

UNACCUSTOMED EARTH – STORIES OF CULTURAL MIX, CLASHES AND ENDEAVORS OF ACCULTURATION AND CROSS – BORDER RELATIONSHIPS – A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri has become in the last decade one of the most outstanding and evocative voices in the American literary Panorama. All her works deal with the cultural identities and nostalgia for the characters for homeland and the problems they encounter while living in America. Lahiri has acknowledged in interviews that her fiction is largely based on her own memories, personal anecdotes and life experiences. It was in part due to her parents' keen powers of observation and following Indian customs and traditions scrupulously and persistence to raise their children as Indians. Lahiri in her works portrays the lives of Indians in exile, of people navigating between ethnic culture and tradition they have inherited and a baffling new world they must face every day without any bias. She deals with a variety of themes which include physical and emotional displacement, assimilation, isolation or alienation, rootlessness, linguistic hurdles and barriers failed relationships, marital problems and difficulties and even misunderstandings. The most conspicuous trait of Jhumpa Lahiri's writing is her remarkable insight with which she probes deep into the psychological depths of her characters and reveals their inner world from multiple angles. Suman Bala points out: "Lahiri's fiction reminds one of the Victorian styles of character portrayal through scenes and situations, persons and places. Lahiri is a painstaking writer whose quality is reflected in her labored prose that tries to create a balance between the internal and the external aspects between the landscape and the mindscape.... Lahiri's forte is her lovable characters." (2014 : 29)

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Much of her short fiction deals with the lives, the trials and tribulations and the vicissitudes of Southeast Asian Indian (Often Bengali) protagonists, who are trapped or rather caught between two different cultural and social worlds and two different ways of living. With respect to her being a hyphenated American, Lahiri announced in March 2006, while I am American by virtue of the fact that I was raised in this country.

Each story manifests a cultural or social or multicultural problem. Sometimes we find incompatibility of tastes, temperaments, attitudes and even mores of personal life. So, each story creates a unique, self-contained world. Yet, there is always the metaphor of disconnection, disengagement with life in America. Some of the problems of emotional isolation that her characters undergo and experience are universal in their nature. The individuals (mostly immigrants) of different countries, climates and cultures, who are compelled to live away from their own country, experience these trying phases of life. We find reality rather than fancy in the characters of Lahiri's fictional world. She emphasizes the inevitable fact of life that life anywhere in the world demands proper understanding, accommodative nature, maturity and genuineness' in the process of creation of happiness in the world. Her first collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* is subtitled as stories of Bengal, Boston and 'Beyond'. The present collection of study *Unaccustomed Earth* depicts the beyond the writer has taken the title *Unaccustomed Earth* from the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne. The prologue reads as follows:

Human nature will not flourish any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generation, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birth places, and so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into the unaccustomed earth." – Nathaniel Hawthorne "The Custom House"
– (Novel *The Scarlet Letter*)

The prologue itself suggests that this short story collection too deals with Lahiri's perpetual theme life of the migrant Indians. One of the thematic concerns of my dissertation is to look meticulously into the portrayal and presentation of marital relations, failed marriages in this short story collection, which has become internationally popular in no time after its publication. The collection of stories is divided into two parts. The first part consists of five short stories namely *Unaccustomed Earth*, *Hell-Heaven*, *A Choice of Accommodation*, *Only Goodness*, and *Nobody's Business*. Part two entitled *Hema and Kaushik* consists of three stories namely *Once In a Lifetime*, *Year's End* and *Going Ashore*.

All her works almost deal with the themes of cultural identities, clash of cultures and the nostalgia of the characters for homeland and the problems they face while living in America. She also depicts the lives of people who marry from different ethnic backgrounds and the hardships they face in their day to day routine life. These stories deal with life as a whole and

various bonds that are part and parcel of one's life. Lahiri has successfully demonstrated that these bondages, the ups and downs one comes across in life make the person a complete social being. The protagonists and the other characters in these stories represent and reveal the diasporic struggle as well as the journey of the self in search of identity. The author exemplifies in her stories Home K. Bhabha's words, "To be unhome is not to be homeless nor can be unhomely". The *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) got her Frank O. Connor Award, the richest short story prize in the world. The eight stories in the collection analyze, explore and explicate the crisis of identity, which is tied to inability to reconcile the Indian identity with the American one. It is an emotionally astute, character driven assortment of stories that they carry forward and deepen the themes dealt in her previous work. It focuses on the life of second generation immigrants who must guide nurture and direct both the traditional values of their immigrant parents and the mainstream American values of their peers and contemporaries.

