

**Defying all Odds: Female Agency and American Worldview in *The Low Land* (2013) by Jhumpa Lahiri and *An American Brat* (1993) by Bapsi Sidhwa**

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**Abstract**

In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the way female agency works when it is granted an opportunity by a new culture and a new land. In *The Lowland* (2013) by Jhumpa Lahiri and *An American Brat* (1993) by Bapsi Sidhwa, the American land is delineated as an idealized imaginary land which provides a smooth ground for the female agency to work freely without any restrictions. These two novels actually echo Lyotard's theory of postmodern aesthetics and Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity. *The Lowland* and *An American Brat* explore how a great desire to get rid of a tragic past and a longing for building and sustaining an individual identity in a new place within the context of a new culture provides new parameters for female agency to work. Whether it is due to the oppressive social environment or because of the set ideologies of females in a patriarchal society, the emergence of female agency always opens up new ways for women to make their own rational choices and decisions in order to construct an individual identity and independent social world where they can better exhibit their skills and talent. Both novels explore that it is the American world view which enables the females to become an independent human being from an oppressed and subjugated person.

Keywords: postmodern aesthetics, female agency, displacement, cultural hybridity, quest of identity, double-colonization, patriarchal oppression.

This study looks at how American world and female agency work in conjunction in the novels *The Lowland* (2013) and *An American Brat* (1993). In Lahiri's and Sidhwa's novels female desires and ambitions are explored. The narrative dwells on how these subjugated and oppressed women succeed in constructing their own social world in order to give vent to their suppressed desires when a new land or culture provides them with an opportunity to do so. It can however in some part also be attributed to the rich solidity of their writing and their enthusiasm to discover new ways in terms of thematic concern, that have rarely been explored before. This research explores how the female agency works in order to build an individual identity, and it constructs individual realities based on personal experiences of the old world and the changing perceptions of the new world.

Women's agency refers to the capacity of women to make on their own rational choices or decisions and in this sense their agency involves social competence in different arenas of action. Their discursive capabilities and practical consciousness and dialectic of control are often reflected in modes of coping with new and many times oppressive social environment. (Jain 2312)

The credit goes to the postmodern epoch that has granted the individuals with an opportunity to explore their reality in different ways depending upon their own desires and perceptions. As, Sardar has discussed in his book *The A to Z of Postmodern Life* (2003) that the dream of "personal ideal utopias", without a consideration to distinguish restrictions, limitations, prohibited norms and "social acceptability" is the worldwide

acknowledged claim of individualism (240). It is the innate desire of all the individuals to do away their past in order to break with the barriers of old traditions and values. When these individuals enter in a new culture, a desire to exterminate their old identities and adopt new ones becomes more intense and sturdy. In 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodern era it is only American world view which is reflective of that personal ideal utopia having no precincts and margins of any community or culture. American worldview refers to a particular perspective in diasporic circles regarding the potential of America as a safe haven for disgruntled and disillusioned migrants. In contemporary times America is perceived as an imagined land free of any flaws and restrictions which provides equal opportunity to all the individuals having no ethnic, religious or gender privileges. In what appears to be an extension of the same argument, Ziauddin Sardar, in his article “Americana,” states that in 20<sup>th</sup> century America is considered a nation that is created as a refuge for all the rest of the world; and moreover, it is a nation that is made up of refugees and immigrants (16). American culture or society is as open and accommodative for the female wing as for men. It provides a welcoming environment for the female agency to work freely without any obligations or pressures, and in that vast and liberated world the female can better reveal their flair and hidden talent. Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *An American Brat* present a true picture of female agency working in American culture with full flamboyance and modishness.

Like various other writers of diasporic fiction, Sidhwa and Lahiri also discuss about the “hybrid lives and identities” in the contemporary transcultural world. But the way they look at the cultural hybridity in the lives of individuals, who come from

the postcolonial societies, and their characters' exceptional discernment regarding dislocation differentiates them from other contemporary writers of diasporic fiction. Both these female diasporic writers are writing from the "place of hybridity". As Christine Wick Sizemore has described in her book *Negotiating Identities in Women's Lives*, "if most late-twentieth-century cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous and if identity is best understood as narrative, it is valuable to look closely at women's narratives that are consciously written from the place of hybridity, from the interstices of culture" (143). Sizemore further justifies this point by emphasizing that the "author's sense of dislocation or liminality comes from a geographic experience of immigration, emigration, or exile. It does not matter if this is an awareness of geographic invasion and the super-imposition of an alien culture as in colonialism, or if it is a consciousness of a mixed ethnic and cultural heritage or even a sense of marginality". According to her "the narratives of such women come from a different space than many narratives from the earlier twentieth century, which were often nation based" (143).

