

Wounds of Exile: Personal and Political Displacement in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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Abstract

This article critically discusses exile and displacement based on Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Both novels probe into serious personal and political disturbances that are either experienced individually or more generally in situations of socio-political turmoil. The story of *The Lowland* describes the emotional impact of migration, fragmented identities, and the ties that bind a family through political turmoil during the Naxalite movement in India. Twin faces of exile—that of physical displacement and of affective dislocation—find an illustration in the career of Subhash and Gauri, the two twins torn between their trying to adjust to a new culture in America only to be haunted by unresolved traumas traceable back to their homeland. By contrast, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* places exile within the context of the political collapse of Iraq, whereby the disintegration of national unity reflects the fracturing of individual identities. Saadawi's deployment of the *Frankenstein* monster as an icon serves as a potent metaphor for alienation and identity crises driven by violence and sectarianism, embodying the internal political displacement of Iraq since the invasion. The article represents a comparative analysis and shows how two novels can expose the moment when private and political exile converge. It underlines that exile is not just physical removal, but rather an immersion into emotional and even psychic alienation. The discussion that follows now begins by eroding the sense of belonging among the characters due to political turmoil, which in turn compels them to journey through changing social landscapes.

Keywords: Exile, Displacement, Naxalite Movement, Political Upheaval, Identity Crisis.

1. Introduction

Indeed, exile and displacement are returning themes in literature, showing a depth of emotional and psychological pain tied to being uprooted from their homelands, cultures, and communities. It is at once both a deeply personal and politically driven issue—one attached to individual identities and relationships and reflecting greater socio-political upheaval. In this scenario, literature often becomes that medium through which such multi-layered experiences can be reflected, an avenue through which authors get an opportunity to reflect upon the shaping not only of individual lives but also the societal structures through exile.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, which was published in 2013, personal and political dislocation forms the axis of the plot. Set against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement in India and the immigrant experience in America, the novel pitches a tale of Subhash and his family in attempting to come to grips with the emotional fall-out of migration, felt loss, and fissured identities. This book reveals how, for instance, the Naxalite uprising as a political event could impact the private lives of Lahiri's characters. For instance, Subhash's brother Udayan is drawn to this very movement wherein he gets killed leading into the disheartening family relationships after all. Gauri is another important character; she internalizes this exile emotionally deserting her family in the wake of Udayan's death, trying to rebuild her life (Alhashmi, 2020).

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, on the other hand, places its exploration of exile within war-torn Iraq, where the political dislocation has been a fact. Set amidst the mayhem in the aftermath of Iraq's invasion by the United States, the novel dramatizes a cast of characters whose lives are sundered by violence and sectarianism. Saadawi has used the metaphor of the Frankenstein monster—a creature constructed with the body parts of war victims—which would very well relate to the fragmented identity of post-invasion Iraq. It depends upon a rightly placed political exile where individuals experience alienation inside their very homeland due to ongoing conflict and instability (AlAsad, 2021). This is effectively a portrayal of war trauma on a collective level and the subsequent alienation of its characters from their communities and sense of belonging.

Whereas *The Lowland* shows the dual dimensions of exile—personal and political—through personal loss and migration, characters like Gauri and Subhash feel torn apart by the emotional dilemmas that arise with leaving their homeland and causing estrangement from families. On the other hand, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* highlights an aspect of political exile; the displacement of its characters within the war-torn confines of their own country is documented. Intersections of personal and political exile in these novels reveal how larger socio-political events disrupt individual lives and identities. As the concept of politics around them deeply textures their sense of self, there is a stress on the long-lasting wounds caused by exile due to migrations or internal displacements within a fractured society (Said, 2002).

2. The Concept of Exile in Literature

In the broad sense, exile is the condition of being separated or banished from one's homeland, usually involuntarily; this, in turn, sees displacement through physical, emotional, and

psychological means. Exile, as a literary theme, stands not only for the literal removal from one's place of origin but could also mean feelings of alienation, loss, and identity crisis often accompanying such displacement. Exile has tended to figure menacingly within the literary traditions, serving to investigate identity, belonging, and the human condition in terms of location and culture (Bose, 2017).

