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Research Article

Spatial Metaphors and Social Consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*

Vidya Tulshiram Sonone

PhD Research Scholar, KTHM College, Nashik, Maharashtra, India;
vidyatsonone@gmail.com

Dr Swati Braham Singh

Prof. H.O.D. Maratha Vidya Prasarak Samaj's Shrimati Vimlaben Khimji Tejookaya Arts, Science & Commerce College, Deolali Camp, Nashik, Maharashtra, India;
swatibrhm@gmail.com

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Abstract: This paper argues that Jhumpa Lahiri employs spatial metaphors—particularly those related to domestic space, borders, and lowland terrain—to critique both bureaucratic violence in immigration systems and intergenerational trauma rooted in political histories. By analysing *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* through the combined lenses of diaspora and trauma theory, the study shows that Lahiri's representations of space reveal embodied experiences of social consciousness that challenge binary notions of assimilation, identity, and collective memory. Drawing on recent open-access scholarship and selected textual citations, this comparative analysis foregrounds how Lahiri's spatial poetics mobilise domestic, geopolitical, and ecological landscapes as sites for negotiating personal and collective trauma, ultimately illuminating the complexities of diasporic life and transgenerational legacy.

Keywords: diaspora literature; spatial metaphors; trauma theory; postcolonial criticism

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Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction stands at a vital crossroad in contemporary American and postcolonial literature, interrogating the lived realities of displacement, migration, and the ongoing negotiations of identity. Through her lucid, often understated prose, Lahiri humanises the routines of immigrants, bringing to light the subtle and violent transactions of belonging that shape diasporic lives. While existing scholarship has highlighted her interest in generational conflict and hybrid identity, less attention has been paid to how her novels use space itself—be it the home, the "lowland" of Calcutta, or the bureaucratic terrain of documentation—as a medium of social critique and a witness to trauma (Chariandy; Visser). The objective of this paper is to fill this gap by examining the interplay between spatial metaphors and the emergence of social consciousness in *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*.

By reading these works through diaspora theory (Clifford, Hall, Gilroy) and trauma theory (Caruth, Visser), the project contends that Lahiri's characters do not merely inhabit or cross spaces; instead, they are shaped, constrained, and made conscious by the politics and histories those spaces embody. This approach reframes familiar questions about identity—such as who belongs, who is excluded, and who remembers—at the material and symbolic geographies of the novels. As Sharad Binnor puts it:

> It (diaspora writing) always involves the representation of the duality of existence, in which there is both longing for the forsaken homeland and adjustment to the present alien host lands. Moreover, it implies a kind of unhappiness or disenchantment in the hyphenated identity and existence experienced by the diaspora community. They always suffer from a self-imposed sense of exile and a feeling of real or imagined displacements. They want to cherish their cultural heritage while modernizing (westernizing) and adapting their lifestyles to suit the demands of their host lands. In the process, they sometimes get sandwiched and lose their real self or identities. Then begin a new search for meaning or self-realization in the land where they do not belong. Thus, they are nostalgic for their native culture, and at the same time, they don't want to lose the citizenship of their present country (Binnor: Rootless: 2014)

Diaspora and the Figure of Space

At the heart of diaspora theory is the idea that migration and exile are not just experiences of physical displacement but also ongoing states of negotiation between origin and destination, between memory and present, between the individual and the collective (Clifford, Hall, Gilroy). Diaspora is thus "self-consciously figurative or metaphorical... a special agent for social change," as Chariandy suggests, disrupting national narratives by drawing attention to hybrid identities and contested belonging (Chariandy). Spaces in Lahiri's novels are not neutral backdrops; they are "parasites" (Chow), points where cultural memory, state power, and private identity intersect and collide.

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Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Critique

Trauma theory is traditionally rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis, conceptualising trauma as an unassimilated event that continues to fragment consciousness and memory (Caruth 4). Postcolonial critics, however, have challenged trauma theory's Eurocentrism and its emphasis on individual, isolated wounds, arguing for a broader framework that can account for the historical and structural violence of colonialism, migration, and displacement (Visser; Durrant). Lahiri's engagement with trauma is layered: trauma inheres both in personal memory (the loss of home, family, language) and in the collective wounds of revolution, state violence, and forced migration (*The Lowland*). Her spatial metaphors materialise these traumas in the lived environment—so that forgetting, remembrance, and negotiation of pain become acts with physical, communal consequences.