In Lahiri's narrative female characters perceive displacement or dislocation as an opening to move away from their awful pasts which splinter their lives. On the other hand their preference for displacement is an obvious warning that they are not ready to surrender in front of patriarchal domination and exploitation. Lahiri's novel examines the terrible impact of history on the lives of females, and how this collision destroys their lives and wheedles their rebellion against the conventional authority and social standards. Thus, Lahiri depicts female perspective of displacement as an endeavor to discard the power and supremacy of colonial authority as well as the patriarchal order

of the society. The females disallow their suppression, be it by colonial power or by patriarchy. In *The Lowland* Gauri's character is typical of a woman in post-colonial India where females are suppressed and oppressed doubly, as a colonial subject and as a victim of patriarchal society. The incident of her husband's death and its after effects upon her life is an obvious sign of her oppression as a colonial subject, and the society's mistreatment of her as a widow exemplifies her as a subject of patriarchal coercion and cruelty. She was so badly treated by her own society after her husband's death, in the name of social values "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 109). Gauri was also an ill-fated victim of the malicious customs of the society like many other widows.

In *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* Ania Loomba has discussed that "Spivak's choice of the immolated widow as emblematic of the 'subaltern' is significant. Such a figure is in fact the most perfect instance of subaltern silence, since she is conceptual and social category that comes into being only when the subject dies". Spivak further argues that "The to-be-sati is merely a widow, the *sati* is by definition a silenced subject. Her silencing points to the oppression of all women in colonial India, but at the same time not all women in colonial India can be collapsed into such a figure" (196). Gauri was dissimilar to many other widows of the post-colonial India. She challenged and discarded the old morals and ideologies which were the reason of female domination and suppression. Her decision to marry Subhash was an act of rebellion against society. "The relations between colonizer and colonized were, after all, constantly spliced by

many other social hierarchies. This suggests that any instance of agency, or act of rebellion, can be accessed from divergent perspectives” (Loomba 199). Subhash had given her an opportunity to move to a new world that had no traces of the old world where Gauri was doubly colonized. By marrying Subhash, “though in one way she’d burrowed even more deeply into their family, in another way she’d secured her release” (Lahiri 127). Gauri’s second marriage was a rational decision in order to secure her life from the ruthless traditions in the name of religion and social standards. For the sake of her safety she took refuge in another culture that protected her liberty and individuality. This act of Gauri refers to the notion of women’s agency.

Moreover, Sen considers agency as “the pursuit of goals and objectives that a person has reason to value and advance” (qtd. in Jain 2312). Though Gauri knew that “in a way it had been another flaunting of convention, perhaps something Udayan might have admired. When she’d eloped with Udayan, she had felt audacious”. And now again “agreeing to be Subhash’s wife, to flee to America with him, a decision at once calculated and impulsive, felt even more extreme” (Lahiri 127). She thought about second marriage on rational grounds. She was aware of the fact that only displacement could shield her from the social oppression and suppression. She had an immense desire to do away with her past that had caged her. So, in order to fulfill her desire and for an improved life Gauri happily chose displacement. She availed the opportunity offered by Subhash in order to break with the barriers of conventional past: “Though their marriage had not been a solution, it had taken her away from Tollygunge. He had brought her to America and then, like an animal briefly observed, briefly caged, released her” (242).

In both novels female agency is at play on multiple levels. While talking about Sidhwa's female characters, it would not be wrong to say that displacement grants them an opportunity to take a turn from the subject position as a victim or hostage of a system where individuals have to live their lives following the tenets and ideologies which are inflicted in their minds by the establishment or the government of the country. It is through displacement that they come to know how to judge the world through their experience and perceptions. As, in *An American Brat* Feroza was a Parsee girl, but she was expected to follow the basic Islamic laws while living in Pakistan. She was not a free individual, and could not afford to look at her life from her own perspective. Her mind was imprisoned by the practicing ideologies of the society where she had the position of a minority subject. It was only after experiencing a new life in America that she came to realize the value of her own individuality, freedom and her autonomous acuity of the world. "There was also the relief from observing the grinding poverty and injustice she could do so little to alleviate, the disturbing Hadood Ordinances that allowed the victims of rape to be punished, and the increasing pressure from the fundamentalists to introduce more Islamic law" (Sidhwa 347). In American culture Feroza was happy and relieved as she was no more a victim of constraints and limitations that she had to follow in her own society. "Her wide-open eyes soaking in the new impressions as she pushed the cart, a strange awareness seeped into Feroza: She knew no one, and no one knew her! It was a heady feeling to be suddenly so free---for the moment at least---of the thousand constraints that governed her life" (57). It was the same feeling which Gauri went through while travelling to America "she preferred being on the plane, detached