The relevance of exile to literature lies in the explanation of combined human experience under conditions of dislocation. Exile frequently presents impressions that are disorienting, sensations of nostalgia for a lost homeland, and recasting identity in new or generally unfamiliar surroundings. It is a multifaceted experience that enables the writers to participate in the interior of their characters and provides a narrative space for the probing of the existential question of selfhood, belonging, and the search for meaning in a dislocated world. As Edward Said, perhaps more than any other scholar who has written about exile, says, exile is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (Said, 2002). It is this dislocation of the self from the homeland that becomes a strong lens through which authors examine both personal and political upheavals, reflecting the continuing human search for a place and a sense of origin.

2.1 Historical and Contemporary Examples of Exile in Literary Tradition

Exile has been a gripping note that has been central to some of the most celebrated works throughout history, both ancient and modern. Probably one of the earliest examples is to be found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, when his hero makes a journey very far from his kingdom, being in exile, as it were, in search of immortality. Meanwhile, in the *Odyssey* by Homer, the protagonist Odysseus is also fighting for his exclusively long exile back to Ithaca immediately after the Trojan War. His journey therefore signifies not only physical but also psychological displacement and trauma for being outside of the home for such a very long period of time. Classically, these works make use of exile to tell a heroic identity through trials and hardship he undergoes in bringing into view deeply human needs either to return to one's origins or to redefine oneself when the homeland no longer exists. This is expounded further in the modern period, with the exponential rise in the volume of works dealing with exile in literature during the 20th century, strongly reflective of global upheavals due to world wars, colonization, and political turmoil. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is an autobiographical exploration of exile—both physical and intellectual. Exile has been created within an expatriate's psyche, as Joyce himself was an expatriate, and so is his protagonist Stephen Dedalus, self-imposed in exile from Ireland while he refused to accept the societal norms and the political shackles placed on him by his homeland. For Joyce, exile is a way of coming into one's own, an escape from "the nets of tradition" into artistic autonomy (Cullingford, 1998).

The concept of exile still stirs in modern literature. Exile, for writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, features in, among other works, *Americanah*, which considers the immigrant experience of today, particularly the tension that exists between cultural identity and the sense of otherness often associated with migration to the West. Adichie's characters struggle to feel any sense of cultural dislocation as they grapple with the divide between their Nigerian roots and their exposure to immigrant life in the United States and the UK. This new kind of exile reveals not only geographical aspects of displacement but also some emotional and psychological

complications one has to face while living between cultures and shows very well how the condition of exile can survive even if the person is already physically settled in a new place (Adichie, 2013).

2.2 Exile as a Narrative Tool to Explore Identity, Loss, and Transformation

Exile is by no means a theme but rather a powerful device that gives way to the core of human identity. Exile brings about the crisis of self where the character is thrown into a tug-of-war between traumatic loss of home, culture, and personal attachments. As Edward Said has recorded, exile gives a person that "contrapuntal awareness," an acute consciousness of the manifold, often-conflicting realities he has to live with outside his native land (Said, 2002). This often sets off deep transformations, as characters try hard to reconcile their past with their present exoneration.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, exile is an important narrative device driving the emotional voyages of her characters. Migrating from India to the United States, Subhash is in personal and cultural exile. The physical dislocation from his homeland reflects the emotional distance between him and his family and between him and his own identity. Changed life in America dramatically changes Subhash, though he cannot help continuing 'to be persecuted' by the past, namely, his brother's death and unresolved conflicts preserved in his family (Stoican, 2017). Using exile, Lahiri explores the profound sense of loss accompanying migration and also, perhaps, the reinvention of another new cultural context.

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Ahmed Saadawi used exile to describe the collapse of Iraq's national identity. The Frankenstein monster made out of the victims' body parts from the war symbolizes a broken state and collective trauma of political displacement. Characters within the novel experience exile in their hometown due to ongoing violence and war, creating a sensation of complete alienation and dislocation. Saadawi uses the theme of exile to shed light on how political turmoil destroys individuals and societies, how the loss of a stable home environment leads to a deeper crisis of identity (AlAsad, 2021).