The title story explores a daughter's difficulty dealing for the first time with her recently widowed father. In fact, it is a story dealing with daughter-father relationship in a foreign country. Ruma has married Adam, an American and moved to San Francisco. Her father, a retired professional pays a short visit to see his new grandson, Akash, who was just a baby when the grandmother died unexpectedly on the operating table. When Ruma's father visits her, after the death of his wife he wastes his time with great difficulty, undertaking grading projects and becoming close to his new grandson, with whom he finds a rapport. Ruma, a young mother, has settled in Seattle due to her husband's job. She comes to know reliably that her father is on intimate terms with a widowed Bengali lady, and perhaps he wants to marry her much to the dislike of Ruma. Moreover, he is not spending his time happily in his daughter's house due to generation gap. "Ruma couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare.

From this it is very clear that Ruma's father cannot be as happy with her daughter regarding food and other physical aspects as when his wife was alive. Ruma is upset when she realizes that her father does not miss her mother after her death. In fact, she feels that he is happier now, alone: 'Though it upsets her to admit it, if anything he seemed happier now; her mother's death had lightened him, the opposite of what it had done to her'. (33) The palpable sense of loss in the story is balanced with her father's fondness for guarding and his organized life style now.

In the words of Beena Agarwal:

"Jhumpa Lahiri in *Unaccustomed Earth* makes efforts to establish that the warmth of personal relationships is a comprehensive realization that goes beyond the limitations of human experiences. 'Dadu' is tender and sympathetic not only to Akash but exhibits consciousness for growth of plants." (2010: 108, 113)

That is why Ruma accepts this situation of long-term spouses typically dying, within two years of one another's demise, the surviving spouse dying essentially of a broken heart and unbearable solitariness and alienation. "But Ruma knew that her parents had never loved each other in that way".(33) It is obvious; therefore, that marriage has meant different things for different degenerations of Indian women immigrants. Ruma's mother presents a traditional picture of a typical Indian woman. She spends most of her married life attending to domestic chores such as, washing clothes, cooking food, cleaning or washing utensils, rearing up children, looking after their needs, much like her counter-parts in India famous for discharging their domestic duties and household responsibilities. As expected, she goes to Ruma's house at the time of Akash's birth and had been of immense help to her. Such is the tenderly love of an Indian mother to help her daughter to act even as an ayaa or a midwife or even a baby-sitter. Though, she may not know the sophisticated expression *dignity of labour*. She then conforms to the conventional role of the typical Indian grandmother. The bond between Ruma and her mother strengthens and deepens after Akash's birth. "It was after she'd had a child that Ruma's relationship with her mother became harmonious; being a grandmother transformed her mother, bringing happiness and energy Ruma had never witnessed. For the first time in her life Ruma felt forgiven for the many expectations she'd violated shirked over the years." (26-27)

Of course, prior to the birth of Akash, it had been a different relationship. Like the traditional Indian mother abroad, Ruma's mother involved with American boys and ignoring her is the case not with Ruma's mother, but in the case of other traditional women who are immigrants in America behave typically as Indian conventions and cultures. They never deviate; let them migrate to Alabama or Alaska, Newyork or New Jersey. Attitudes never change. Moreover, it is a well-established and proven fact that Indian women indisputably and undoubtedly love their country first, cherish their mores of life, and later when they become immigrant they to acculturate themselves with the new cultures, concepts and traditions.

However, Adam within no time had become a much loved member of the family, a replacement for Romi, Ruma's brother, who had crushed them by moving abroad and maintaining only distant ties. Ruma's father, an individualistic man, now released from the ties of marriage, at the age of seventy, feels free. He begins to travel the world extensively in tour groups something he had never thought of doing before. He soon becomes close to Mrs. Meenakshi Bagchi, a Bengali widow he meets on one of the tours and soon they start "eating together and sitting next to one another on the bus. Because of their common appearance and language, people mistook them for husband and wife." IJE (9) This is not for him his usual love affair of youth, but an extension of what he misses most now that his wife is no more: a close and comfortable companionship. It was not passion but a companionship. Of course, he rightly guesses that Ruma and Romi would never understand. So, he decides to keep to

himself that he enjoyed Mrs. Bagchi's company. Mrs. Bagchi also wants nothing more of him either. She was adamant about marrying and therefore she wants only companionship and does not like sharing her home with another man. She appears in the story not in person but through Ruma's father's thoughts. She is evidently a stubborn woman of strong will and faith.

Her past is: Her girlhood love, who she had married, had died in a scooter accident after two years of marriage. She moved to America soon after that at the age of twenty-six, lest her parents should get her married again. She has been teaching at Stony Brook University for the last thirty years. There is one glaring difference between Bagchi and other Indian Women. Unlike other migrant Indians who visit India as often as possible, she had gone back there only to attend her parents' funerals.

