

Diaspora as a State of Widowhood: A Comparative Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Raj Gaurav Verma
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Central University of Jammu

Abstract

The paper attempts to explore the diasporic sensibility by fusing it with the experience of the widowhood. Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland projects Gauri as a widow of Udayan. Later she marries his brother Subhash and goes to America. The loss of husband creates trauma in Gauri's life so that she is never able to accept any man in her life and she continues to live single. The novel communicates the intricacies of psychology of suffering loss: the loss of husband via the loss of homeland. Similarly, Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner reveals a life of widower through one of its central character Baba. Baba never gets remarried. When Afghanistan is attacked by the Soviet Union, Baba has to go to America with his son. Once again, the loss of the homeland is compared with the loss of the wife. Loss of spouse creates "psychological fissures" in the life of the people. It becomes difficult to cope and communicate such an experience. At the same time, the loss of homeland turns out to be a more concrete loss. The loss of homeland thus can be seen through the lens of widowhood. This paper attempts to look at these texts from twin lens of being in a state of diaspora and widowhood. The argument of my paper is that the trauma of being in exile coincides/overlaps with the trauma of being a widow/widower.

"Each of us wants to live. The more absolute death becomes, the more intense life also becomes." (Rock and Rock 1)
"We are our history, especially our personal psychological and spiritual history." (Rock and Rock xvii).

Widowhood occurs as an eternal exile in most of the societies whereby the woman is subjected to the seclusion from society and male influence in general. It is important to note that while this trope works very well for the female authors, it works no less for the male authors. Therefore, the experience crosses and overlaps the gendered boundaries. The argument of my paper is that the trauma of being in exile coincides/overlaps with the trauma of being a widow/widower. Significantly, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Khaled

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* presents one of their central characters as a widow and widower, respectively. This paper attempts to compare these two texts in light of the twin facts of being displaced from home and of going into a voluntary exile from the "opposite sex."

Diaspora has come to mean a lot of things in recent years. Becoming an umbrella term it has incorporated many facets in its corpus and its theory. Robin Cohen in *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* discusses about the "Four Phases of Diaspora Study" (1-20). The first phase of study of diaspora in classical sense centered on the dispersion of Jews, which later included Irish, Armenians, Africans and even Palestinians. The second phase extended to include "expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court*" (Safran 83). The third phase was marked by a postmodern shift that "identities have become deterritorialized and constructed and deconstructed in a flexible and situational way" (Cohen 2). Consequently, the concept of diaspora needed to address this complexity. The fourth phase can be seen as a response to the "danger of emptying the notion of diaspora of much of its analytical and descriptive power....The phase of consolidation is marked by a modified reaffirmation of the diasporic idea, including its core elements, common features and ideal types" (Cohen 2). *The Kite Runner* can be associated with the first phase and *The Lowland* with the second phase. However, Rogers Brubaker points out, "three core [essential] elements that remain widely understood to be constitutive of diaspora" (Brubaker). He explains: "The first is dispersion in space, the second, orientation to a 'homeland'; and the third, boundary maintenance" (Brubaker). Thus, the fundamental state of diaspora remains that of being displaced in geography and history, in time and space.

Marriage is a vital institution which forms the basic fundamental unit of society. Wife and husband form a family. It is a family which transforms a house into a home. When one of them is missing it suggests a lack in the family. The house fails to become home. The condition of widow/widower turns that of perpetual exile from the "other" sex. This severing from the opposite sex becomes much pronounced in case of the widow than the widower. P. Adinarayana Reddy writes: "Widowhood is not just transition from one marital status to another after death of the husband. Entering into widowhood is more hazardous, painful and humiliating to women than to a widower because of the discrimination, ritual sanctions of the society against widows" (2). This is particularly true in case of most of the societies. Pat. U. Okoye in *Widowhood: A Natural or Cultural Tragedy* also noticed: "Thus, whereas detailed accounts of widowhood practices are given...little or nothing is reported about 'widowerhood' which could be said to be non-existent, more or less" (Okoye 22). It brings upon the alarming consequences of widowhood on the basis of societal and cultural norms. However, for this paper my focus will be more on the psychological and philosophical impact on the state of widowhood.