from the earth, the illusion of sitting still” (124). Gauri had a strong feeling of captivity related to brutal and violent Indian post-colonial society. That was the reason she wanted to stay away from the earth where she had undergone a lot of pain and viciousness due to the nasty customs and way of life. “On the plane time had been irrelevant but also the only thing that mattered; it was time, not space, she had been aware of travelling through”. It was staggering to see Gauri being so happy and gratifying while thinking about displacement or dislocation. While sitting in the plane she was comfortable to think that now she was free from the old world, and would not follow its rules and values anymore. Gauri content that “she sat among so many passengers, captive, awaiting their destinations. Most of them, like Gauri, freed in an atmosphere not their own” (Lahiri 125).

It was an advantage of displacement that Gauri and Feroza belonged to neither one place, nor the other, and they were not obliged to follow the customs and norms of any particular society. They could follow any rule which was convenient for them. According to Bhabha “hybridity or transnationalism is a challenge to the idea of a unified ‘imaginary community;’ hybridity brings up the idea that you may belong to many communities or cultures at once, and trans-nationalism brings up the idea that identity may not be determined by national boundaries, either political or geographical” (qtd. in Klages 159). So by picking up displacement or cultural hybridity Gauri asserted that she was no more a colonial subject of Indian society to tolerate the cruelty and mistreatment, and at the same time she was not an American to follow the social and religious standards of that culture. Feroza on the other hand was not a subject of a

dominated marginal community of a Pakistani Muslim culture; as she had not to face the social, ethnic and class hierarchies in American culture. As, Bhabha says in *The Location of Culture*, the “interstitial passage between fixed identification opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertain difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4). For Gauri and Feroza cultural hybridity is an underpinning of fulfillment and accomplishment. It fulfills their desire of independence and freedom.

Both Gauri and Feroza’s accomplishment in attaining everything they wished in that new world is a clear notion of female agency working freely in American culture. In case of Gauri “She had been given what she had demanded, granted exactly the freedom she had sought”. So in a way, “Gauri’s mind had saved her. It had enabled her to stand upright. It had cleared a path for her. It had prepared her to walk away” (Lahiri 213). On the other hand “the heady sense of freedom, of youthful happiness, deepened in Feroza” (Sidhwa 112). While living in America, “She felt she was being initiated into some esoteric rites that governed the astonishingly independent life and unsupervised lives of young people in America. Often, as she sat among them, Feroza thought she had taken a phenomenal leap in perceiving the world from a wider, bolder and happier angle” (179). That was the reason she did not want to go back to Pakistan. In that new country both of them had succeeded in building up a new identity. As, Mark Currie has defined in *Postmodern Narrative Theory* that “identity is relational, meaning that it is not to be found inside a person but that it inheres in the relations between a person and others”. According to this argument, the validation of a person’s identity “must designate the difference between that person and others: it must refer not to the inner life of the person

but to the system of differences through which individuality is constructed. In other words, personal identity is not really contained in the body at all; it is structured by, or constituted by, difference” (25). So in a new world Gauri was completely successful in building up her individual identity.

She is the member of the virtual world, an aspect of her visible on the new sea that has come to dominate the earth’s surface. There is a profile of her on the college website, a relatively recent photograph. A list of the courses she teaches, a trail marking her accomplishments. Degrees, publications, conferences, fellowships. Her e-mail, and her mailing address at the department, should anyone want to send her something or get in touch. (Lahiri 276)

And Feroza was sure that “she was in the right place, that her life would develop in unexpected and substantial ways” (Sidhwa 234). The new world had given her the opportunity and freedom to do anything according to her will and desire, “Within the heady climate of her freedom in America, she felt able to do anything” (239). So besides building up new identities in a new culture, both Gauri and Feroza had also successfully joined new social circle.