Ruma's father though happy to renew his ties with his daughter, he misses his freedom. Hence, he has no intention of making his home with his daughter, as she had beard. This is really contrary to Indian widowed, who are expected to live with or close by their children. He also misses Mrs. Bagchi, but never tells Ruma about his courting or companionship to Ruma. He writes Mrs. Bagchi a postcard but loses it before posting it. It is only when he has gone home that the lost postcard is found. Meanwhile Ruma realizes the truth. She stamps and posts the card to Mrs. Bagchi, thus accepting that her father, too, has the right to live a life of his own. But in India, the socially and culturally widowed father's life would be totally different from Ruma's father's life. Don't you agree with me? This kind of acceptance comes easier to second-generation Indians.

This idea is reinforced by the motif of gardening in the well-knit story. Ruma's father has always been an avid gardener and he transforms the arid garden in Ruma's home, so far away from her old one, planting flowers her mother had loved in *Unaccustomed Earth*, thus renewing old ties and forging new ones.

In the words of Juhari and Agrawal:

Until "Unaccustomed Earth", Jhumpa Lahiri's concerns were confined for the most part of the Indian immigrant parents to America and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. She wrote about how the parents struggle to keep their children close to them even after they have grown up in Indian tradition of joint family. In this story she steps forward to scrutinize the fate of the second generation and their children. (The Indian Journal of English Studies – OP. Cit 114 -119)

Sravani Biswas points out:

Lahiri's *Unaccustome Earth* reveals a yawning gap between two generations. If pain of alienation and an acute consciousness of it glorify and enrich human experience on this earth, then Lahiri's quotation from Hawthorn's "the custom-House" is an appropriate prologue.... There is a wish for children to strike their roots into unaccustomed earth, but the hope of their fortunes remains within the control of the parents is a far ery. (2002: 104)

The story *Hell-Heaven* is narrated by young by young Usha, a second generation immigrant, who can bridge the gap between cultural differences of the two worlds. Pranab, an MIT graduate, who misses his native people and food a lot, is not the only person who got benefited from his regular visits to Usha's house. Aparna, Usha's mother, too took a liking for the young man and his visits to their apartment. He brought a new lease of life to her as both of them have many things in common. Friendships or familiarities continue only when the wavelength of the people concerned are nearly the same. Usha's father married only to console and pacify or rather placate his parents: "He has wedded to his wife, his research, and existed in a shell." (65) Therefore, Aparna tried to fill the emotional gap in the endearing companionship of pranab. Cooking delicacies for him, changing into a new sari, anticipating Pranab's arrival substantiates her eagerness and interest in him. "He brought it to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt. I don't think only pure happiness she ever felt. I don't think even my birth made her so happy." (67)

When Deborah comes to Pranab's life she comments the relationship as *Hell-Heaven* was *Heart Broken* and took an extreme step in an attempt to end her life by dousing herself with a lighter fluid. It was Mrs. Holcomb a neighbor's call that desisted her from her suicidal plan. When Pranab left Deborah, she turned to Aparna for consolation. Lahiri showcases the culture of Indian society *Vasudeva Kutumbakam*. Aparna who has developed prejudice to Americans is in a position to console Deborah and a stranger like Mrs. Holcomb becomes central in saving Aparna's life. Aparna in her later days, has realized the importance of home billed with flies and has drawn closer to her husband, "I noticed a warmth between my parents that had not there before, a quiet, teasing, solidarity, a concern when one of them fell ill." P.81. Here, we have to observe carefully that Lahiri who has assimilated different cultures, seen and interacted with different types of people, highlights the fact that life demands understanding, maturity and love in the process of creation of happiness in the world. She prioritized the dominant concern in the multicultural world today for love that leads to the creation of happy homes away from homeland.

Lahiri's woman of maternity can be clearly seen in her master piece *Unaccustomed Earth*. Her characters play household roles both subjugated and empowered like Nigerian Women. Lahiri manifests a curious way of attributing power to the women in her fiction. By placing her women characters in traditional roles such as nearly silent or reticent often jobless house-

wife and/or mothers Lahiri displays, through the inner monologue a narrative of her women characters and their impact on other characters consciousness and their communal bonding – in sharp one of their great power. These women use their constant re-evaluation of cross-cultural, Indian American mores, often developed by implementing maternity to improve their lives and the lives of those who live around them. Basically, Indian women are very sociable and they interact with all types of women. Of course, Indian women are outwardly powerless in Western society. Lahiri reveals their inner adaptability in their day to day affairs. They do not have over-assimilatory nature as was the case with the Ashima and Google. We find places of similarity in their attitude and behavior between Ashima, the female protagonist of *Namesake* and Ruma the heroin of the title story *Unaccustomed Earth*. Ruma, a Bengali American woman and former lawyer, is a stay-at-home-mom, expecting the birth of her second child, at the outset of her narrative. At the same time she mother by playing host to her newly widowed father and mothers both Akash, her father and herself both physically and culturally.

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