

CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S
UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to realize the cultural conflicts in Jhumpa Lahiri's story Unaccustomed Earth. Being diaspora writer she writes about the Indian Bengali community people migrated to America. Her works depict emigrants experiencing dual life and try to assimilate in the foreign culture keeping them stick to the homeland culture i.e. Bengali culture. Ruma, the protagonist of the story struggles hard in the assimilation. Present paper focuses on her struggle which is representative of every Indian woman who has migrated to the foreign land along with her husband. Ruma's story also explores the family issues associated with Indian heritage and conventions. Being migrated to the foreign land Indians establish community attachment in order to share their common suffering. They struggle hard to come up to compromise between the two cultures; homeland and adopted home.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Dispersion, Dislocation, Homeland, Emigrants, Postcolonial literature*

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Diaspora is a metaphorical term in the usual terminology of the literary criticism today. It was first used as an agricultural metaphor associated with the idea of dispersion. It also undermines the sowing or scattering seeds. Moreover, its initial metaphorical attribution is with the dispersion of a particular community or people. For example the Jews, after the Babylonian captivity were forced to leave Palestine. The classical, Jewish diaspora has carried over its meaning, extending it to other similar dispersions. Like the Jewish diaspora there are African diaspora, Asian diaspora, Indian diaspora, and others. Basically Diaspora is a minority community living in exile. The Oxford English Dictionary 1989 Edition (second) traces the etymology of the word 'Diaspora' back to its Greek root and to its appearance in the Old Testament (Deut: 28:25). It is mentioned that God's intentions were that the people of Israel should be dispersed across the world.

Diaspora Literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Indian diaspora literature constitutes an important part of the budding field of postcolonial literature published throughout the world. Some of the well known writers are V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, M.G. Vassanji, Shyam Selvadurai, and Kiran Desai. The growing international fame of these writers has gone hand in hand with the popularity of postcolonial criticism and theory. According to Bed Prasad Giri,

'The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement—a perennial theme in all exile literature. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sense of displacement. Their concerns are

global concerns as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles. These exilic states give birth to the sense of displacement and rootlessness.'¹ (Giri 243-253)

In diaspora literature cultural conflicts are recognized through the projections of 'otherness.' The Indian diaspora literature tries to focus the clash of identity that the migrated people experience in the foreign land. As Amartya Sen has rightly pointed out that 'the nature of Indian identity is significant for those who live in India. But it is also important for the very large Indian diaspora across the world-estimated to be 20 million or more in number. They see, rightly, no contradiction between being loyal citizens of the country in which they are settled and where they are socially and politically integrated (Britain or United states or Malaysia or Kenya or wherever), and still retaining a sense of affiliation and companionship with India and Indians. As is frequently the case with emigrants in general the Indian diaspora is also keen on taking pride- some self- respect and dignity – in the culture and traditions of their original homeland.'² (Sen 73) Thus there is a cultural conflict of opposites in the mind of the migrants.

Famous diaspora writer Jhumpa Lahiri in her works writes about migrant experiences and how the emigrants suffer from cultural conflicts. Her works primarily focus on first and second generation emigrants, exploring themes of exile, isolation, and assimilation and clash of culture between the homeland and migrated land. She could write it because she herself had experienced the pains of cross cultural dilemma. In her interview to 'Newsweek' she told Barbara kantrowitz, 'I have often felt that I am somehow illegitimate in both cultures. A true Indian does not accept me as an Indian and American don't accept me as an American.'³ (kantrowitz 187)

Unaccustomed Earth is Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories. After writing the first collection Interpreter of Maladies which received the Pulitzer Prize the Unaccustomed earth is her second collection of stories. The title Unaccustomed Earth—is the title of the first story in this collection. It is symbolic as it hints at the unaccustomed life of the migrated family of Adam and Ruma. The story has migrated Indian American characters living in the mixed cultural environment. There are three generations the father, his

daughter, Ruma, and her son, Akash. The symbolic title suggests a world unaccustomed to the dilemmas and changes taking place on its surface. The story depicts the characters that are migrants full of distressed hearts and confused minds struggling in unknown lands. They struggle to accept peculiar lifestyle of the foreign land while at the same time holding the Indian conventional ways in which their forefathers wanted them to be attached.

