

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

5th Year of Open Access

Vol. 5, Issue-6 December 2014

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor- Mrs. Madhuri Bite



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

A Bird in a Cage: Hybridity and Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

Dr. Gunjan Aggarwal

Associate Professor (English),
Department of Mathematics & Social Sciences
M.M.University,
Mullana (Ambala)

&

Rohina Ratti

Research Scholar (English)
M.M.University(Ambala)

Abstract:

The important issues that the postcolonial studies are concerned about which include the exploration of the new arenas of heterogeneity and cultural polarity that are rising continuously with the span of time are carried forward in *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri, tries to examine the various issues that has led to transform itself from the colonial, the postcolonial including the subaltern to the globalised contemporary era. Diversified culture, hybridity, identity, and marginalization on the various aspects of race, class, gender, social and cultural which have always been the core issues of concern in the study of post colonialism. Her works raise not only the sensitivised issues of the Indian aspects but globalised in nature but also tantalize the transformation that took place in Indian culture which may include the hybrid identities, the cultural clashes, the social taboos lying in a conservative society, the gender oppression or class struggle and a lot more. She, herself being an immigrant has depicted vividly the issues in her work in a very plain language as to how she felt herself to be divided in two parts.

Keywords: Hybridity, PostColonialism, Dichotomy, Identity.

Introduction

In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*, one can easily find the depiction of formation with the evolution of characters' individuality, which keeps on changing from time to time. It too tries to inhabit a sort of fluidity in the newly established cultural patterns they move to which are on the other hand tries to redraw on the canvas of previous culture they inherit. The novel *The Lowland* of Jhumpa Lahiri deals with the expatriate Bengali family that move on to the Rhode Island or the West to find a new sense of identity, a sense of belonging, to carve out a new niche for themselves and to cherish their dreams. The main focus that the author keeps on is that of the second generation immigrants, Bengalis that are raised in the United States in search of an identity for themselves either to live with or without it and in particular the subaltern section who needs to find out their identity which they hardly do in their own land and are found to be subjugated in one way or the other with the feeling of otherness. An ambivalence to the text is enacted about the inhabitation and choice of the characters. Through the characters, Lahiri explores the position of the subject acting in the binary discourses of the Orient and the Occident. The concept of hybridity seems to be resultant from ensuing synthesis redefining the positions of the subject. The text explores relationships of an individual that exist in the complex

web of nationality, ethnicity and rejection as well as the hybridity in the community of Bengal living in the U.S. in the novel *The Lowland*. Unlike her other creations make use of intricate patterns, motifs to bind the reader and the plot together bringing it to life and including the various themes that might be a barrier to or opportunity for the human race or the community that she talks about which might include marital, extra marital, the relationship of two generations, and the care and neglect dichotomy which leaves an impact on the soul of the character, be it any. As the postcolonial incorporates the critical analysis of the history, culture, literature, and the modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France and all the other European imperial powers that have once tried all their power to subjugate their colonies and after attaining their freedom the impact could be seen in one way or the other. The countries of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand that somehow achieved independence much earlier than the third world countries could do, has widened the scope of the analysis to the discourse and cultural productions of the countries. But the major threat that seemed to exist was the individual identity of the people and the cultural that move on to make their dignitable place for themselves in a country that was once a colonizer and the Eurocentric discourse for all the nations. It also apparently includes the British literature that existed in the 18th and 19th century that could easily reveal the trials and tribulations in the social, economic and the intellectual life was tacitly represented by the colonial representation. In common parlance it could be said that when a human being gets inflicted from any problem mentally or physically it effects him overall from economic, social and intellectual aspect and in order to recover it might take a few years or ages but this was the concern with the nation that has gone through the colonial exploitation and to come out of it a thorough struggle is required that is clearly visible in the lives of the citizens that tend to migrate from one land to the other. In a way to identify the various recurrent issues that dealt within it which includes the rejection of the western narrative of the Western Imperialism whereby in which the colonial “other” is not only subordinated and being marginalized but also diminished as a cultural agency and to get it replaced by the counter narrative in which the cultures of the colonial fight their way back into the European written world history or the Eurocentric world. To quote from one of the most influential books that exists *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (2d ed., 2002), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin stress that what they term as hybridization of colonial languages and cultures, in which imperialist importations are superimposed on indigenous traditions. They also draw attention to a number of postcolonial countertexts to the hegemonic texts that present a Eurocentric version of colonial history.

Discussion:

With the expanse of Post Colonialism the issues that originate with its existence assimilate hybridity, subaltern, Occidentalism and the Orientalism as in the colonizer and the colonized. As from the theory of Postcolonialism, comes the praxis of subaltern and it also considers cultural political questions of national and ethnic identity, ‘otherness’, gender, race, gender, culture, imperialism and language during the periods of the colonial. Homi K. Bhabha has tried to make an easy evaluation to the query of the colonization i.e., how the colonizers have come to build their colonies and the colonized, the original inhabitants who are now referred to as the ‘other’. According to him the stereotype image of the colonized is that of the negated one. In common parlance, they are considered quite inferior to the colonizers in colour, race, knowledge and culture. He considers colonial discourse as the apparatus of power and further states as:

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. Despite the play of the power within colonial discourse and the shifting positionalities of its subjects (for example effects of class, gender, ideology, different social formations, varied systems of colonizations and so on). I am referring to a form of govern mentality that in making out a 'subject nation', appropriates, directs and dominates its various spheres of activity. Therefore, despite the 'play' in the colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible. (The Location of Culture, 57).

