



ON THE LOWLAND

Venessa Khairifa Sefra

Faculty of Humanities, Andalas University, Padang, Indonesia

Email venessakhairifas@gmail.com

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, 340 pages

The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri was published by Alfred A. Knopf and Random House in 2013. Lahiri is a British-born American author and is the daughter of an Indian parent who immigrated to the United States. This novel is fiction that represents India's social and cultural condition, which affects Indian immigrants who migrate to the USA, find their new identity, and struggle for their individual and communal development.

The plot revolves around two siblings, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, who are separated owing to circumstances in the 1960s. Then, they parted ways. Subhash is moving to the United States for higher studies in oceanography. He settles there while his younger brother, Udayan, lives in Calcutta. The novel takes place in two different locations. The first one is in Calcutta, India, and the second one is in the United States, two sites with different environments. These two other cities play a significant role in changing the characters' identities. Four main characters play a considerable role in developing the novel's story: Udayan, Subhash, Gauri, and Bella. Each has their own story and problems related to one another, making the story more interesting. However, changing the identity of the female character named Gauri, which was influenced by a new different environment, makes the story more exciting and fuller of curiosity on how she survives being an Immigrant with a dark past that still exists haunts her.

There are many themes in *The Lowland*. Every point of view has its own story. One of the most important themes of this novel refers to the development of cultural identity, especially for the female character, Gauri. This novel tells how Gauri struggles with her own identity back in Calcutta, especially after becoming a widow within the strict Indian culture and society and right after she moves to the United States. Even more, the author of this novel portrays Gauri's complicated ways of seeking a new identity in a different environment, culture, and tradition. The book also narrates the characters, Subhash, Gauri, and Bella, who left their homeland and how the absence of Udayan affected their lives. During the migration, each character has conflicts that relate to one another and develop their characters.

The story begins when Udayan and Subhash go to college separately and begin to make friends. Unlike Subhash, who chose to pursue his studies in the United States, Udayan stays in India. The story's conflict begins when Udayan joins a radical group due to the political issue in India in 1967. The story gets complicated when Udayan marries Gauri and indirectly gets her involved with his silent radical movement until the police find out about Udayan and his radical movement, which ends up with the death of Udayan. The conflict towards Gauri begins after she becomes a widow, where the society and culture in India are highly despised. Gauri often receives different and lousy treatment due to her status. Subhash notices the situation and offers Gauri the chance to move to America. Thus, Gauri takes this chance to move to America to avoid the case back in Calcutta and develop her character and identity.

This story makes the readers aware of the political conditions in India at that time. The story reflects how one false movement could affect our surroundings, especially our family, for an extended period. Moreover, it also makes the reader aware of how India's social and cultural practices view a widow. Importantly, it makes us aware that migrating influences the chances of someone's identity or character based on the environment, especially for Immigrants like Gauri. It could affect many aspects, such as character development. The trauma of experiencing such a bad thing could be one of the reasons why someone decided to change their identity. Schreiber explains the connections between bodily trauma and cultural identity: "Cultural and personal memory are not intellectual or detached ideas, laws, and customs but rather physically encoded entities" (p.20).

According to Singh (2015), the novel mentions that "Identity is a topical issue in the contemporary study of culture with many ramifications for the study of ethnicity, class, gender, race, sexuality, and subcultures" (p.38). It shows that culture is an essential aspect and factor for identity, especially for immigrants. Identity can be a problem in someone's life when they experience doubt or uncertainty. In Etienne Balibar's words, "Identity is never a peaceful acquisition: it is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of annihilation that can be figured by another identity or by the erasing of identities" (p.186). Moreover, being an immigrant is not a thing that someone can easily bear or face. Moving to a new place that has many differences could create conflict within oneself. As stated by Balibar, it could be figured out by changing to a new identity. Wald (2014) also states in her book that "identity began to be thought of as a developmental, changeable product rather than an essence" (p.70). The changes in identity are reflected in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* in the female character named Gauri.

As described in the novel, Gauri lives with only her brother back in Calcutta. Lahiri does not explain Gauri's condition or her family. Still, it seems like Gauri does not come from a high-class society. However, her interest in education is very recognizable. She is described as having tutored two students back in Calcutta. However, after she married Udayan, she began helping her husband operate the radical communist movement, even helping her husband kill someone. It shows her character, who was so obedient to her husband that she was willing to help her husband murder someone. After her husband died, she became a widow. Widows in India are mistreated and are forced to obey various cultural customs in the name of tradition. Widows are socially regarded as low and bad.

