



**JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *UNACUSTOMED EARTH* AS A MIRAGE OF
CULTURAL IDENTITIES**

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Abstract

Indian-American diaspora writers form a distinct part of the American society which has become an epitome of multicultural and multi-ethnic settlements. They have skilfully explored these experiences through their literary contributions. The United States of America is not only diverse in its cultural aspect but also in its literature, it's rightly called as 'the melting pot'. Pulitzer Prize winning writer Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most acclaimed contemporary Indian-American writer. Her oeuvre of writings sheds light on the immigrant experiences. Her collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* is a fine example of cultural interaction that her characters encounter and the mechanism they adopt to balance their bicultural lives. This paper attempts to analyse the theme of cultural identities. The paper will explore the palimpsest nature of her characters with special reference to culture and identity. (136 words)

Keywords: Diaspora, Culture, Identity, Migration, Immigrant experience

For centuries, the United States has been a land of opportunities. People from all over the world migrate to this land in search of a better future. Since the Jews, others ethnic communities too have made this country their 'new found homeland'. Diaspora literature primarily deals with the literature created by immigrants and about immigrant immigrants. It explores the immigrant psyche and the effects of migration on the native communities. The literatures of the ethnicities have brought major changes in the American literature. Diaspora writing deals with this type of movements and reveals certain features that are similar

to the experience. Jhumpa Lahiri is a famous Indian American author whose works portray the migrants' experiences and their attachment to the homeland.

This paper will explore the various diasporic aspects focusing on the issue of cultural identities in the fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri especially the short story collection entitled *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). This collection of short stories was published followed by the global success of Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* (2003). As the descendent of the first generation of immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri has always been concerned with the idea of an immigrant's identity on foreign soil. For her those individuals that are culturally displaced continue to oscillate between two worlds or two culture systems. Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities in a new cultural space. Lahiri's works manifest the notion of being uprooted from homeland and also emphasizes the quest for blending in the host country. Her characters try to become a "new-self" without really letting go of the "old-self" and thus create stories that display a universal appeal. Lahiri pursues contradictory ways in dealing with the issues of diasporic life which makes her writing a delicate and poised voice within the Indian and world diasporic literature.

Unaccustomed Earth (2008) examines the difficulties that the protagonists have in incorporating and relocating their identities to a place which is more privileged than their original one. Dual identities can be difficult to maintain and practice. Immigrants often face the conflict of interests, identity and most importantly culture. Adhering to two different cultural systems can both be confusing and a tedious task. Individuals constantly move back and forth in the attempt to abide by their native culture and the host culture. Most of them are deeply troubled by the complicated and unresolved issues connected to their hybrid state. Here the marriages are mixed or inter cultural marriage. By marriage and relationships these two different types of people from diverse socio cultural backgrounds are getting united.

Eventually, issues like miscommunication and detachment recurring into their lives. *Unaccustomed Earth* symbolizes the new earth and soil in which the descendants of immigrants as well as their parents submerge their roots and culture. C. G Kurthikadevi in her essay talks about the title of the story collection. She thinks that the title conveys a dual meaning. First, it is suggestive of the world of the first generation immigrants who are now not accustomed to the world of their children. Secondly, a different kind of world is occupied by the children of the immigrants who are no longer connected to the lives they share with their parents.

The new kind of generation and their dilemma gets most significance in this series of writing. In the title story "Unaccustomed Earth" the protagonist Ruma feels traumatic and

nostalgic on the loss of her mother. Ruma feels that after her mother's death she has no way to return to traditional culture of her origin. Ruma considers her mother as a bridge between herself and her Indian roots. Her mother's death severs all her ties with the Indian customs and traditions. She cannot imagine her way back to her origins. Even though Ruma belongs to the second generation of immigrants who is an independent woman, she suddenly grown the feeling of loss of identity. Ruma is portrayed as an independent woman who is born and brought up in the American culture. When she loses her mother, Ruma feels that she has lost a part of her identity. Until her mother's death, Ruma always considered herself an American rather than an Indian. But her mother's death brings her to the realization about her true self. Ruma is married to a white man and has settled down in Seattle. She has a three year old son and expecting her second child. Many years of independent life in America has deprived her of the traditional Bengali culture. She feels that she has lost her Indian identity. She got married against her parents will. Ruma chooses to wear western clothes instead of Indian. Her mother leaves her two hundred and eighteen sarees but after her death Ruma gives all of them away to other women and keeps only three for herself. She seldom uses Bengali language at her home. As she refuses to use her native language it shows that she has become a stranger to her own culture. She only had a very close relationship with her mother with whom she communicated in native way. Ruma's relationship with her father is a distant one. Ruma become worried when her father decided to visit her home one weekend. She thought that her father might become her responsibility. In Bengali culture the children are responsible to look after parents in old age. Ruma thought differently and gets tensed because she was not ready for liabilities and was busy with her own life. Growing up in America made Ruma think more independently but after she lost her mother she get to feel the loss of traditional way of living life. She started missing her mother's visits at her home and taking care of her son Akash. It was her mother who cooks traditional Indian dishes and teaches Akash Bengali rhymes. Her mother's death suddenly brings back to Ruma the feeling of losing national identity. Marrying a white man and living a American life makes Ruma feel a certain kind of self-hate. For Ruma the loss of her mother signifies the loss of a role model in life and the source of traditional culture to return to. On her father's visit gradually the ice was broken between the daughter and father. Her father took the place of her mother in a way. He helped Akash to speak Bengali and created a garden for Ruma at the backyard. As a father he encourages his daughter to live like the Hydrangea flower which changes color depending on the acidity of the soil. In a sense he wants Ruma to get out of her trauma of losing her mother and accept

the reality. Ruma gradually comes to terms with her traditional identity and mends her relationship with her father.