Exile as a theme in literature is a strong tool toward the exploration of identity, loss, and transformation. In a way, exile catapults characters to the very edges of their identities and sometimes to the loss of an unstable sense of self as a result of physical migration or otherwise internal dislocation. Many characters come to literary works already in transformation because of the exile that makes them discover new facets of their selves or at times come to grips with the impossibility of ultimate belonging anywhere (Elayyan, 2017).

3. Personal Displacement in *The Lowland*

3.1 Subhash and Gauri's Experiences of Personal Displacement

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) is the tender evocation of personal and political dislocation. With her novel, she narrates the story of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, growing up in post-colonial Calcutta against the backdrop of political turmoil. While Udayan finds himself embroiled in the Naxalite movement—a radical communist uprising—Subhash moves in another

direction and leaves for America for a PhD. The police killing of Udayan has cast a long shadow over Subhash and Udayan's widow, Gauri. Subhash, in trying to give Gauri and her unborn child a future, marries her and takes her to America. This marriage and their immigration do not provide emotional stability but deepen the sense of personal displacement for both characters (Merritt, 2013).

The theme of displacement is projected in the fractured lives of Subhash and Gauri by Lahiri. Subhash, though physically removed to the United States from India, cannot feel that emotional distance from family and homeland will ever dissipate. Gauri is even more deeply displaced, emotionally and mentally. Udayan's death haunts her, while her move to America with Subhash exacerbates her sense of alienation. She turned within herself, into academics, and the eventual abandonment of her child, Gauri shows just how displacement—from both her husband's death and her home country—can have a deep, profound impact on her psyche (Merritt, 2018).

3.2 Themes of Migration, Emotional Alienation, and the Consequences of Political Upheaval on Personal Lives

The Lowland is an explicit coming-of-age story—a migration of sorts—not out of the country but through a process of emotional and psychic change. It is Subhash's migration out of India, first and foremost, into America; secondly, away from the fecund, highly politicized atmosphere of Calcutta in which he grew up; thirdly, out of his family circumstances; and lastly, out of his need to emulate his brother. Yet his actual migration to America is not at all liberative. While Subhash can literally withdraw from India, the emotional connections of his family and memory of his brother's life and death bind him to the past. The political tumult that took Udayan's life becomes a part of Subhash's psyche that is never truly separated from tragedy (Kumar, 2022).

Gauri is emotionally alienated even further. She marries Subhash, not out of love, but out of compulsion after Udayan's death. In fact, the physical migration of Gauri to America along with Subhash is also an emotional exile. While Subhash tries to settle down in the U.S., Gauri slips further into her grief and guilt. Udayan's involvement with the Naxalite movement and his eventual death come to define her, and she becomes emotionally unapproachable—first from Subhash, then from her daughter, Bela. The political aftermath of what happened with Udayan trickles into the family: Gauri cannot find closure as to her role in Udayan's life and death, and this lack of closure is what also keeps her alienated from her family (Istari, 2022).

3.3 Exile's Effect on Personal Relationships, Family Dynamics, and Individual Identity

Presentation of exile by Lahiri in *The Lowland* is an intricate analysis of the changes in personal relationships and family dynamics due to displacement. Subhash is driven with a sense of duty towards Gauri and Bela, his obligation propelled by his guilt over the disappearance of Udayan and to provide them both with a secure life in the U.S. Yet, this very compulsion of matters brings on emotional distance. The relationship that Subhash shares with Gauri is more out of duty and obligation rather than the feeling of love. Despite all efforts to take care of Gauri, she remains unreachable. This tension itself shows how exile—both physical and emotional—fractures relationships. Over time, his love for Bela will grow, though always with the heavy weight that he is not her biological father—a fact that complicates things further between the

two. Through the family dynamics, Lahiri shows how displacement infuses in them the never-ending conflicts and emotional tensions (Batra, 2014)

