CHAPTER VI – REFLECTION OF DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY IN LAHIRI’S
THE LOWLAND

6.1 Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri has been Shortlisted for Man Booker Prize 2013 as well as for US National Book Award 2013 in the genre of novel as she has once again proved her literary merit as a powerful diasporic writer with the publication of her latest novel *The Lowland* (2013). Lahiri has won DSC PRIZE for South Asian Literature in recently held Jaipur Litfest 2015 for this novel. The novel investigates the lives of middle-class educated Bengali immigrants either coming to America to seek higher education or brought by the stroke of fate. These immigrants are obsessed by their preference, loneliness and the guilt of vanished connections with family and lovers in their native country. In addition to these well-known themes of Jhumpa Lahiri, we also observe a powerful story about a real political revolt took place in some parts of India in 1960s and which is known as Naxalite movement in the first part of *The Lowland*. The second part of the novel highlights its far-reaching effects on the one family. Some critics are unwilling to consider the novel as immigrants’ literature. They highlight the complex family and human relationship depicted in the novel. It can be observed that the novel is a synthesis of political and historical event with personal and family life of Mitra family. It is on this background; Lahiri focuses the diasporic dilemma of her characters whose lives cutting shuttle between India and the United States over the course of five decades. The story deals with the theme of uprooting and assimilation with attempts made to set up connectivity among the characters. It can be observed the novel focuses on individuals and his or her fortune
rather than focusing collective element in the diaspora. The following comment of Shubha Mukherjee can be applicable to the novel as she remarks;

   In her earlier collection the first generation Indian-American immigrants and their desperate struggle to care take their family in a country very diverse from their own. The stories relate their incessant efforts to keep somehow their children acquainted with Indian tradition and culture- the Indian brand with the foreign label. In her later collection, the characters ascend to new stages of occurrences as they disclose the destinies of succeeding generations who are quite incorporated with foreign customs and are comfortable in countries outside their origin comprehend unlike predicaments and Lahiri shifts to the desires of individuals. (Mukherjee, 2010:180)

This fourth book and second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), by Lahiri tells the story of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, who are born only fifteen months apart and are always together while growing up. Subhash is more careful and realistic, so he leaves the troubled city of Calcutta in order to follow an educational career on the East Coast of the United States. His younger brother is more radical and obsessed by a sense of equality and justice, joins the Naxalite movement in the 1960s. Caught in the midst of the communist movement taking place in West Bengal, Udayan is finally put to death by the police in the lowland behind his parental house. His sibling returns home, hoping to pick up the pieces of the crushed family, and marries Udayan’s widow out of a sense of duty. He takes Gauri to Rhode Island with him, although she is pregnant with his brother’s baby. The remaining text discloses the pathetic story of guilt and memory of the past affecting the family for decades and generations together.

The first part of the novel mostly dealt with historical Naxalite movement by describing its background and functioning. Naxalite movement is one of the most significant socio-political movement took place in post-independence India. This movement had its epicenter in West Bengal in the 1960s as it took its name from a peasant rebellion that took place in May 1967 at Naxalbari – located in the state of West Bengal. It was led by equipped Communist revolutionaries, who two years later were to form a party – the CPI (M-L), or the Communist Party of India (Marxist-
Leninist), ideologically an offshoot of Maoism. Under the leadership of their ideologue, a 49-year-old Communist, Charu Mazumdar, they defined the aim of the new movement as the ‘seizure of power through an agrarian revolution’. The tactic was the abolition of the feudal order in the Indian countryside to liberate the poor from the authority of the tyrannical landlords and substitute the old order with an alternative on that would execute land reforms. The strategy to attain it was through guerilla conflict by the peasants to get rid of the landlords. Calcutta (which is now known as Kolkata) in West Bengal, become the center of Naxalite urban violence from the beginning of the 1970s, targeting police personnel and political rivals.

The novel highlights the political history and its effects on Mitra family on the background of the diasporic dilemma of characters struggling to deal with the problems of familial relationships and interconnectedness between people. The author highlights emotional twists of the characters and establishes the need for an enhanced emotional link between them to resolve conflicts and problems of mutual adjustment. Depicting the life of the Indian migrants to America, Lahiri has been very poignant in mapping the diasporic spirit of her characters jumbled in multiple emotional twists. The title of the novel indicates to a muddy area of land between two ponds in a Calcutta neighborhood where two very close brothers grow up. In the monsoon season, the marsh floods and the ponds join. In summer, the floodwater evaporates. The two ponds represent the two brothers – Subhash and Udayan. But there's still more meaning hidden in this natural landscape. Lahiri's narrator goes on to inform us that certain creatures laid eggs that were able to undergo the dry season. Other creatures survived by burying themselves in mud, simulating death, waiting for the return of the rain.