The story depicts a father, a retired widower who visits his daughter Ruma's new home in the suburbs of Seattle. The story explores the family issues associated with Ruma's Indian heritage, including her sense of obligation to care for her father and allow him to stay along with her. But since their day today struggle to live in Seattle and managing the expenses of family she could not afford it. In addition to that since her father is old and who has recently become a widower would demand more attention from her. This is a cultural clash that she suffers. In India there are joint families in which old parents are looked after by their wards. They keep them in the house and take care in their old age. But for Ruma her father would be 'responsibility'. 'Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash.'⁴ (7)

What makes the story most compelling is the limited communication between the father and daughter, both afraid in some way to acknowledge that they have moved away from their culture of origin and have embraced aspects of the new culture. . Thus Ruma is sandwiched between the family and father responsibilities. In Indian culture sons and daughters keep their old parents with them as a part of their family duty. But Ruma couldn't imagine her father staying with her since it will disturb her own family set up Adam, Akash and the second child that would come in January. This suffering makes her feel worse since she is unable to offer place to her father in her spacious home. Thus Ruma suffers from trauma of cultural clash.

Ruma's son Akash belongs to the third generation of emigrants, and completely engrossed in the migrant land culture, develops a strong attachment with his grandfather's habits that are foreign to him. Even the language that his 'Dadu' speaks is a kind of foreign language for him. This

attraction between the child and his grandfather is an interesting twist in the story which can be viewed as the universal bond between a child and a grandparent. Later on the grandfather wishes to leave the house since he realized that it is very difficult for the migrated family to manage things as it is managed in India. Therefore he decides to leave Ruma's house admitting – 'I don't want to be a burden.'⁵ (52)

Migrants try to establish community attachments. Caught physically between the two worlds, they are to use Victor Turner's term 'transitional being(s) or liminal person(a) that is they are in the process of moving from one cultural state of existence to another. According to Turner this state of transition, some respond ambivalently to their dual, often antithetical, cultures or societies. Some attempt to assimilate and integrate. Ruma's father resembled an American in his old age. He was wearing a baseball cap that said POMPEII, brown cotton pants and a sky blue polo shirt and a pair of white leather sneakers. Ruma also starts wearing the American dresses like T shirts and trousers etc.

'Of the two hundred and eighteen saris, she (Ruma) kept only three, placing them in a quilted zipped bag at the back of her closed telling he mother's friends to divide up the rest.'⁶ (17)

Ruma and her family no more eat Indian food rather they prefer to eat pasta and pizzas. Akash loves to eat macaroni and hates Indian food dishes. Once Ruma prepares begunis, Bengali dish Akash refuses to eat them and rather prefer to eat macaroni. Ruma scolds him, 'Why do you buy those things? They are filled with chemicals.' But Akash restores frowning at his father's plate and says 'I hate that food' (begunis)⁷ (23) Thus the second and third generations of migrants do not like to eat the traditional Indian food rather they keep the habit of eating the food of the migrant land only. These generations even do not know eating with fingers but they develop the habit of eating with spoons and forks. Akash do not know how to eat with fingers.

Migrated people particularly women live alienated life in the foreign land since their husbands are away for the work. Unlike the Bengali joint family culture in Seattle Rum lives a secluded family life where husband and

wife live without parents. Ruma lives an alien and hostile life with no friends and relatives in the foreign land of Seattle. Although more traditional her father tries to persuade her to continue her legal career while being a mother and a sole caretaker of the family she finds difficult to manage things all alone. She has no friends to communicate the day today affairs as it is the case in Indian situation where women enjoy gossiping the day to today matters among each other. Ruma even stops speaking Bengali. Her mother taught some Bengali to Akash when he was a child. But when he started speaking English Ruma stopped the discipline laid down by her mother to stick to Bengali.

'Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her. Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. But her father didn't mind. On the rare occasions Ruma used Bengali anymore, when an aunt or uncle called from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya or Akash a Happy Birthday, she tripped over words, managed tenses. And yet it was the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life.'⁸ (12)

Thus the life of the wife who has migrated along her husband for his better prospectus in the foreign land is more alienated and hostile as compared to the husband.

Conclusion

To conclude the characters of the Unaccustomed Earth suffer cultural clash in the migrated land. They are so evocative that the readers find them in their memory, in their homes, in their lives, in all of those awkward and nostalgic situations, that they are almost living their private lives. These characters are Indian emigrants to Seattle. They experience navigation between the cultural values of their birthplace and their adopted home. They try to evolve a mixed type of culture of their own as a compensation and compromise. They suffer from dispersement or dislocation that creates feelings, experiences and issues like dislocation and cultural conflicts.

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