Michael Rock and Janice Rock in *Widowhood: The Death of a Spouse: Reflections on Death and Dying, Plus Nine Interviews with People Who Lost a Spouse* have explored the plight and predicament of widowhood. Living marital life is not only the sharing of bodies it also extends to emotional, psychological and spiritual sharing between two beings. There is built a life time bond with the spouse. It marks the building up of “human bonds, human points of interaction, memories, meanings; and now with the death of our spouse, there is this dreadful feeling of emptiness! Now...alone, ‘the bonds’ broken and wounded” (Rock and Rock 2). “The experience of living” entails two things: “the presence of people and the presence of relationships” (Rock and Rock 6). Human beings are “people of relationships.” Rock and Rock goes on to explain the position of widows in Biblical tradition. O. J. Baab points out about the state of widow that “hers was an unfortunate state...As an object of public concern she is often linked with the orphans or fatherless” (qtd. in Rock and Rock 11). However, the Diasporas are not seen as fatherless, but as without a motherland: homeless and motherless. Rock and Rock also talk about the notion of death in various societies and mark: “Life and death, therefore, become very complementary! This is so in many archaic cultures...Since there was a belief in the on-goingness of life, death became a chance for the primitive to be creative, i.e., to “create the new identity of the deceased” (Rock and Rock 18). Thus, evolved the notion that death was a second birth, or a new spiritual existence, or an initiation. A new mode of being was envisaged. In case of Diaspora this death is twin fold: First is the death of the notion of motherland, which brings in a re-invented concept of the homeland to the author/migrant. On one hand, the notion of homeland as motherland begins to suffer death; on the other hand, the notion of host-land as homeland begins to emerge. Second is like the death suffered by a spouse of his/her counterpart which brings in the necessity for the surviving spouse to change himself/herself. The condition of the diaspora in coping up with the loss of the motherland is similar to the condition of a spouse coping loss of the dead spouse. “Much of our attention is focused on the dying person; but ironically, the widowed spouse also has a personal death: a finality to the human bonds built up over the years. Death, in other words, is very real, both to the person dying and to the widowed spouse. Rainer Maria Rilke, the poet, points out that “death is the side of life which is turned away from us” (Rock and Rock 20). Therefore, migration to a new place, is marked as a point of termination and inception, a break and continuation, a death and birth, of an existing person in a host-land, whereby the dimensions of existence are meant to change with the extinction of the older ones.

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) is set in Afghanistan and America. It opens with images of past enkindled in the mind of the protagonist, Amir and then in the next chapter it shifts to Afghanistan when Amir was a child and used to live with Baba, Ali and Hassan. Amir and Hassan were childhood friends. Hassan was Ali's son, who was Baba's servant. Amir throughout his life is shown to be craving for Baba's love. The focus of this

paper is not Amir, but Baba. Baba who has been described as “a force of nature” and Amir wonders: “How my mother ever managed to sleep in the same room as him” (Hosseini 12-13). The story before Amir’s birth is presented in a very scattered and fragmented manner. Amir’s mother died giving birth to Amir. Hardly a reference comes of Amir’s mother, Sofia Akrami. Whatever information Amir gets of his mother is from other people, but never from Baba. It is in the latter half of the novel that Amir goes to Afghanistan to find Sohrab, Hassan’s son, that he comes across a beggar who tells him that his mother had been a professor at university. He himself admits: “I had just learned more about my mother from this old man on the street than I ever did from Baba” (Hosseini 231). There are certain patterns that could be easily traced out in Baba’s life: He hardly had a woman after his wife’s death. He would never mention his wife in any conversation. When in Kabul, he remained confined to his room, “Baba’s room, and his study, also known as “the smoking room” (Hosseini 4). He lived a life of a widower, retiring from all female company in his life. “Death is not some ‘thing’ that happens ‘outside’ us, outside of our experience of living. Death happens in our living of life...” (Rock and Rock 10). It is this death of the wife which Baba experiences in living his life, all by himself, without a companion to share the ups and downs of his life. In Kabul, he had friends to give him company to compensate for the absence of a companion in his life. But, when he had to move to America because of Russian invasion then his life changes.

In *The Lowland*, however reader comes across the state of widowhood in a different form. The novel is set in Calcutta and America. The narrative begins with brotherhood of Subhash and Udayan, and that the two remain inseparable, unless Subhash go to study abroad and Udayan joins the Naxalite movement. In the course of time Udayan, gets married to Gauri, the protagonist of the novel. However, he is killed in an encounter. The fact of Gauri’s widowhood is much magnified in comparison to Baba’s widowerhood in *The Kite Runner* because Baba does not fall from the status, he does not lose privileges, however, Gauri does.