The novel deals with themes of displacement—across lands, identities, choices and roles. Lahiri has created the very intricate character of Gauri. Like Moushumi, the academic in *The Namesake*, Gauri too has the capacity to alienate herself from the world, not having the clear idea of what she wants or why. This tendency of Gauri is resulted in her identity crisis that is heightened in a diasporic dilemma. Unlike the other characters, Gauri is troubled with a past, a tragedy and a memory of guilt haunts her life in America. Gauri had never attempted to be ideal in her role as a wife and mother. Instead of the traditional role of perfect Indian woman, she tried to discover her own identity and choices, without any proper justification. The male characters in
this novel are shown as torn between spheres. They shuttle between duty and ideology. Their choices and actions as a son, brother, husband, father shape the entire story.

Though *The Lowland* cannot be regarded as a diasporic literature in its full and usual sense of the term, one can certainly trace out diasporic dilemma in which the characters involved in multiple relationships negotiating with their personal decisions and destiny. The present chapter will attempt to examine diasporic predicament and sensibility portrayed in the novel through the framework of four prominent aspects namely Sense of Alienation and Displacement, Nostalgia and Cultural Assimilation, Identity Crisis and Family Relationship and Intergenerational Gap.

### 6.2 Sense of Alienation and Displacement

*The Lowland* is different from other writings of Jhumpa Lahiri as displacement and alienation of characters is not caused only by their diasporic dilemma, but it also comes from the choices and actions of the characters. The characters experience isolation and alienation comes from an American culture in the initial days after their arrival. When busy in his research work in his early days Subhash feels a sense of alienation and loneliness as the text describes; Sailing even slightly east reminded Subhash of how far away he was from his family. He thought of the time it took to cross even a tiny portion of the earth’s surface. Isolated on the ship with the scientists and other students and crew, he felt doubly alone. Unable to fathom his future, severed from his past.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 50)

The missing of family life back at Tollygunge heightens the loneliness of Subhash as the text narrates; ‘For a year and a half, he had not seen his family. Not sat down with them, at the end of the day, to share a meal. In Tollygunge, his family did not have a phone line. He’d sent a telegram to let them know he’d arrived. He was learning to live without hearing their voices, to receive news of them only in writing.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 50)

Subhash’s loneliness intensifies on India’s Independence Day as he observes and compares it with his present situation as the text informs; ‘The following day was

After the tragic death of his brother, Subhash decides to marry Gauri and bring her in America to save her from the hardships of widowhood. In the passage of time, Subhash’s decision to marry Gauri has proved very painful to him as he feels acutely alone in his old age. Though he finds his life partner in Bela’s teacher he feels the pangs of loneliness of old age in an alien land as the text reveals; ‘But he had lost that confidence, that intrepid sense of direction. He felt only aware now that he was alone, that he was over sixty years old, and that he did not know where he stood.’ (Lahiri, 2013:172)

It should also be noted that Subhash, Gauri, and Bela are equally dislocated in Calcutta and Tollygunge, where everybody knows of Udayan and his destiny. In America, nobody knows what happened with Mitra family in Calcutta that could give a necessary space to Subhash and Gauri to start a new life. However, their inner disturbance and secret of Bela’s parenthood haunted their lives, and they become psychologically displaced in the diasporic environment.

Gauri is a woman who is not able to forget her past, and that enforces her into a kind of aloofness and alienation not only from the present, but also from her daughter Bela. She cuts her hair according to American style, throws away her saris and attempts to lose herself in the study of philosophy. Ironically, feeling of isolation comforts her as the text depicts; ‘Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 165)

She torns between the two persons clings to the memory of the Udayan's death and the secret that she hides. The secret makes her unable to adapt in any place as she was a stranger in her in-laws’ home, and she is an equally stranger in Subhash’s life, though she likes the anonymity that American academia offers her.

Jhumpa Lahiri has also dealt with alienation and isolation of Udayan when he gets injured in the preparation of explosives. He always remains under the threat of police department as the narrator informs;
He had trouble hearing, asking Gauri to repeat herself. There had been damage to one of his eardrums from the explosion. He complained of dizziness, a high-pitched sound that would not go away. He said he could not hear the shortwave when she could hear it perfectly well.