Perhaps the most striking feature in the novel is the tangible emotional exile of Gauri. Since migration into the U.S., she pursued an academic career in Philosophy—a field that would allow her to intellectually engage with abstract concepts of existence, guilt, and identity. But this is at the expense of her relationship with Subhash and Bela, as she leaves them to live a separate life. Lahiri portrays Gauri's exile as an inner, self-imposed exile—a dislocation not from the physical homeland but from the emotional contours. Her intellectual pursuits become a means of fleeing her personal guilt and trauma, yet they further deepen her isolation. Gauri's internal exile reflects the theme of emotional dislocation, where displacement is not only geographical but psychological and relational too (Challa, 2018).

3.4 Lahiri's Portrayal of Physical and Emotional Exile: Cultural Dislocation and Inner Exile

Jhumpa Lahiri's depiction of exile in *The Lowland* is notorious for the prominence of cultural dislocation and inner exile. For instance, the migration of Subhash to the United States is an ideal example of cultural dislocation. Being an immigrant, he has never been able to cope with the fissure between his being an Indian and his life in America. Lahiri depicts the immigration perspective through the efforts of Subhash toward assimilation into American society and attachment towards homeland. His life is marked by the sensation of "in-betweenness," never completely Indian, nor totally American. The cultural dislocation in which he finds himself illustrates more generally the immigrant experience of negotiating a place between two worlds (Bhattacharya, 2022).

However, where the question of displacement is more complex is regarding Gauri's interior exile. Lahiri really brings out the interior turmoil Gauri goes through when she starts to remove herself from family and past. While Subhash participates in a more overt form of cultural exile, Gauri's struggle is more internal and emotional (Dhingra, 2012).

4. Political Displacement in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is set in the chaotic and war-torn environment of post-invasion Iraq during the early 2000s that followed the U.S. invasion in 2003. This period was extremely politically unstable, violent, and full of sectarian conflicts that deeply fractured the social and political fabric of the country. With the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, a power void appeared and opened its doors to all-engulfing violence, insurgency, and a bloody civil war that laid entire Iraq in ruins. Throughout this time, daily life was punctuated by car bombings, assassinations, and the breakdown of civil order, whereby many Iraqis could not find even the very basic notion of safety. Added to these were sectarian tension riots that ripped the country apart between Sunnis and Shias, and the rise of extremist groups further heightened a sense of disintegration and displacement of its citizens (Al-Leithy, 2023).

It is in this scenario that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* uses the horror of Frankenstein's creation to narrate the realistic war scenario and strong political displacement of Iraqi natives. The novel outlines the social dislocation of Baghdad, where citizens struggle to keep a semblance of

normality in the face of unending violence, sectarianism, and loss of state authority. This backdrop forms a fertile ground for exploring the alienation and fragmentation of identity, both personal and collective, with war distorting every aspect of life (Campbell, 2020).

4.1 Ahmed Saadawi's Treatment of Political Displacement through the Figure of the Frankenstein Monster

The main character in the middle of *Frankenstein* in Baghdad is a monster created from body parts of war victims by a junk dealer named Hadi. Hadi puts together all the body parts into a single body as a political statement; he wants to give dignity to the unclaimed dead by giving them one body for burial. The monster, though, brought to life by a wandering spirit, goes on a rampage of violence against the oppressors responsible for the deaths of the people providing the body parts. It symbolizes the political displacement of Iraq itself, torn apart by war, sectarianism, and foreign occupation (Elayyan, 2017).

In this monster called Frankenstein, Saadawi probes into the nature of political displacement in a homeland that no longer avails safety and a sense of belonging to its people. This monster, made of disparate parts, becomes a powerful metaphor for Iraq in its fractured state: individuals, communities, and the national identity have been dismembered after these years of conflict. The monster's inability to find a stable identity reflects the broader experience of political exile within one's country. The monster keeps spreading violence for the sake of avenging the dead, but it only leads to more death and chaos. It is the embodiment of the self-perpetuating circle of violence and hopelessness pervading post-invasion Iraq (AlAsad, 2021).