Does it mean nothing that she’s going to give you a grandchild?

It means everything. It’s the only thing he’s left us, his mother said.

And what about Gauri?

She has a place here if she chooses?

What do you mean if she chooses?

She could go somewhere to continue her studies. She might prefer it.

What makes you think that?

She’s too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother. (Lahiri 114)

Therefore one finds that Gauri is an outcast in her own home. She is not accepted by her in-laws and that her existence is of no consequence. Subhash contemplates of Gauri’s fate “living by their parents rule.” He finds: “His mother’s coldness toward Gauri was insulting, but his father’s passivity was just as cruel. And it wasn’t simply cruelty. Their treatment of

Gauri was deliberately intended to drive her out” (Lahiri 115). Then it is with the prospect of giving support to Gauri that he marries her and takes her to America.

It is in their lives in America that we find Gauri and Baba facing the same fate. They are in two exiles now: One from their homelands, the other from their spouses. It is the exile from the homeland which intensifies the exile from the spouse. Because now they have to face their lives all alone, all by themselves, without friends too.

When the death of a spouse occurs, the remaining spouse’s personal skills and philosophy of life are dramatically called into question, and will be more so after the funeral despite the mourning, if he/she is to continue to live a productive and satisfying life in the years ahead. To grow and develop as a person is not now an option. Perhaps for the first time the remaining spouse is asked to “grow up,” become the unique person he/she is meant to be, become an individual. (Rock and Rock xiv-xv)

Baba as a widower is put at utter disadvantage in America, because of his fallen status, and with no emotional support that comes from the spouse. To him America, was no less than a new wife, with whom he cannot reconcile, where he cannot find refuge. “Baba was like a widower who remarries but can’t let go of his dead wife” (Hosseini 119). In case of Gauri the moment of Udayan’s death becomes a recurring memory: “As if her gaze had to span an ocean and continents to see. It had caused those moments to recede, to turn less and less visible, then invisible. But she knew they were there. What was stored in memory was distinct from what was deliberately remembered” (Lahiri 152). This makes the idea of the loss very much the part of life. “When people die, relationships help us to establish human bonds. Death severely wounds these bonds. They are never destroyed; broken, yes, wounded, yes, but never destroyed. The more intimate the relationship ...the more intense the grief” (Rock and Rock 6). An observation that stands true for both a widow/widower and a diaspora, therefore, is, that though the separation of bodies has actually occurred in the physical world, psychologically they remain tied together. It is here that we find the magnitude that “shards of memory” acquire. As Rushdie points out: “it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and mundane acquired numinous qualities” (Rushdie 12). The prospect of hardships and solitude makes a widow/widower and a diaspora grieve even more intensely in absence of a spouse and a homeland, respectively, for these fragments of memories.

One of the basic idea behind comparing the state of widowhood with that of Diaspora is the sense of loss that marks a trauma, as Juliet Mitchell writes: “must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss. The severity of the breach is such that even if the incident is

expected, the experience cannot be foretold...In trauma we are untimely ripped” (121). In a marital relation the spouses are in bond of mutual sharing whereby they have shared their understanding of life, their philosophy and their vision for future. “Loss seems to produce not only deep and lasting sorrow but also disorientation, a failure of trusted meanings” (qtd. in Rock and Rock 28). The death of one of the spouses, marks an alteration in this understanding, in this philosophy and vision. The same thing holds true for a homeland, that people share understanding of life, their philosophy and their vision for future with relation to their culture. The movement willing or unwilling away from home to a new place breaks this understanding.

When one’s spouse dies, a period of “life transition” for the living spouse begins. When the death of a spouse occurs, the first effect to be felt is grief. The context for this grief is mourning; and the whole process is what is called bereavement...As in any life transition a person starts out usually on an unknown path, with unknown markers, and with unknown and untested ways of how to cope. (Rock and Rock 28)

Getting settled in a host country produces the same spectrum of behaviour and is marked by the same “transitional phase” of bereavement where one misses the homeland, as the spouse misses the dead spouse in “recalling of specters, of being reminded ...about the unspeakable moment” (Mishra 33). It holds direct significance for a diaspora that “the old place has not yet released its hold—that some roots still cling to be transplanted” (Nayar 193). While Baba is in America, he misses his Afghanistan, his watan. America to him becomes “a place to mourn” his memories (Hosseini 120). “He [Baba] missed people milling in and out of his house, missed...greeting people who knew him and his father, knew his grandfather, people who shared ancestors with him, whose pasts intertwined with his” (Hosseini 120). Likewise, for Gauri, Subhash and America had presented a new world, but a world where she found it difficult to get herself settled. Though she had married Subhash she could not carry on her marital relationship with him.