He worried that he might not be able to hear the buzzer, if it rang, or the approach of a military jeep. He complained of feeling alone even though they were together. Feeling isolated in the most basic way. (Lahiri, 2013:78)

Udayan's death is the result of his being involved in the killing of a police officer called Nirmal Dey, though Udayan was not the one to use the knife, he was the one, among those who plotted the murder. Gauri becomes a part of the plan when she spies on Dey and keeps a track of his daily timetable. In her blind belief and love, Gauri either never comprehends the consequences of her actions or ignores the doubt that makes her question Udayan’s intentions, in asking her to spy.

The ramifications of the actions long ago still disturb the Mitra family. The event of Udayan’s death changes the course of their lives in Calcutta and Rhode Island. It shows how the socio-political incidents back at home affects immigrants lives for generations together. As Meera Bharwani rightly comments; ‘By presenting the responses of the first and second generation diasporas and people on temporary and more permanent settlements from India and Pakistan, now Bangladesh Jhumpa Lahiri shows how the conditions in their homelands have an effect on them in the alien land.’ (Bharwani, 2010:145)

After their arrival in America, Subhash again showed his maturity. Knowing that it will take Gauri time to accept him as a husband, Subhash keeps patience with her and tries to give her space to not make her feel cornered or pressurized to allow her active participant in the relationship.

Gauri soon gives birth to a daughter Bela, but cannot bring herself to care for the child as much as a mother would. Not out of post delivery despair or because she still mourns for Udaya anymore, but because of her inner obsession for seclusion and philosophy, she cannot love and attach with Subhash and Bela. Soon even the sexual aspect of their relationship did not carry forward. When a couple of years into the
marriage, it dawns on Subhash that Gauri won't have any child with him or even love Bela the way a mother should.

Gauri adopts the American concept of liberty spotlighting on individual independence and personal advancement. At the center of the novel is Gauri’s unresponsiveness as a mother. By and by, she is so self-absorbed that she cares neither for her husband nor her daughter Bela. She became preoccupied with philosophy, a discipline that is deeply associated with problems of life, love, destiny, God and so on. The critical obsession with philosophy makes her alienate and unconcerned towards actual human life, love, and family bonding. Gauri more and more isolates herself, pouring her energy into a doctorate in philosophy. She specializes in the neo-Marxist social theory of the Frankfurt School.

Subhash finally realizes to himself, the marriage is a mistake and was damned from the beginning as predicted by his mother. Through this marriage, he wants to attach to his brother Udayan but the marriage displaced him psychologically. The farce of the marriage finally ends 12 years later, when Subhash has to return to India owing to the death of his father. Six weeks later when Bela and Subhash return to Rhode Island, they find the house empty and a note written by Gauri, explaining that she has left for good and is shifting to California, where she has been received a job in one of the universities.

The separated couple never meets again. Bela is obviously left shell-shocked by these developments and in the wake of the separation of her parents ends up in depression. She became a victim of alienation and withdrew herself from family and decides to follow a nomadic life and never marry. She is psychologically displaced due to eccentric and disgusting behavior of her mother. It is years later, that a now 34-year-old Bela finally discovers the truth of her parentage and though enraged at the disclosure, forgives Subhash - since he has been the only parent she has ever really had and been loved by.

Subhash was collapsed after reading the paper of Gauri written in Bengali language informing him her decision to pursue her obsession by handing him over all responsibilities of Bela. Though Subhash experienced freedom from a loveless marriage, his fathering Bela got a shock when he observed her looking her own space for establishing her identity, as the text narrates; ‘She was establishing her existence
apart from him. This was the real shock. He thought he would be the one to protect her, to reassure her. But he felt cast aside, indicated along with Gauri. He was afraid to exert his authority, his confidence as a father shaken now that he was alone.’ (Lahiri, 2013:214)

He began to be enfolded in fear and nervousness as he felt that his fatherhood was breaking down under the feeling of loneliness in an alien land.

### 6.3 Nostalgia and Cultural Assimilation

*The Lowland* deals with the cultural assimilation of immigrants on the backdrop of the political event. Subhash Mitra, one of the main characters in the novel belongs to middle-class Bengali family of Tollygunge, Calcutta comes the United States to pursue his Ph.D. Once Subhash starts living in the United States, his love for younger brother, parents and Calcutta began to decline gradually. In the beginning, he shows his unwillingness to assimilate into the American cultural culture. He also shares his nostalgic feelings about Calcutta in general and the lowland and Tollygunge in particular. He shares these nostalgic emotions in his letter to Udayan as he writes; ‘As strange as it sounds, when the sky is overcast, when the clouds are low, something about the coastal landscape here, the water and the grass, the smell of bacteria when I visit the mudflats, takes me home. I think of the lowland, of paddy fields.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 39)

Subhash recalled his and Udayan’s obsession with Tolly Club of Calcutta as the text narrates; ‘Here, each day, he remembered how he’d felt those evenings he and Udayan had snuck into the Tolly Club.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 34)

Subhash also observes the difference between the lifestyle of Calcutta and Rhode Island and remembers fast life in Calcutta as the text describes;

‘The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them; he was the sole link. Here life ceased to obstruct or assault him. Here was a place where humanity was not always pushing, rushing, and running as if with a fire at its back.’ (Lahiri, 2013:33)
Despite the differences, Subhash also observes the positive side of immigration; nobody knows him in the United States, so he can start a new life and can assert his individuality.

