

PORTRAYAL OF TRANSCULTURAL ETHOS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH*

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Abstract

*Jhumpa Lahiri continues to deal with the subject of the cultural disentanglement experienced by immigrants entrapped between the culture of their Indian origin and the unfamiliar ways of their adopted land in her second short stories collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. The collection more notably draws attention to the lives and diasporic consciousness of second-generation immigrants who are passing through both conventional values of their immigrant parents and the mainstream American values of their contemporaries. *Unaccustomed Earth* secured the esteemed Frank O'Connor award of \$35,000, the richest short story award in the world. In all stories of the collection Jhumpa Lahiri employs the metaphor based on the epigraph, that is introduced in the beginning and which is taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" which reads, "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall sterile their roots into unaccustomed earth." Through this epigraph, Hawthorne advocates that resettling people into the new soil of the unaccustomed earth makes them flourish better as they become hardier.*

Key Words – Diasporic Consciousness, Relocation, Transculturality, Cultural Assimilation

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Like the title asserts, first-generation Indian immigrants create circumstances for their children to strike roots into 'unaccustomed earth'. Yet at the end of the book one understands that some of them do and are gladly transplanted, others do and are not contented. Others decide to immigrate in their turn and reopen the cycle while others free themselves of any roots.

Nostalgia and cultural assimilation have become important aspects of diasporic consciousness in the literary works of Jhumpa Lahiri. She presents cultural assimilation in all the short stories of *Unaccustomed Earth*. It should be noted that dissimilar their parents, the sons and daughters of immigrants are not at all homesick about India. They are born in America and feel full of satisfaction of leading American mode of living. Their parents apply some burden on them for following the traditional values of India. However, the younger generation does not feel any warmth for India except their parents. On the other hand, they think themselves as sons and daughters of America where they live.

The title story 'Unaccustomed Earth' is about a retired Bengali father, recently widowed, who visits his daughter, Ruma, now a mother, in Seattle. After the death of her mother, Ruma thinks it is her moral and social duty to look after her father. However, she is incapable to carry out her responsibility as the American culture is entirely diverse from the Indian one. There is the notion of nuclear family in America: husband, wife and their children. They do not welcome any outsider in their family. This cultural conflict in the mind of Ruma becomes apparent in the as the text states: 'She knew her father did not need taking care of, and yet this very fact caused

her to feel guilty, in India there would have been no question of his not moving in with her.'(Lahiri, 2009: 6)

On the other hand, the father enjoys his freedom after his wife's demise by going on the world trip. During these tours, he met a Bengali lady Mrs. Meenakshi Bagchi who was a widow. Being the only two Bengalis in the tour group, noticeably they'd engaged in the conversation. They started eating together, seating next to one another on the bus. Because of their common look and language, people considered them as husband and wife. Initially, there was nothing far-fetched; neither of them had been fascinated by anything like that. He enjoyed Mrs. Bagchi's company, knowing that at the end of a few weeks, she would take a separate aircraft and disappear. However, after Italy he had started thinking of her, looking onward to getting her emails, checking his e-mail inbox five or six times a day. This is a clear-cut sign of the fact that he had developed a romantic relationship with Mrs. Bagchi, and he was waiting sincerely for the next tour to begin. He would soon meet Mrs. Bagchi again in Prague this time, they'd agreed, they would share a room. However, before this tour, the father wanted to visit his daughter Ruma in Seattle. Ruma attempted her best to offer homely surroundings to her father. She even intended to greet her father at the airport itself. However, the father did not want to create any problems for Ruma, and he came to her house by a rented taxi. Not only that, at Ruma's house he did most of the kitchen and household work that is totally against the norms of an Indian culture. In fact, self-reliance is the important characteristic of American society. No one wants to be reliant on any other. Every man and woman wishes to be self-dependent in America. The father has lived a foremost part of his life in America, and he has also accepted and practiced this American value in his own way. His only son has gone to New Zealand for the job, and his daughter Ruma is leading a married life. So he does not want to disturb and upset the life of his children. He goes on the European excursion to get enjoyment for himself. However, Ruma notices her father's newfound love and his obsession for traveling only after his departure. The story reveals the emotional aloofness between father and daughter, which stopped them from sharing each other's emotions.