4.2 How War, Violence, and Sectarianism Contribute to a Sense of Political Exile within One's Own Homeland

Another major theme underlying *Frankenstein* in Baghdad is a kind of exiledness within one's homeland—a concept capturing the alienation that Iraqis feel when they live and feel displaced by war and sectarian divisions within their native country. The destruction of state institutions, coupled with the permeation of militia groups in post-invasion Iraq, builds a society in which people can no longer depend on the old structures for order, safety, and belonging. Violence, through bombs, assassinations, or sectarian killings, forced many Iraqis to live in fear and displacement, even if they physically never left their homes (Ghazi, 2020).

In Saadawi's view, this political exile is portrayed through the sense of insecurity of the characters and their disillusionment with the government and the overall social order. In Baghdad, people live in a state of permanent tension, where survival depends on navigating the dangerous and ever-shifting allegiances of various political and sectarian groups. The city itself becomes hostile, barely recognizable amid the destruction and chaos of war. In this light, *Frankenstein* in Baghdad exemplifies the idea that political homelessness is not just about being removed from one's nation, but also about dislocation and exile from the very homeland that has become uninhabitable due to the violence and instability that now define it (Jani, 2016).

In this respect, the failure of national identity to unify the people emphasizes the sense of political exile. The failure of a central authority and the overriding sectarian violence leave the citizen abandoned in a fragmented space, with loyalty being divided among diverse ethnic and religious

identities rather than to the nation in its entirety. This disintegration finds itself even in the monster's body, pieced together from the fragmented bodies of victims of sectarian and political backgrounds. The monster, as a child of war, personifies the political turmoil in Iraq, the fracture of the nation, and its people (Metz, 2018).

5. Intersections of Personal and Political Displacement

Individual and political dislocation braids powerfully and tragically in bringing out the stamp left on individual existence by socio-political turmoil in both Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein* in Baghdad. Both novels come out strongly and poignantly with the way greater forces of political turmoil and violence accentuate the personal strife of exile, dislocation, and erosion of identity. This section reveals how such intersections of personal and political displacement shape the sense of belonging and identity of the characters in each socio-political context (Daukšaitė, 2020).

5.1 Comparative Analysis of Personal and Political Displacement

In *The Lowland*, political displacement is staged within the context of the Naxalite movement in India during the 1960s and 1970s, an era when radicals with left inclinations challenged the then-power structures. The novel articulately interweaves personal and political displacements with choices and destinies pertaining to the central characters. Udayan, one of the two brothers in the epicenter of the story, soon finds himself deeply embroiled with the Naxalite uprising and is eventually executed by the state for his revolutionary actions. His brother Subhash and Gauri, Udayan's widow, are plummeted into profound personal exile. Subhash leaves India to escape the political unrest, finding refuge across the ocean, in America. Meanwhile, the pregnant Gauri is forced to marry Subhash. According to Jhumpa Lahiri, political involvement by Udayan causes emotional and psychic dislocation to the people surrounding him, therefore making political violence one of the shaping forces behind personal exiles (Alhashmi, 2020).

In *Frankenstein* in Baghdad, the Iraq War and sectarian violence following on the 2003 U.S. invasion create a panorama of political and personal upheaval. This novel makes war-torn Baghdad a place of day-to-day uncertainty, while the violence disrupts any coherence of the character's sense of belonging. The monster stitched together from the remains of war victims, which is at the heart of the novel, serves as a metaphor for fragmentations of Iraq's national identity but mirrors personal dislocation in individuals. Political instability invaded every sphere of city life; hence, the characters can neither get security nor feel attached to their motherland. Ultimately, these personal displacements come to light as a result of the political uproar that has kept going; again, this brings up the close connection between war and identity (AlAsad, 2021).