On the occasion of the arrival Durga Pooja, Subhash becomes nostalgic that is described in the following words in the text;

‘He thought of Durga Pujo coming again to Calcutta. As he was first getting to know America, the absence of the holiday hadn’t mattered to him, but now he wanted to go home. The past two years, around this time, he’d received a battered parcel from his parents, containing gifts for him. Kurta too thin to wear most of the time in Rhode Island bars of sandalwood soap, some Darjeeling tea.’ (Lahiri, 2013:63)

After her arrival in America with Subhash, Gauri finds America as an appropriate place for escaping her past and aching memories of Calcutta, she occasionally expresses her nostalgia for Calcutta and Udayan as the text says; ‘She put her face to the table’s surface, inhaling deeply, her cheek against the slats. It was the smell of the bedroom furniture she’d left behind in Tollygunge, the wardrobe and dressing table, the bed with slim posts on which she and Udayan had created Bela.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 169)

Another point is that nostalgia in Gauri is portrayed through a pain for her departed husband as the novel shifts back and forth in time as the text narrates; ‘Anger was always amounted to her love for Udayan. Anger at him for dying, when he might have lived, for bringing her happiness, and then taking it away, for trusting her, only to betray her, for believing in sacrifice, only to be so selfish in the end.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 164)

This feeling of anger act as signs for the development of feelings of nostalgia in Gauri in America, never permitting her to entirely amalgamate herself not only in a marital relationship but also in the new cultural environment. As a result of her feelings of nostalgia, Gauri never feels at peace and deserts Subhash and her daughter Bela in false anticipation of gaining her spiritual peace. Gauri is found to be a careless mother and a psychologically secluded wife due to feelings of nostalgia.

Apart from such few instances of nostalgic feelings, the novel shows how Subhash, Gauri, and Bela assimilated into an alien culture of America.
In his initial days at the university campus, Subhash met Narasimhan, a professor of Economics from Madras. Narasimhan has married Kate, an American woman. He gets astonished that his fellow countryman Narasimhan got married to an American woman. With his ethnic traditional views, he wonders what woman his parents would prefer for him. He psychologically opposes his brother Udayan’s act of marrying before his elder brother and choosing a girl of his choice, not of their parents.

When he meets Holly, a Massachusetts-born French Canadian nurse, his Indian cultural ethos starts getting tattered. In the beginning, he shows his reluctance to join with Holly. There is ten years gap between their ages, and he can’t imagine a married life with her. But over times, he comes close to her and makes sexual liaison with her. When Holly asks him if he returns to Calcutta after acquiring his degree, he replies in affirmative. But her proximity pushes him to the mainstream American culture. With her company, he feels that it would be very hard for him to go back to Calcutta. His assimilation into American culture seems to be in progress when he dreams to be like Narasimhan, to have children like him from an American wife. He thinks Holly would carry on her extra marital relation with him. He even thinks of completing his relationship by getting married to her. But within short periods, Holly stops this relationship.

During one of his visit to Calcutta, a sudden encounter with foreigners brings feelings of attachment in the mind of Subhash, clearly signifying his assimilation in an alien land as the text describes;

‘He got on a bus, riding with no destination in mind, getting out close to Esplanade. He saw foreigners on the streets, Europeans wearing kurtas, beads. Exploring Calcutta, passing through. Though he looked like any other Bengali, he felt an allegiance with the foreigners now. He shared with them knowledge of elsewhere. Another life to go back to. The ability to leave.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 82)

When Udayan was killed, his parents forced Gauri Mitra, Udayan’s wife to lead her ascetic like the life of a Bengali widow. At this moment, we observe the open-mindedness of Subhash. To give Gauri new life, he gets married to her and brings her to the US. There he gives her complete freedom and allows her to take pleasure in independent life in the US. In a conventional Indian family, a wife is expected to have a meal after her husband finishes it. But Gauri has not to wait to have her dinner
before Subhash. She wanders about university campus independently. Once she pursues a professor and masturbates after it in a stall. All these things are clear signs of assimilation of Gauri in American life which helps her to escape from guilt and secret that she kept away from Bela. The individual-centered American society is quite appropriate for Gauri to accomplish his academic passion.