The concept of colonial discourse probably highlights the status of the colonized inferior to that of the colonizers. It too goes to the extent to state that the power politics of the colonizers that always try to dominate the colonized in all sense. Literature being ambiguous in nature the 'Other' can be referred to as the women in the patriarchal society who is set free but in shackles. It draws upon the post structuralist theories such as those of Deconstruction in order to unravel the complex relations between the dichotomy of the centre and colonial periphery. Alongwith the concept of postcolonialism pops up the conceptualization of immigrant where by cultures are intermingled together to form up a hybridized formulation of individuals. Jhumpa Lahiri who is amongst one of the writers who tend to write upon the immigrants and the issues they have to face ahead are well delineated by her in the works that she produces. Hybridity as a concept has been talked about by Homi. K. bhabha, Gayatri Spivak chakraborty and Aijaj Ahmed literally deals with the dualities of a single aspect as two sides of a same coin. It is the influence of the postcolonial and the colonial concern that the intellect too gets its impression. The concept of hybridity applies on basically the diasporic or the immigrant novels that conveys the dilemma of the protagonist what he or she undergoes from the beginning to the very end. As this kind of theory has been applied in various novels by diasporic novelists that tend to let their readers know as to what is going on in their psyche. When the protagonist becomes an immigrant he is supposed to tackle the upcoming difficulties embracing to adjust with the two cultures: one that is his and the other that he is going to step into. This gives rise to hybridized from of an individual who gets his identity blurred up as he is about to lose his previous identity in search of the new one.

What Homi K. Bhabha claims about the salient feature of colonial culture is its hybridity, it's "in betweenness" and "liminality". He calls this liminal space between two worlds or cultures of the colonizer or colonized as the "Third space of enunciation" (Bhabha 54). Being a theorist and a advocate of cultural hybridity and inbetweenness, he himself is regarded as, " a mediating figure between activists and academics" in his seminal work, *Location of Culture* that is a series of concepts that undermine the simple polarisation of the world into the self and the other. It too leads to the crossfertilization of the culture and this is very aptly represented by Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel *The Lowland*. The character of Bela, who is the biological daughter of Udayan but socially raised and brought up by Subhash in a foreign world of the colonizers and all they inherit, is the culture of their motherland but still through Bela, Lahiri has clearly presented the personality that comes to existence who being a female protagonist is trying to live her own live but is somewhere in between the two worlds. Robert Young in his book *Colonial Desire : Hybridity in Culture and Race* states:

A hybrid is technically cross between two different species and therefore the term hybridization evokes both the botanical notion of interspecies grafting and the ‘vocabulary of the Victorian extreme right’ which regarded different races as different species. (Robert Young 10)

In the novel *The Lowland*, the author has constructed a plot whereby she presents everything in dualities, the confusions, the trials and the tribulations, the inner and the outer war, the sense to identify oneself as an individually and intellectually. Hybridity of fate and chance and also reading between the lines. On one side Jhumpa Lahiri presents the duality of the hybridized form in the major characters of her novel but on the other hand by way of minor characters she has tried to portray the subaltern, who tends to be weaker just because of the confusion the dilemma that exists in their identity. At times they stand to fight for their existence achieving their goals in life. One becomes weaker the subaltern not because they tend to but because they are made to. In her novel *The Lowland* Gauri and Bela tend to be the victims of the postcolonial impact where they are unable to find their true identity. Gauri is a daughter, a wife and a mother too but when required she is unable to provide justice with her duties. The dualities that bore a space in the plot of the novel is on psychological and the social level; fate and chance. Though Jhumpa Lahiri has been living away from Bengal for quite a longest part of her life, in her fiction *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* it is the same yearning that she is trying to preserve. After reading the novels of Jhumpa Lahiri one can easily make out a revelation that though she has been brought up and raised in Rhode Islands, U.S.A and her parents being of the Bengali origin did celebrate the wedding of their daughter in the ritualistic way of Bengal traditions trying to maintain the essence of the culture. Though multicultural in nature and hybrid in character the intellect of the author as well as the reader is bound in such a way that the incidents portrayed in the novel clarify aptly what they might have undergone in their life. She continues to write about the continents and the countries that she is associated with, by simply expressing the feeling and psyche that might have disturbed the expatriates. Lahiri words in one of her conversations as quoted by Brati Biswas in her book, “ I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts....always set in Calcutta...learned to observe things as they are outside, and yet I also know that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way. . .” (187) Trying to balance her lives in both the lands, she feels a sense of oneness, a sense of belonging there. It is just due to this hybrid division that Jhumpa Lahiri has, at times been quoted as the expatriate writer. In her work *A Room Of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf has gone to the extent of presenting the dilemmatic mindset of the woman especially what she has undergone in her life but still she goes on to state, “Life for both sexes -- and I look at them, shouldering their way along the pavement—is arduous, difficult, a perpetual style. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion that we are, it calls for confidence in oneself” (Virginia Woolf 27). While describing the assertion of the point about the unequal treatment of woman, she holds men responsible for all the conditions of woman in the society as the human are somewhere responsible for the extinction of the species of birds. Also does she believe that men have very systematically subordinated women in order to reinforce their own confidence as the more capable sex but on the contrary she doesn’t blame men for all this because it is the patriarchal society that has overvalued the want of the son in the family and this is what Bijoli, Gauri’s mother—in-law somehow expect:

