash finds Gauri not at home. She returns some time later "...wearing slacks and a grey sweater" (Lahiri 168) along with her hair cut till her jawbone. In this context, Laddha and Bhatt say that, "While many Indian immigrant women might wear western dress to work, they continue to wear traditional clothes in their homes for community gatherings symbolizing themselves as custodians of religious and cultural tradition" (e406). Gauri, on the other hand has not embraced the culture of America through her clothing to assimilate herself in the host country. She adopts this new style of dressing in order to assert her identity within her home.

During the first few years of Bela upbringing, Gauri fulfilled her duties as mother by bathing and feeding her, she however, didn't spend time with her or play with her like the way Subhash did. Slowly Gauri started to resent the activities and duties she had towards Subhash and Bela. It started with eating an early dinner with Bela and leaving a portion for Subhash.

Gauri was being dominated by her need to assimilate herself in the culture of the west. It is interesting to note here that, the dominant need to fulfill one's desire urges a migrant to create a space for themselves. Therefore, they are compelled consciously and unconsciously to adapt to the culture of the host country. Furthermore, it can be appropriately said that in a transnational community, the need becomes the new utopia. Gauri was somewhere unhappy with the fact that Subhash could decide his work schedule. On the other hand, Gauri had to design her work schedule according to the needs of Bela and the house. For Gauri,

“...it was just the evenings she had class, but then it was every evening of the week that she spent in the library, away from them. Happy to spend time with Bela, Subhash let her go. And so she felt antagonized by a man who did nothing to antagonize her, and by Bela, who did not even know the meaning of the word” (Lahiri 196).

This was followed by many more instances until Gauri mustered up the courage to walk out on Subhash and Bela. The unsatisfied need of Gauri to be in her own space without those she is related to compels and forces her to assert her identity as an individual who is on her own. In this process, she keeps shifting her identity. Thereafter, her visits to the library increase from two days a week to all the days of the week. During the time of her thesis, she is confined to her room. The room itself becomes a metaphor for her much needed space. It is interesting however to note here that Gauri did not leave Subhash until she had secured herself financially.

Gauri was aware of the fact that it was Bela who was a thread between Subhash and her. Nonetheless Bela as a thread was not strong enough a reason for Gauri to consider living her life with Subhash. Furthermore, Gauri also understood that Bela needed Subhash in her life as well. Gauri was “...a student, without an income. Like Bela, Gauri wouldn't survive without him” (Lahiri 212). The reason that Gauri does not leave Subhash as she found that her need to feel safe was being met through Subhash. Maslow in this regard argues that, “Practically everything looks less important than safety” (6). Through her marriage with Subhash Gauri's financial as well as societal needs are being fulfilled both for her and her child. It was here in the United States with Subhash that Gauri could bury her past. This space that Subhash created for her was a safety net that protected her from her traumatic past in Calcutta. In order to exert her independence and individuality Gauri found the opportunity to leave the home she built in Rhode Island while Subhash and Bela were in India.

While studying Gauri under the influence of feminism, it can rightly be said that Gauri's assertion of her identity is unexampled. Hudson-Weem in her book *Africana Womanism Reclaiming Ourselves* emphasizes on how the Alice Walker's literary theory of Womanism "...necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women" (23-24). A similarity can be traced between the Africana women and Gauri- a diasporic Indian women. Gauri does not relate to the identity of a diasporic Indian woman, rather, she sets on the path to create a new identity for herself which she places over and above anything else that is a part of her life.

Gauri makes another significant journey across the country to the other coast of America in California. She wanted to get captivated by the new place. She was escaping yet another past- now the one with Subhash and Bela and in the process of constructing a new identity like the transnationalist who are "...constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference" (Hall 235). However, her identity as an Indian did not leave her and due to her Indian "...background she was given a special responsibility to oversee students who came from India" (Lahiri 283). In this new space Gauri is not compelled to form associations within the transnational communities. She refrains from forming associations or friendships where she would be questioned about her personal life. She links with various other men in her life were fashioned in a manner that did not hamper her personal space. When Gauri meets Lorna, a researcher who showed interest in her work, Gauri feels an attraction towards her. Being the recluse that Gauri was, she traverses in a unconventional relationship.

Conclusion

To conclude, "...Lahiri presents a manifestation of Bengali American womanism that is not purely American, not purely Bengali" (Kasun 46). Being a first generation migrant, Gauri does not maintain any conventional ties with her country of origin. However, she does maintain a transnational asserted identity as she assimilates herself into the culture of America. She was in constant touch with Manash, her brother. As a transnationalist, she absorbs herself in the American culture by adopting their work culture, clothing, language and lifestyle. Gauri refuses to adopt the identity fate has chosen for her as "...some identities may be more dominant than others" (Kolpakoviene 119). Had Udayan been alive, the identity of being a married woman would have never bothered her. Moreover, as a mother too Gauri would have not asserted and chosen her individual identity

over Bela. It is Gauri's need for her own space that she seeks throughout her life and that has been metaphorically penned by Lahiri: her balcony in Calcutta, marrying Subhash, migrating to America, the room in Rhode Island and eventually settling in California for the rest of her life. These are all spaces that Gauri creates for herself where she asserts her individual identity through the process of self-actualization.

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