She did not tell Subhash...that though she had become a wife a second time, becoming a mother again was a one thing in her life she was determined to prevent from happening.

She slept with him because it had become more of an effort not to. She wanted to terminate the expectation she’d begun to sense from him. Also to extinguish Udayan’s ghost. To smother what haunted her. (Lahiri 161)

The “transitional phase” after the widowhood is followed by a “communicative phase” whereby the widow/widower begins to enter into her/his usual course of life. “A listener’s the only medicine a widow really needs,” she said. “And let me tell you from bitter experience, there aren’t any” (Rock and Rock 41). This also typifies the condition of a Diaspora who suffers loneliness in the host-land, where they want to share their memories, their experience, their nostalgia but actually they fail to find listeners for themselves. Baba begins working at a

gas station. He works very hard to provide good education to his son, Amir. He makes some Afghan friends. Out of these friendships is found a wife for Amir, named Soraya. Baba's nostalgia for his homeland can be seen in his conversation with the afghan people around him. Gauri's case is different because she cannot find a company around her house, therefore, she joins the university. Gauri, is the one who chooses such a life for herself. "The death of a spouse leaves wounded bonds for the remaining spouse" but "[t]he wounded spouse can also be the wounded healer" (Rock and Rock 11). In case of Gauri, it becomes evident because "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). She leaves Subhash and her daughter, Bela, born out of her relationship with Udayan. Subhash acquires a responsible role towards Bela, however, Gauri turns indifferent and never returns until her old age. She becomes a professor and lives an individual and independent life.

Though no specific reason has been shown explicitly as to why Baba does not go for remarriage one can find that he had lost faith in his life after the death of his wife. "One dies as one has lived in the terrible moments of one's life,"...this is so because "there are certain deep consistencies in all human beings. An individual lives characteristically as he or she has lived in the past; and dying is living" (qtd. Rock and Rock xii). Baba is shown living in exile from his wife, and therefore, he remains prepared for his own death "because death is a stressful event, we will probably live our dying and death as we have lived other "dark periods" or times of stress in our lives" (Rock and Rock xii). He dies of cancer. "However, the widowed women are much less likely than widowed men to be interested in forming a new relationship. Many widows value their independence and not eager to resume the domestic responsibilities of a long-term relationship. Some do not relish the idea of becoming a caregiver for an older man, having already experienced the stress of caring for a terminally ill partner" (Denmark and Paludi 282). This is something that holds true for Gauri because it was the idea of independence that Subhash has promised her to give that she married him, but in which he had failed utterly. Instead he starts expecting and becomes assertive about Gauri's obligation towards her child. It is this disillusionment that makes Gauri leave Subhash and find a new life for herself.

Whether or not we look at the individual differences between widows and widowers, we still come back to the same common thread with the death of a spouse: "When the partner is lost, all the meanings of marriage, all its memories, will be thrown into relief." For either the man or woman, widower or widow, there are shock, numbness, disbelief, intense longing, waves and pangs of grief. In the beginning "behaviour is purposeless, despair overwhelming." The future seems bleak, empty; life seems meaningless. Thus, they both experience intense grief: "His grief may be more hidden, and constrained; hers more open. (Rock and Rock 40)

Therefore, the case of Baba as a widower turns hardly different from the case of Gauri as a Widow. At the same time their widowhood turns barely different from their exile. The widowhood put Baba and Gauri into an exile from the “opposite” sex; their migration put them into an exile from their “homeland.” Their mourning and trauma, in fact, becomes far aggravating because of their dual exile they suffer as widow/widower and as a diaspora. It becomes very difficult both for Baba and Gauri to initiate their new life in America because they lack their spouse. Gauri had her home in Calcutta, when Udayan was alive. Baba had home in Kabul, where he had married and built the most expensive house in the locality. Their home were where their spouses were. America is able to provide them a place of refuge, a shelter to live, but the absence of spouse cannot convert the place of dwelling into home. Baba is never shown to carry the images of his wife, but of his home in Kabul. Gauri is never shown to carry the images of the home but of Udayan. At this juncture it becomes apparent to identify the spouse with home, and home with spouse. America, as a host-land misses a vital tie, a tie almost as strong as a tie that one has with a spouse.

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