Does it mean nothing, that she is going to give you a grandchild?

It mean's everything. It's the only thing he has left us, his mother said.

And what about Gauri?

She has a place here if she chooses. (The Lowland 114)

All she wants --- the child to inherit the family name and virtues and that is what Gauri was blessed with but something she lacked was the want of individuality in her own house, a will to live on her own terms and conditions. She wanted to fly and achieve something for her but she seemed to be caged in the golden bough of her past. She pined for a beautiful future but the bizarre old memories kept her struck within herself. For a bird no matter the cage is golden or of any other metal but is appealing is the freedom. But for Gauri she was caged in the past and the future.

Her strongest image was always of time, both past and future; it was an immediate horizon, at once orienting and containing her. Across the limitless spectrum of years, the brief tenancy of her own life was superimposed. To the right was the recent past: the year she'd met Udayan....She was made to anticipate against her will. (The Lowland 110-11)

She yearned to fly in the vast sky but being far away from the family she caged for the care and love of her Daughter Bela. At one point of time she is doubtful of what to chose, "time to speculate that, without Bela or Subhash, her life might be a different thing" (176). And it was her dependability that was being sought by her, "Because of Bela, the possibility of separating was not discussed. The point of their marriage was Bela, and inspite of the damage Gauri had wrought, in spite of her new schedule, her coming and going, the fact of Bela remained" (177). Both Bela and Gauri wanted to escape from their present lives and for Gauri, the memories of Subhash provided solace to her, "A place she knew would contain her, where she knew she would be conveniently lost. Within her was the guilt and the adrenaline unleashed by what she'd done, the sheer exhaustion of effort. As if, in order to escape Rhode Island, she'd walked every step of the way" (232). All she wanted was a space for her own, a sky for her own dreams, "The obligation to open to others, to forge these alliances, had initially been an unexpected strain. She had wanted California to disappear. But over time these temporary relationships came to fill a certain space" (233). All that matters for Gauri is her own self that has lost somewhere in the past but she is trying to cope it up with her present lives believing that her past is influencing her life but still while moving ahead she is flying backward, "She'd not kept in touch with him. She imagined word had spread, and that people in Rhode Island, at the university had learned of what she'd done" (235). To some extent it has a guilty conscience and tries her level best to hide it. But it is her dilemmatic and traumatic self that is making her do those things in her life. In a very picturesque manner Lahiri has tried to depict the exact situation of Gauri that leaves her alienated from all aspects from her family:

Though she was close to another coast, the massive ocean on this side of the country kept to itself; it never felt as encroaching, as corrosive, as the harsh sea in Rhode Island that had stripped things down, that had always looked so turbulent to her and at the same time starved for color life. The new sense of scale, the vast distances between one place and another, had always been a revelation. The hundred miles of freeway one could drive. (The Lowland 236)

In her life she had come so far that it was hard for her to return back to her family, the roles that the destiny has assigned to her have been left merely from a lover to the colleague of people in an alienated land with whom she is hardly concerned and is similar to them, “It was not was not unlike the way her role had changed from sister in law to wife, from mother to a childless woman. With the exception of loosing Udayan, she had actively chosen to take these steps....Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end” (240). Very aptly Lahiri has symbolically quoted in regard of the lives of Bela and Gauri, “It was the restlessness of birds, rearranging themselves” (246). While transmigrating the birds often have to leave off their nests back and adapt in a new place, making for themselves a new place to dwell and similar is the case with the woman characters in the novel of Jhumpa Lahiri which she beautifully weaves in her plot.

Conclusion:

To sum up, the woman is somehow similar to that of the metaphor “bird”, no matter caged or free has its own limities and this can be best expressed in words of Maya Angelou in the poem *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* :

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
 his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
 his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
 so he opens his throat to sing .

The caged bird sings
 with a fearful trill
 of things unknown
 but longed for still
 and his tune is heard
 on the distant hill
 for the caged bird sings of freedom. (27-38)

Works Cited:

- Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House. 1969.
 Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. 1994.
 ‘Beyond ethnicity: A study of Interpreter of Maladies’ in Jhumpa Lahiri’: The Master Story Teller, A critical response to Interpreter of Maladies, ed. Suman Bala, Khosla publishing House, 2002.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. 1949. Reprint. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972.
Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Low Land*. Random House India, 2013.
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1990.
Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1989.
Young, Robert. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Putnam. 1994.