The Domestic Space and Bureaucratic Violence

Lahiri's evocation of the domestic sphere consistently operates at the juncture of refuge and jeopardy. Home is depicted simultaneously as a "sanctuary and a site of strife" (Visser), serving the twin functions of nurturing cultural memory and of accommodating the vicissitudes of enforced displacement. However, the warmth and continuity traditionally ascribed to domesticity remain porous to external pressures, as the vigilant apparatus of state sovereignty invades the very thresholds that once promised intimacy and a sense of belonging.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima's transformation of a Cambridge apartment into a semblance of her Bengali home is a gesture of resistance: "On a sticky August evening… Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts, and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chilli pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to add to the mix." (The Namesake 1) Even here, the memory of 'home' is filtered through what is available/inaccessible in the American supermarket, a negotiation that underlines every meal and ritual. The apartment is a borderland, simultaneously a haven and a site of alienation ("She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband… it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind" *The Namesake* 279).

However, the house is also a site where the intrusions of bureaucracy become intimate. When Gogol's pet name appears on official medical paperwork, Ashima is both amused and unsettled: "when they see it at the top of his immunisation record, it doesn't look right; pet names aren't meant to be made public in this way" (*The Namesake* 36). The forced imposition of "Gogol" on a birth certificate—an error that later precipitates an existential crisis—functions as a form of bureaucratic violence. It is not just a clerical mistake but a wound, an institutional rewriting of subjectivity that reverberates through Gogol's youth and adulthood ("There's no such thing as a perfect name. I think human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen," *The Namesake* 245).

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Similarly, in *The Lowland*, the domestic sphere is perpetually breached by larger political and administrative forces. Early in the novel, Lahiri establishes a vivid landscape: "A warren of narrow lanes and modest middle-class homes. Once within the enclave, there were two ponds, oblong, side by side. Behind them was the lowland spanning a few acres... The features of the lowland given deft matter-of-fact strokes have a telling impact on the characters of the novel." (The Lowland 3, IOSR-JHSS) The marshy lowland and its bordering dwellings are sites thick with recollection, yet equally recognisable as zones of surveillance, infiltration, and loss, illustrating the ontology of the personal as perpetually porous to collective and state-sponsored violence. Such trauma bears a specifically gendered inscription: in *The Lowland*, Gauri discovers that no conjured domestic space may be purged of the residues of memory and bureaucratic armature. Her migration to the United States, in the company of Subhash, does not bring rest, but rather perpetuates administrative violence; the house in which she is received becomes as much a product of what she flees as of what she is offered.

Borders, Liminality, and the Precarity of Belonging

Physical and symbolic borders feature prominently in both stories, structuring patterns of geographic movement and, most especially, the stratification of mental and social identity. Frontiers are both palpable and elusive in *The Namesake*: the official national boundary that Ashoke and Ashima cross at the port of entry, as well as the vague "arrangements of internal space" that regulate, sometimes confining and other times expanding, the legitimacy of social affiliations. The airport checkpoint is the most obvious juncture. Still, far more insidious borders are carved out by the dialects of accent, dietary practice, and family expectation that trail behind the couple into everyday Minneapolis life – implicitly but also quite tactically dividing what belongs from what doesn't. For Gogol, citizenship is never a simple matter. It is always tenuous, provisional, a test of assimilation and erasure. When Gogol changes his name to Nikhil—"an effort that is a concession to official necessity, an attempt to forge the most workable compromise between existing in the world and remaining connected to the worlds I have lost"—it's not exactly a victory but, rather, an acknowledgment of "the unhomely space one occupies": "How many times does a person write his name in a lifetime—a million? Two million?" (The Namesake) His desires for Ruth and Maxine, and later for Moushumi, are mediated through overlapping questions of presence versus absence, race, the desire to overcome the distinction—even as "Gogol has nothing to say to these people. He doesn't care about their dissertation topics, or their dietary restrictions, or the color of their walls" (*The Namesake* 237). The search for "home" is an ongoing crossing of symbolic borders—each new domestic space a potential resolution, each one ultimately incomplete.

The Lowland, meanwhile, gives the border special status as a site of trauma and memory. The border between the two ponds, between the home and the marsh, between Calcutta and Rhode Island, between revolutionary idealism and family duty, is never a clean line but is always permeable and dangerous. Udayan's crossing from student to radical is tied to literal journeys through the city and figurative crossings of social boundaries. Subhash, upon leaving for America, experiences this liminality as a

condition of perpetual provisionality. As an academic with a temporary visa, his place is conditional, and his identity is bureaucratically managed. When Gauri joins him, the border is not left behind. Still, it is imported into their new life, resurfacing in their foreignness, their separation from the past, and their inability to leave memory behind: "She had preferred being on the plane, detached from the earth, the illusion of sitting still" (*The Lowland*).