Subhash develops few sexual relationships with other women in the U.S. Once Gauri discovers a woman’s hair elastic and thus finds another’s woman presence in his life. This thing also indicates how after initial reluctance Subhash adopts the American lifestyle.

It is quite well known that immigrants often attempt to recreate mini India in a foreign land by establishing community friend circle. Subhash, to some extent, attempts to follow the same pattern in the beginning. But afterward he took little interest in this type of community feeling. On the other side, he could able to develop a relationship with a woman from the different culture in the course of time. At his old age, he falls in love with Elise Silva, his step daughter Bela Mitra’s History teacher. It secretly disturbs Bela, but her father gets some ‘homely’ feeling after settling with Elise Silva in his last stage of life in the United States. He visits his Calcutta home yearly, but he feels as the text narrates;

‘…he had walked away from Calcutta just as Gauri had walked away from Bela.’ (Lahiri, 2013:220)

It can be observed that like Moushumi Mazoomdar in Lahiri’s The Namesake (2003) and Kaushik in Unaccustomed Earth (2006), Gauri completely rejects her ‘home’ culture and assimilates into American culture. American culture gives her liberty that reduces the burden of her past. She takes such type of free life in California, leaving her just eleven-year-old daughter Bela and her second husband Subhash at Rhode Island. Subhash behaved like a saint to save her from Calcutta’s widow life and she is expected to recognize her total independent life in the U.S. But contrarily, like an ungrateful human being, she forgets everything to fulfill her wish as the text says; ‘She had California to swallow her; she had wanted to disappear there.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 233)

She takes California as her only ‘home’.
It can be argued that American culture provides Gauri her desired detachment as a refuge. It helps her to lessen the feelings of isolation and guilt. It is general opinions that in the U.S., people live independently even after marriage. Gauri follows the same pattern. Even she doesn’t recognize Bela as her daughter. When anybody asks her if she has any children or not, she replies in negative. She also learns to speak in German. Though she can’t change her Indian accent, she adapts Western dress codes, western academic interest, etc. She also shows her unusual sex orientation. She forms a lesbian relationship with Lorna, a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Bela was born in Rhode Island. She has totally been bred up on foreign language, foreign learning, and foreign cultural ethos. She has never asked or forced to pursue her native cultural ethos, as we found Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake* who always tries to persuade her children Gogol Ganguli and Sonali Ganguli to follow their ‘home’ culture. Since her seventh grade, she has been learning Spanish language. With her coming of teenage, she makes her own world. Even Subhash, who plays the role of for her rearing hesitates to interfere in her private life.

Bela adopts her American dressing code: a tattoo that was like an open cuff above her ankle, a bleached section of her hair, a silver hoop in her nose. When she is at 21, she gets a job on a farm as an agricultural trainee in the field. She visits her father only on certain occasions like during the Christmas or at emergency. When she leaves her father, she never tells him when she would return again or where she would go. Her chosen path is a “rootless path” (Lahiri, 2013: 225). But Subhash learns to accept such type of unconventional, independent life of Bela; he never tries to interfere with her Americanized life. Within his mind, he always worries for her, for her possible future marriage. Her assimilation with American cultural ethos results in a fatherless daughter in her rootless, homeless, nomadic life.

When Subhash informs her details of her actual fatherhood, she refers her father by his name Udayan, like other American children who address their parents with names only. She doesn’t recognize her mother’s existence. She becomes habitual to say to her friends that her mother had already died. Over times, she accepts Drew, a vegetable seller as her husband. Drew also has not any fixed root in the U.S. She has always chosen rootless fate in the United States.
In the beginning, Subhash shows some cultural negotiation/encounter “in-between” spaces and finally reconciles with a global scene of the United States. Gauri never looks back to her ‘home’ culture and totally assimilates with California’s multi-ethnic culture. The second generation diaspora in *The Lowland*, Bela chooses free and nomadic life in the United States.

In spite of their preference towards American culture, these characters uphold some aspects of Indian culture and habits. Even if Gauri cuts her long hair and rejects her saris, she still drinks tea at night, instead of wine, and travels with an Indian shawl for warmth. Through the long years alone, Subhash has learned to cook for himself, but even after decades life in the States, he makes Indian food, *dhaals*, and rice. American-born Bela knows some Bengali. She wears her hair long and braided.