A moment earlier before his exit from Ruma's house, Ruma's father thought his grandson, Akash one day left his parents, Ruma, and Adam, similarly like him. A sense of reminiscence

grips his mind as the text writes, 'He imagined the boy years from now occupying this very room, shutting the door as Ruma and Romi had. It was inevitable. (Lahiri, 2009: 51)

We observe that the Indian characters of the story have undoubtedly adopted cultural features of America. Americans are very much career-oriented. They willingly abandon their parents for the sake of their career and goal. Many years ago, Ruma's father also did the same. He forsook his parents in India and came to America to achieve his aim, and now the similar thing has been done to him by his only son Rumi who has gone to New Zealand for the job. As the title indicates, first-generation Indian immigrants create an atmosphere for their children to strike roots into 'unaccustomed earth'. At the end of the book, one realizes that some of them do and are cheerfully relocated and resettled; others do and are not pleased. Others decide to immigrate in their turn and revive the cycle while others favor to free themselves from any roots.

The story portrays the father does who not want to become a burden for his children after the death of his wife. That is the reason, as he decides to live in his own place and lead his life in his own way. Self-dependence is also an important trait of American culture which has been adopted by the father.

The characters of the first generation expatriates in the narrative are Ruma's parents and Mrs. Bagchi. Ruma's parents came to the U.S. to get better educational opportunities: after her father obtains Ph.D. in Biochemistry he gets a worthwhile job in a pharmaceutical company, which enables the family to live in ease. The mother remains at home, and she is only an dormant member in the pursuit for professional and economic growth, her purpose is to cultivate the homeland traditions in the foreign country. The financial strength achieved in America brought the feeling of fulfillment – happiness – which is a word often emphasized by the narrative, is a pointer of a successful life. Ruma's father, as he grows older, feels happier and happier with his life in America having his way towards cultural adaptation. In an interior monologue, he confesses that he is used to having tea with milk, sugar and "Nice" biscuits deeply with his wife; their kitchen cupboard always contained a box of them. These immigrants have adopted features and traditions of the new culture such as celebrating Christmas or Thanksgiving, or certain food habits while maintaining some Indian traits of Indian culture. This thing indicates their hybrid identity and transculturality. Cooking represents a way of maintaining their Indianness, but American ingredients and dishes fill their well-stocked

cupboards and fridges. Therefore, the kitchen of Indian immigrants is hybridized, but the merging of cultures gives them and their children an occasion to develop twofold cultural lenses.

Mrs. Bagchi is driven by a different aim when she comes to America. This is connected with her widowhood. She is also successful/ – she fulfills her wish for liberty and independence. She escapes India for fear of being enforced by her parents to remarry after her beloved husband's death. America offers a protection: the woman can make a decision about her life in America the not reserved by traditions or social restrictions. She achieves a doctorate in Statistics, becomes a professor at a university, and is totally independent in her life, even though in the opinion of an Indian community she is regarded as a freak, an abnormality, because she is a lonely Indian woman. In both examples, Ruma's father and Mrs. Bagchi, the accomplishment of success is connected with a gradual assimilation process.

Ruma's father feels more comforted when the last link with India is broken after his wife's death. With a sense of pleasure, he submerges himself in American culture. After he retires, he carries out activities typical for Americans. He becomes a volunteer for a Democratic Party in Pennsylvania, and he begins to travel preferring package tour to Europe. The drive from the east to the west coastline to meet his daughter is also not difficult for the seventy-year-old man. Furthermore, coming to Seattle, he still feels at home, well-known with the American scenery, which is contrasted with his European travels. The change takes place also in his look. Ruma is surprised when she saw how her father looked like an American in his old age with his gray hair and American clothes. Mrs. Bagchi, his fellow tourist, has also Western clothes and hairstyle, but more particularly, her life is a kind of rebellion against Indian values and customs, at the same time being a willing adjustment to the American value system. Even though passing through cultural assimilation the representatives of the first generation immigrants are however, cultural hybrids. They are familiar with their roots, but they also recognize that to get the success they need to adapt to the new cultural system, which they do necessarily, because of the contact with another culture./ Commenting on this aspect of cultural assimilation of second generation immigrants dealt by Jhumpa Lahiri, Nandini Sahu rightly observes;

While she also writes judiciously about the residents of India and the United States, Lahiri makes her most momentous to endowment to contemporary American literature by arresting the flimsy balance between cultural choices and

personal bureau in the lives of second-generation South-Asian Americans. In particular, she expounds the necessary detachment from the originating culture of immigrant parents and the daily lives of their American- raised children, an aspect of the second generation experience. /(Sahu, 2007:93)

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