Then, she migrates to America, which has a free society. Where freedom is on each person's hand, and where her status as a widow does not become a problem for her and others and is not regulated in tradition. According to Ferdi (2013), in a journal entitled "Identity Transformation of Josephine Alibrandi and John Barton in The Novel *Looking for Alibrandi*," the process of changing identity happens to middle and lower-class people. Usually, it happens to someone who is unsatisfied with their current identity and wants to look for a new one (pp.144-5). It somehow reflects how Gauri wanted a change in her life and the freedom she desired. The desire to change the character's identity was influenced by her experience, which was arranged by society and culture just because she is a woman and a widow. She is not satisfied with her treatment and seeks better treatment by migrating to America and finding a new identity as a free woman. According to Kazmierska (2006), identity alterations are an immanent aspect of each biography, even if an individual seeks to minimize this process and adopts tactics for attaining a sense of personal continuity.

Nevertheless, the changes are usually processual (p.76). However, there must be a process until the characters find their new identity to change the identity. In the case of the novel, Gauri is trying to find her new identity by attending higher education. She often sneaks into a philosophy class, which she likes. Lahiri narrates, "She took a seat at the very back, high enough so that she was looking down at the top of the professor's head" (p.108).

As explained above, the story occurs in two countries with different social and cultural environments. In this novel, Lahiri contrasts these two settings regarding the social and cultural background. Lahiri portrays Calcutta (India) as a population density with strict rules and traditions. The political problems and social stratification are the problems highlighted by the author in the story. Moreover, this novel shows the readers how the status of a person influences the treatment of society.

On the other hand, Lahiri portrays a country that contradicts Calcutta/India in the story through the characters of Subhash, Gauri, and Bella. Lahiri shows the contradiction of the environment in the United States, where the character feels freedom regardless of gender and status in society. Compared to the situation back in Calcutta, Lahiri chooses the freedom of social and political in the United States in presenting the development of the characters' cultural identity.

In conclusion, *The Lowland* is a good book that portrays a complex problem within identity, culture, homeland, and family. This book entertains the reader with its exciting stories and exposes the readers to its issues regarding cultural identity struggles. Moreover, this book makes the reader aware of India's social and cultural conditions and how Indians view and treat women. The readers can also learn from each character's stories and problems, especially Gauri's identity development. Even though this novel is fictional, the story's plots relate to real-life conditions. I like this book because it represents Indian and Western cultures, which differ in every aspect. As a reader, it makes me aware of how a particular environment's social and cultural condition can change one's character and point of view regarding one's life and the people around them and how they see the world. However, the characterization of the female character, Gauri, is a bit confusing and complex. Her trauma of the shadow of her late husband makes her decide to leave everything behind, including her daughter, to have a fresh start in her life.

REFERENCES

- Balibar, Etienne. (1996). "The Nation Form: History and Ideology" in *Becoming National*, ed. G. Eley, and R. G. Suny. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ferdi. (2013). *Identity Transformation of Josephine Alibrandi and John Barton in The Novel Looking for Alibrandi by Melina Marchetta*. MA Thesis. Universitas Indonesia, lib.ui.ac.id.
- Harack, Katrina. (2012). A Knowing So Deep It's Like a Secret: Recent Approaches to Race, Identity, and Transformation in Toni Morrison's Fiction. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 42(2), 246-257.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. (2013). *The Lowland*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Kazmierska, Kaja. (2006). "Migration Experiences and Changes of Identity: The analysis of a Narrative." *Historical Social Research*, 31(31), 72-89.
- Schreiber, Evelyn Jaffe. (2010). *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.
- Singh, Ashutosh. (2015). "Cultural Transformation, Identity and Resistance in Jhumpa Lahiri's '*The Lowland*.'" *Anglisticum Journal (IJLLIS)*, 4(3).
- Wald, Christina. (2014). "Disguise and Identity Transformation in Elizabethan Pastoral Romances." *The Reformation of Romance (The Eucharist, Disguise, and Foreign Fashion in Early Modern Prose Fiction)*, Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.