6.4 Identity Crisis and Family Relationship

*The Lowland* narrates the story of Subhash and Udayan Mitra. In spite of their sharply dissimilar personalities, the two grow up to be very close. Udayan is brave and stubborn, and Subhash is far more alert and more interested in shouldering family responsibilities. Udayan involves in the Naxalite movement, the Maoist political organization that swept India during the 1960s, as a young man, determined to improve the predicament of India’s poor. Subhash moves to Rhode Island to obtain a doctorate and to make a career in marine chemistry. However when Udayan met death by police, Subhash comes back to Calcutta and convinces his brother’s widow, Guari, pregnant with Udayan’s child, to marry him and move to the United States. What follows is a pathetic and heartbreaking story of how a single tragic event can play out over decades and generations. The decision and choice made and taken by characters disturbs their lives and identities. The secret of Bela’s fatherhood makes Subhash and Gauri alien to each other. It also haunts their identities throughout their lives in a diasporic milieu.

After the first part of the political movement, the second part of *The Lowland* deals with intensified family drama resulted in a sort of split personality and identity crisis of some main characters. Udayan’s love marriage with Gauri and his sudden death becomes an opening point from where identities of Subhash, Gauri and Bela have started to negotiate with each other. Gauri and Subhash feel divided from Bela because of the secret of her fatherhood, which they fear revealing to her. The burden
of the past, the guilt of secret of parenthood has created some sort of emptiness and remoteness in their relationship.

The massive novel dealing with the lives of two brothers reflects how the fruits of individual choices and actions echo throughout the course of their lives. Subhash Mitra, the elder brother, believes in social traditions, family duties and oppose against the rebellious tendency. He is sincere and sober in his childhood as the text says;

‘Since childhood, Subhash had been cautious. His mother never had to run after him. He kept her company, watching as she cooked at the coal stove, or embroidered saries and blouse pieces commissioned by a ladies’ tailor the neighborhood. He helped his father plant the dahlias that he grows in pots in the courtyard.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 03)

Subhash’s behavior is totally opposite to that of his younger brother Udayan’s, who is always ready to take risks and challenge the conventional, and compared to whom Subhash regards himself inferior. Udayan, during his college life, gets involved in a radical left movement started in a village called Naxalbari, gets actively participated in the Naxalites movement. One day Udayan is held and killed by the police. Subhash, the responsible elder who’d had been studying chemical oceanography in an alien land of America, returns to comfort his parents, and also Udayan’s widowed pregnant wife, Gauri. After taking into account the ills Gauri will have to undergo as a widow, if she stays in Calcutta, he marries her and brings her to Rhode Island, where he raises Udayan’s child Bela as his own. The remaining part of the novel highlights the relationships between Gauri and Subhash, Subhash and his parents back in Calcutta, Subhash with Bela. Jhumpa Lahiri convincingly highlights complications and complexities of the family relationship in the multi-generational story that covers almost five decades.

Subhash decides to marry his brother’s pregnant widow only to save her from very painful life in India as it is the only way through which he can bring Gauri to America. Through this marriage, Subhash wants to connect with his brother. He could not able to form this connection as Gauri never considers him as her husband. On the other hand, Subhash’s presence always reminds her Udayan. In fact she marries to Subhash to stay connected with Udayan but very soon she realizes uselessness in her new identity as Subhash’s wife as the text says; ‘She had married Subhash as a means of staying connected to Udayan. But even as she was going through with it she knew
that it was useless, just as it was useless to save a single earring when the other half of the pair was lost.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 91)

Gauri cannot find herself fit in the role of Subhash’s wife. Similarly, she does not able to adjust into her role and identity as Bela’s mother. The novel convincing describes Gauri’s identity crisis as follows; ‘Though she cared for Bela capably, though she kept her clean and combed and fed, she seemed distracted. Rarely did Subhash see her smiling when she looked into Bela’s face. Rarely did he see Gauri kissing Bela spontaneously. Instead, from the beginning, it was as if she’d reversed their roles as if Bela were a relative’s child and not her own.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 113)

After an early stage, Gauri began to adjust in American life. She gets much-required liberty in America to develop her philosophical understanding. Rejecting the traditional identity of Indian wife and mother, Gauri came out with her new identity in a diasporic dilemma. The importance given to individual freedom by American culture proves helpful to Gauri to follow her academic passion even at the cost of family responsibilities and duties. Her diasporic predicament helps her to establish new identity. She escapes the pressures of household duties and engages herself in the study of philosophy. She immerses herself in the theories of Hegel and Einstein, which seem to repeat her obsessed feeling of impermanence. America liberates Gauri into academic confidence and intellectual fame, but on the other hand she becomes incapable of maternal feeling towards her daughter. She becomes highly unpredictable and unusual character. She discards her family and starts to live free and liberated life that is totally against her native culture. Gauri rediscovers her identity in a new diasporic environment of America that gives plenty scope for her academic development. However, this rediscovered identity of Gauri comes at a terrible cost to her family. Subhash calls her cold-hearted. Through, Gauri Lahiri has shown insight into the inner conflict of a woman who chooses her intellectual life over the demands of motherhood.