5.2 Political Upheavals and Exacerbation of Personal Exile

In *The Lowland* and *Frankenstein* in Baghdad, political turmoil presents itself very much as a catalyst for personal exiles. In Lahiri's novel, the involvement of Udayan with the Naxalite uprising results directly in his death, leaving emotional wreckage with which the family struggles afterward. Subhash resettles to the United States, hoping to move away from the political unrest in India, yet his migration allows no real reprieve. Even abroad, he is tied to Udayan's memory

in marrying Gauri and raising Udayan's child as his own. Similar to Subhash, Gauri lives in emotional exile tormented by the memories of Udayan, burdened with guilt and unresolved grief (Alhashmi 2020). Thus, the political unrest of the Naxalite movement has eventually placed the characters in a footing of perpetual emotional exile, where the characters would never find peace or closure. In both novels, there is a creation of the dual effects of political violence in that such upheavals displace individuals physically and break down their identities, thereby disturbing their sense of belonging. Characters exist in continuous exile amidst a world destabilized by conflict and hence lack stability and peace required for rebuilding life (Alhashmi, 2020).

5.3 The Effect of Exile on Characters' Sense of Belonging and Identity

Exile and its consequences on belonging and identity are shown both in *The Lowland* and *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. In *The Lowland*, Subhash moves to the United States in pursuit of a better life. He finds himself trapped in cultural and emotional limbo. Although he has physically distanced himself from political turmoil in India, he remains emotionally connected to his homeland, which hinders his ability to integrate into American culture and prevents him from escaping the legacy of his brother's political activism. Caught between a new life in the U.S. and the past he left behind in India, Subhash experiences a sense of dislocation that permeates his relationships and his sense of self (Bhattacharya, 2022).

Gauri experiences a more serious form of emotional exile. Udayan's death and the political violence surrounding it shatter her identity. She becomes increasingly detached from her new life in America, abandoning her daughter and husband in an attempt to escape the emotional burdens of her past. At the same time, Lahiri shows what internal exile means when Gauri has a traumatic experience in personal relationships and their impact on self-identity as a result of political violence (Alhashmi, 2020).

Similarly, in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the Iraq War upsets any attachment that the characters have to their homeland. Baghdad was a sanctuary and comfortable place; it becomes a phobic and unstable territory where at every turn, displacement and death are looming dangers. This monster, assembled from mismatched body parts, is further reduced to a symbol of the fragmented identities in the inhabitants of Baghdad, symbolizing their struggle to make coherence or stability of anything amidst the chaos. Ultimately, the violence surrounding them defines their identities in continuous exile status within the same city (Metz, 2018).

6. Conclusion

Both Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* focus personal and political exile as key influential forces within the development of characterization and conflict. The novels trace ways that political ferment—the Naxalite movement in India, the Iraq War—displaces lives, leading to dislocation that produces emotional and psychic cleavage. Lahiri and Saadawi interlink personal and political dimensions in order to make exile not only physically separated from the homeland but also alienated from identity, family, and belonging.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri depicts how political violence, migration, and unresolved trauma lead to emotional exile. Udayan's involvement in the Naxalite uprising influences Subhash and Gauri

and produces a series of events that causes their physical and emotional dislocation. Meanwhile, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* uses the war-torn Baghdad as a strong symbol of political dislocation. The monstrous creation of the novel reflects the fractured national identity of Iraq amidst political chaos that has exiled the people within their country, lost in fragmentation and alienation, far away from peace and unity on account of violence and sectarianism.

While both novels focus on exile—personal and political—as the driving theme, they also indicate how the political turmoils, even between India's Naxalite rebellion and Iraq's war-torn reality, exacerbated personal displacement and deepened the wounds of emotion and psychology. Lahiri and Saadawi ponder on the dual nature of exile in a way that the mere fact of displacement severs individuals from their geographical roots and personal identities, strains family bonds, and shatters their sense of belonging. Through *The Lowland*, Lahiri illustrates how political violence and migration incite an enduring emotional exile. Udayan's political activism irreversibly alters the course of Subhash and Gauri's lives, launching the siblings into trajectories defined by cultural, physical, and emotional dislocation. In a related vein, Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* employs the war-torn city as a metaphor for political exile while the Frankenstein monster serves as a symbol for Iraq's fractured identity. The characters continue to live in exile in their homeland, as violence and sectarianism lead to peace and unity that never seem attainable.

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