“Growing up, her mother’s example moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma’s life now” (Lahiri, 11).

Ruma’s life between American and Indian culture is a constant negotiation for her. She is well educated; she becomes lawyer in New York and was successful and independent. But after shifting to the new home because of her husband’s job Ruma gave up her professional career and independence. She started being like her mother looking after the house and kid. Eventually, Ruma also has given into the traditional role that her mother used to have. Ruma accepts her position according to the Indian tradition.

She left her home in Pennsylvania to work in New York and then moved with her family to Seattle. The position of in-betweenness, living between two cultures, is uncomfortable and confusing for her. “Only Goodness” is the story of a Bengali American family. Rahul and Sudha are siblings who grow up in American lifestyle with a traditional Bengali origin. The siblings lead a life of double identity and they become rebellious at certain points. Their parents were more into tradition of their native land. The children secretly cling to the new space they are born in. Sudha and Rahul chose their independent life hiding their parents. This type of contradiction is much more visible in an immigrant family and Lahiri did use her dazzling narratives to depict the story.

Sudha had waited until college to disobey her parents. Before then she had lived according to their expectations.... Out of sight in Philadelphia she studied diligently, double majoring in economics and math, but on weekends she learned to let loose, going to parties and allowing boys into her bed. She began drinking, something her parents did not do.” (Lahiri, 129)

The lifestyle Sudha chose for herself was more American and shows her belongingness to the country. Her brother Rahul also did the same and became an alcoholic. Their way of living life was not welcomed by the parents and the relationships just got scattered. Most of the immigrant families lack communication, attachment and unity. The parents think differently and wish for a traditional upbringing. The children try harder to blend into the western land to survive.

Amit from the story “A Choice of Accommodation” comes from an upper class family in India but his wife Megan is white and from a working class American family. The marriage between two was not socially accepted by Amit’s family.

“We eloped eight years ago. Cityhall. He was twenty-nine, Megan thirty-four. It had been exhilarating the joy of getting married combined with the fact that it would all be in secret, without planning, without involvement from anyone else. His parents have not even met her. He was aware of what an insult it was to them. For all their liberal western ways he knew they wanted him to marry a Bengali girl, raised and educated as he had been.” (Lahiri, 111)

Because of his marriage, his parents ended their relationship with him. Therefore, Amit feels depressed both towards his family and his wife. While he got drunk in the wedding ceremony they came to attend Amit tells a stranger woman that how disappointed he is about his marriage. He thinks after the birth of the daughters the relationship bond disappeared. They feel detached from each other.

In “Unaccustomed Earth”, Lahiri tells us stories of Hema and Kaushik. There are three stories about these characters and their dilemmas and trauma of rootlessness. The two families of Hema and Kaushik get to know each other when they are living as Bengali Americans in a neighbourhood in Boston. When they were kids both have a puppy love for each other. But later Kaushik and his family left US and moved back to India. Then after couple of years they suddenly returned to America ending up staying at Hema’s home. Through the narratives described by Hema and Kaushik’s point of view we came to know about their lives. Hema always felt inferior in the American society because of her origin. She doesn’t want to think herself as an Indian so she wanted to marry an American guy. She later on entered into a relationship with a American guy Julian who was married.

Later on Hema got engaged to Navin who was chosen by her parents. Navin is an Indian American like her and shares the same traditional background. The failed and dishonest relation with Julian made her understand the traditional values of being in a relationship. The problems of trust issues, lack of commitment and miscommunication are very much present in the lives of the immigrant children’s. They find themselves rootless.

“My mother’s dead. My father lives in the US’.

“But you are Indian, no?”

“Yes.

“You live in India”

“I don’t live anywhere at the moment”. (Lahiri, 328)

This dialogue between Kaushik and his neighbour depict the rootlessness Kaushik suffers from. He chose to wander around places and countries and never settles down. His state of mind could not make peace with any place which he can call home. Kaushik from his childhood living here and there which can be a reason he never settled down.

To conclude, it can be said that in comparison to their parents' lives, the second generation Indian Americans feel a sense of displacement to a larger extent. Since their lives solely exist and revolve around American culture, lifestyle, philosophy and values, they have an imagined idea about their native country. In the opinion of the second and third generation Indian immigrants, America is their homeland because their lives and identities are shaped by the American society. Assimilation for the first generation is a difficult process in comparison to the second and third generation immigrants. This is because the former feels a strong affinity to the Indian culture as they were born and spent major part of their lives adhering to these values. Whereas, the latter feels alienated towards their own culture as they have never experienced their Indianness practically, they feel comfortable to their American surroundings than their Indian values. In the case of all immigrants, cultural assimilation is a paradox of choices. At times it seems like an easy mundane activity while at other times it poses itself as a challenge.

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