While achieving academic success, Gauri also enjoys free and frank sex life in America as she maintains a lesbian relationship with Lorna. After traveling so much on her own chosen academic path in America and playing various roles in life, Gauri finds herself alone and perplexed about her true self and identity. The text aptly describes her condition as follows;
It was not unlike the way her role had changed at so many other points in the past. From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman. With the exception of losing Udayan, she had actively chosen to take these steps. She had married Subhash; she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself; she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 168)

In this total isolation Gauri realizes detachment in her relationship with Subhash and Bela which caused identity crisis in her life as the text says: ‘She understood now what it meant to walk away from her child. It had been her own act of killing. A connection she had severed, resulting in death that applied only to the two of them. It was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 169)

It can be observed that Gauri attains surprising professional success by becoming a professor of Philosophy at a college in California. Immigration has empowered her career, yet Gauri discards her daughter and prefers an individualistic life path that does not make her happy. She travels thousands of miles, away from both Calcutta and Rhode Island, but in reality continues to be a prisoner of the past. Ashima compares immigration with lifelong pregnancy in The Namesake. The same correlation can be applied to Gauri’s character. In her case, the metaphor refers to her incapacity to escape the past and ‘deliver’ a completely new self in the United States. She gives birth to a child, but never really becomes a mother. She lives in a time before Bela was conceived before her genetic father was killed. She stays away from India for forty years, yet she behaves as if she were eternally pregnant with feelings of guilt and unanswered traumas. Gauri prospers professionally in the United States and travels the world to attend various conferences. Immigration thus empowers the woman in her career and enables her to become a transnational citizen. But on a personal level she is not empowered; on the contrary, she is unable to cope with powerful emotions, so she literally runs away a second time. When her daughter is twelve, Gauri departs to California and dedicates herself to teaching and research. This radical, apparently unexplainable act performed by an Indian mother, can be interpreted as a self-imposed punishment for being Udayan’s co-conspirator in his terrorist acts, then betraying him and marrying his brother, and for dishonest to Bela about her father’s identity. Running away from her daughter, Gauri actually attempts
to avoid the feelings of guilt and burden of the secret of Bela’s fatherhood that resulted in her identity crisis.

Subhash also experiences disconnection in his family relations that puts him in the identity crisis. He has taken a courageous and liberal decision to marry Gauri in the impulsive state of mind. He gave plentiful freedom to Gauri to settle down in a new role in America. But very soon he understands unpredictable and unconventional nature of Gauri. In spite of sexual relationship, he is unable to connect with Gauri as a wife. As a result, he finds himself in an identity crisis. The secret of Bela’s fatherhood and the impulsive decision of marriage haunt his life. He is unsure about his acceptance as a Father by Bela. This secret and doubt haunted his life and resulted in his identity crisis as the novel describes Subhash predicament as follows; ‘He’d experienced such closeness with only one other person. With Udayan. Each night, extracting himself from her, for a moment his heart stopped, wondering what she would say, the day she learned the truth about him.’ (Lahiri, 2013:112)

Subhash is not able to establish any meaningful relationship with Gauri and Bela, he finds himself disconnected with family in the U.S.A and also Calcutta. This disconnection in the family relationship is heightened in a diasporic predicament. Subhash dedicates his time and energy in raising Bela like a caring father. There comes a time when Bela lives like a nomad changing jobs now and then. She travels in different parts of the country for work. Subhash often gives her unconditional love and support. Bela often returns home to seek shelter and care. There is a hope in Subhash’s heart that one day Bela will give him a respectful place in her heart. Subhash feared that if Bela came to know the fact that he was not her father, it would break their relationship forever. However, his fear proves wrong. The knowledge that her father was Subhash’s dead brother brings them together. She comprehends Subhash’s belief in the genuine bond of love and duty that eventually unite them in love. This also removes Gauri out of their life forever. At the center of the novel is Gauri’s insensitivity as a mother. She is so self-interested that she does not care her own family. She became totally absorbed with philosophy as a discipline. The strong inclination towards philosophy makes her uncaring towards actual human life, love, and family bonding. Subhash, on the other hand, plays the role of a mother in addition to the role of a father. He is an embodiment of sacrifice, love, and care.
6.5 Intergenerational Gap

Generational gap is one of the important aspects reflected in Lahiri’s work as she experiences it as she points out;