In “Women’s Agency in the Context of Family Networks in Indian Diaspora” Shobhita Jain has discussed that for some feminist scholars, it is only by looking into the social worlds of women that we can bring women’s capabilities out into the open and fully discuss them. In this view it is held out that the institution of patriarchy segregates them off from men in such a way that their capabilities remain hidden. These

capabilities become apparent only when one looks at the ways in which women's own social relationships construct women's world that is not only different, but also special in its form and content (2313). In the American world away from the domination of Indian patriarchy Gauri had vigorously revealed her talent. "She had published three books in her life: a feminist appraisal of Hegel, an analysis of interpretive methods in Horkheimer, and the book that had been based on her dissertation, that had grown out of a blundering essay she'd written for Professor Weiss: *The Epistemology of Expectation in Schopenhauer*" (Lahiri 234). That new place was her sociable home where she had given meaning to her life. It was that new world which had given her a new personality, autonomy, distinctiveness, and a prospect to live an enhanced life. "In any case, California was her only home. Right away she had adapted to its climate, comforting and strange, hot but seldom oppressive" (235). Likewise Gauri, Feroza's experience of living in America proves invigorating as well. "Menak she had become used to the seductive entitlements of the First World. Happy Hour, telephones that worked, the surfeit of food, freezers, electricity, and clean and abundant water, the malls, skyscrapers, and highways" (Sidhwa 346). She also succeeded in building up an individual identity and her own social world. "She had gone too far. Finding herself awash in this exhilaratingly free and new culture had made forget the strictures imposed on her conduct as a Pakistani girl" (104).

In that new culture, Gauri and Feroza feel liberated as they are not subjected to any kind of repression and maltreatment in the name of marriage and family life. By leaving their past behind they had maintained a new identity and the new world gave them that

opportunity to build and then sustain that identity. Sardar quotes an American scholar Cornel West who has suggested that individuals construct their identities according to their desires and experience. It is their desire for appreciation, quest for identification, the sense of being accredited, a deep desire for alliance which invoke them to have a desire of belonging to that new world by building up a new identity (100). Displacement had given them a self-determined life full of opportunities, and freedom. “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing” (qtd. in Bhabha1). So the lives of Gauri and Feroza got a new start through displacement. American world allows them to show their expertise and proficiency. It had given them a chance to build a new identity in a new context, and to construct a social world where they could show their hidden talent in a more open and free environment.

Besides giving them liberty and independence, female agency also offers them an opportunity to become an oppressor instead of an oppressed and subjugated self. Lahiri’s female characters get freedom, independence and security through displacement, and on the other hand their intense craving to espouse new cultural habits and lifestyle makes them the tormenters who deliberately hurt those people who are dependent upon their love and care. Gauri’s cruel sacrifice of her relations determined her status as an oppressor or teaser. She wanted an escape from her tragic past, and for that particular reason she left her husband and daughter who really needed her, especially her daughter Bela. Ignoring the fact that her daughter was too young to live without her she left Bela. By doing all that with Subhash and Bela, intentionally or unintentionally Gauri

succeeded in avenging all that was done to her by other members of her society. Being aware of their innocence Gauri destroyed the lives of her husband and daughter in order to fulfill her repressed desire. And it was through displacement that she got that chance to payback what she received from the Indian society. It was in the new world that she had been given an opportunity to do so, as it was not possible while living in the Indian society. She was ostracized and marginalized by her in-laws and relatives in India, but in America it was not so. It is indicated that she detested Subhash and her daughter, because the two were reminder of a hellish past.

Like Lahiri, Sidhwa's female characters also take a turn from a subjugated position to an independent and free self. It was the American land which provided Feroza with an opportunity to reject her identity as an ideological hostage and build a new identity as an independent being having her own relations and self-sufficient social world. Like Gauri she did not become an oppressor towards her loved ones intentionally, but she too sacrificed her relations in order to secure her freedom. "These and the other constraints crush her freedom, a freedom that had become central to her happiness. The abandon with which she could conduct her life without interference was possible only because of the distance from her family and the anonymity America provided" (Sidhwa 347).

So, Lahiri and Sidhwa delineate American land or culture as a milestone for the females of third world postcolonial countries who can achieve everything in that utopian land which was impossible in their own societies. America is presented as a ground-place for the female agency to work liberally without any oppression or incarceration. American culture is a landmark for their objectives and aspirations. It allows the

female agency to operate in an immeasurable prospect. Females from an oppressive patriarchal background or from a fundamental patriarchal system get everything they wish in American land. They construct their own social world and build up an individual identity, and fulfill all their curbed desires and aspirations in that new culture.

In one way or other these narratives offer a chance to the female characters to enjoy liberty, autonomy and confidence, and if necessary, become an oppressor or dominating personality instead of an oppressed and vanquished self. So it can be suggested that *The Lowland* and *An American Brat* represent the notion of the female agency working freely in a new land, America, where women can make their own rational choices or decisions and show their social competency in different fields of life. However, personal angst, which this displacement caused to their family members, also suggests that they have paid a heavy emotional price for their freedom.

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