***The Lowland:* Contested Terrain and Environmental Memory**

If the home and the border are loci for negotiating bureaucratic and psychological violence, the "lowland" as metaphor and material space stages the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Geographically, the lowland in Calcutta is a place of fluid boundaries, flooding in monsoon and drying in summer: "Certain creatures laid eggs that were able to endure the dry season. Others survived by burying themselves in mud, simulating death, waiting for the return of rain" (The Lowland 3, IOSR-JHSS). This space stands as the site of Udayan's political awakening, his murder, and Bijoli's daily acts of mourning. The perpetual presence and erasure of water reflect the ongoing process of trauma—sometimes submerged, sometimes exposed, always present.

For Gauri, the lowland is irretrievably marked by loss, violence, and memory: "The past is there, appended to the present" (*The Lowland*). In Lahiri's *The Lowland*, the lowland itself operates as a synecdoche, embodying histories that refuse expungement. The land displaced for so-called reclamation at the close of the novel mirrors not only environmental but also historical heedlessness that accompanies late capitalism—the accumulation proceeds according to plan. An extralegal process now blankets the ponds and paddy fields edging the city, coiling farther into the living web of Calcutta. Water hyacinth still surges upward, obstinately anchored; for the cartel eyeing the sites, eradication now seems to loop between fire and the cut trowel of machinery. This lens confers a revealed patina upon the urban core: Calcutta's submerged strata resonate with the reverberations of composite neglect, a ghost over a ghost of a domicile once thick with labour, agronomic sufficiency, and domestic tenure. The metropolitan body, increment and demolition synchronized as reflex, transfigures the archaisms of mud, rose-tainted brick, fertilizer-stained rubble, into liquidity for the folded sheets of speculative equity. An unimaginable, unreconciled loss is coked into new topographies, and the biota and the human long-denied alike go reticulated into a system that commands the unheard decree of a present that confers neither honour nor inscription.

The concluding movement of the text thus enacts an intersection between the chronically injured and the structurally dispossessed—between the solemn civil war of recollection, the persistently obstinate water hyacinth, the Hyacinth of mourning, and the stratum of urban accumulation within which the city's conditional accumulation assimilates, refracts, and relearns experience. Past trauma, whether collective in its historical derivation or singular in its biographical root, evades the event of total recollection or the contract of formal mourning; it remains lodged in both flesh and subsoil, renegotiated with every contraction and dilation of the water's thin membrane. Kirin, displaced by stone and glass, vegetational and mnemonic trauma, still glances

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interrogative in the synecdoche of a trembling membrane and in the urgent mnemonic of uneven terrain, as if the present's governing leap over the past silently concedes an amplitude of resistance within the amplitude of city, utterance, and hydraulic pulse of hyacinth. Reclamation, in the end, is an incomplete act; the lowland itself pauses to negotiate the payment of melancholia.

Conclusion

This paper argues that Lahiri's use of spatial metaphors exceeds the ornamental; it operates as the cognitive core of her novels, embodying grief and envisaging possible futures of justice. Occupying her characteristic territories of domestic interiors, the carefully marked thresholds of her stories, and the low-lying, silt-emptied deltas that reservoir her fictions, Jhumpa Lahiri converts those places into laboratories—deliberate and enduring—where collective consciousness is quietly forged and then, continuously, refashioned. By asserting that space is both the conduit and the precursor of lament, she argues that the life of the social mind is inescapably constrained by the material histories and the sedimented laminae of the very sites it occupies. The sometimes utopian remedies of assimilation, the ritual application of new names, the pragmatic act of papering over wounds with ceremonial gauze, do not annihilate the lament over what is involuntarily seconded and, by definition, forever absent. What refuses to fade is the water gestured towards in lowland light and the about-which being—be it memory or being—of the walked past and the gone home; both hover, hushed, demanding not restoration, but recognising, not reclamation, but witness; they further insist that the terms of being-to-one-another reopen and reopen. It is for that reason the fictions extend no anticipated conclusion delivered on the countdown of turning pages; instead, the voice preferred by the story quietly requires that the reader remain settled, not in the easy undecidedness of margins, but in the messy centre of dislocated memory, contradicted migrations, and unresolved desertions. The act of remaining is no sentimental leisure, but the hushed and, therefore, courageous labour of simply admiring and acknowledging and holding the act of memory with the stamina of heart. From that sustained orbit, the reader then bears forward, heart inclining, the discipline of inheld, remembered experience.

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