Some of the cultures goes by the wayside, or the link is never made. I was aware of that myself when I had my kids. I really felt a sense that I was the end of a line, and that it was a very short line. I knew my parents had parents and so on, but to me, the universe was my parents, and they were the far end and I was the near end. These were certain intensities to the experience of that first generation and their offspring that don’t carry over. I’m very aware of my parents’ experience, how I grew up, and now how my children are growing up. There is such a stark difference in those two generations. (Lahiri, 2008)

The generational gap is surfaced on the few occasions in the novel. But it indicates shocking and pathetic incidents that have distorted the fortune of the family both at home and diaspora. The reader witness how the father did not like Udayan’s participation in Naxalite movement. He disapproves the movement saying his generation has built a nation, and there is no need for further upheavals as the text says; ‘We’re independent. The country is ours’. (Lahiri, 2013: 23)

Out of two brothers, Udayan did not pay any attention to his father’s attitude and continued his activities that finally resulted in a tragic event of his execution.

The marriage remains one of the main causes of intergenerational differences. Subhash’s parents don’t agree with Udayan’s love marriage. As in their letter to Subhash this generation gap clearly surfaces as the text writes: ‘Letters from his parents referred only obliquely to Gauri, and only as an example of what not to do. We hope, when the time comes, you will trust us to settle your future, to choose your wife and to be present at your wedding. We hope you will not disregard our wishes, as your brother did.’ (Lahiri, 2013:50-51)

The difference between two generations can also be witnessed in their attitude and treatment of widows. Subhash does not agree with constraints imposed on Gauri by tradition as the novel observes; ‘The days of Puja arrived and began to pass:
Shashthi, Saptami, Ashtami, Navami. Days of worship and celebration across the city. Of mourning and seclusion inside the house. The vermillion was washed clean from her hair, the iron bangle removed from her wrist. The absence of these ornaments marked her as a widow. She was twenty-three years old.’ (Lahiri, 2013:78)

To save Gauri from the pathetic life of widowhood in India, Subhash decides to marry Gauri. The generation gap can be witnessed in the following words of the novel;

‘She’s Udayan’s wife, she'll never love you, his mother had told him, attempting to dissuade him.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 115)

She also warned him that Gauri was

‘too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 83)

We can also observe love and affection between grandparents and grandchildren during the visit of Bela to Calcutta as is described in the text in the following words,

‘Watching Bela try to pick up rice and lentils with her fingers, her grandmother told Deepa to fetch a spoon. When Deepa poured Bela some water from the urn that stood on a little stool, in the corner of the room, her grandmother reproached her.

Not that water. Give her the boiled water. She’s not made to survive here.’ (Lahiri, 2013:137)

Lahiri also highlights the essence of second-generation South Asians in the West, particularly their aloofness from the parents’ native language. That disconnection often linked in adulthood with a lingering nostalgia for conversations that they had once heard at home in that language.

This explains why Bela, Subhash’s daughter, is drawn to the group of Bangladeshi construction workers at the end of her street in Brooklyn. She slows down when she walks past them so that she can hear them talk. Her response is aptly described by the novel in the following words;

‘She can’t understand what these men are saying. Just some words here and there. The accent is a little different. Still, she always slows down when she passes them. She’s
not nostalgic for her childhood, but this aspect of it, at once familiar and foreign, gives her pause.’ (Lahiri, 2013: 256)

6.6 Summary

The present chapter has analyzed *The Lowland* in the framework of four aspects of diasporic sensibility. The chapter discussed how the novel is a collage of the experiences of uprooting and resettlement, of the intermingling of personal and social histories, and of many other human dimensions involved in transplanting a culture to a new land. Lahiri explores familial relationships in *The Lowland*, makes an in-depth study of isolation and guilt experienced by the protagonists. In *The Lowland*, Lahiri combined both history and life experiences, to bring out a superb fiction steeped in isolation and guilt to her protagonists, reaching out for reconciliation through familial connectedness. Lahiri has been successful in her psychological analysis of her characters, probing deep into the shock experienced by each character, making them live in isolation and guilt. That while investigating the dynamics of culture and diaspora in the context of characters from the Bengali community, she has successfully given them a universal appeal – making them stand for the dilemma of every man in every age, irrespective of culture and ethnicity. With her simple, absorbing and straightforward narration, the fictionist explores very powerfully familial ties and emotional relationships. Her intricate dialogues with detailed observation render the story powerful and appealing. The novelist can let the readers enter into the hearts of the characters and has successfully touched the minds of her readers with the losses and uncertainties faced by the characters. The Story revolves around minute observation of life with great suspense page after page. Once again, Jhumpa Lahiri has proven her highest literary skill and quality as an absorbing story teller.

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