

## **THE INTRICACIES OF DIASPORIC RELATIONSHIPS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S UNACCUSTOMED EARTH**

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### ***Abstract***

*Jhumpa Lahiri's in her second collection of eight stories Unaccustomed Earth describes the lives of the first and second generation of Indian American diaspora. The characters strive hard to keep a balance between Indian and American culture. This struggle of striking a balance between two vastly different cultures takes its toll on their relations. People of dual cultural identities live a confused life as they are torn between the traditions of their native and adopted country. The first generation of migrants still yearns for their roots and the second generation is at crossroads, finding it difficult to select which way to go and how to connect with their families and friends. Unaccustomed Earth, the first story of the collection a tale about relationships; it explores a wide range of human relationships, husband-wife, daughter-father, daughter-mother, parent-child and grandson- grandfather relationships This paper studies Unaccustomed Earth with an aim to explore the intricate web of different relationships portrayed in the story.*

**Key words:** *Relationships, identity, Indian, American, culture, conflicts, struggle, immigrants.*

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NilanjanaSudeshnaLahiri popularly known as JhumpaLahiri has notched an indelible place among the contemporary writers of English literature. Her parents were the first generation of Bengali immigrants in the United Kingdom. When she was three, her parents moved to America and she grew up in Kingston Rhode Island. As Nilanjana was difficult to pronounce, her teacher at Kindergarten decided to call her by her nick name Jhumpa. After several rejections, her short stories were finally published under the title Interpreter of Maladies (1999) which received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Namesake (2003) her first novel and later on her collection of stories Unaccustomed Earth (2008) and the novel The Lowland (2013) brought her literary acclaim and accolades.

Unaccustomed Earth (2008) received favorable reviews and reached the number one spot on the New York Time bestseller list. It was awarded the Frank O'Connor International Short Story award and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Europe and South Asia. Appreciating the collection Dwight Garner, senior editor of The Times' in Book Review section, wrote in his blog: "It's hard to remember the last genuinely serious, well-written work of fiction — particularly a book of stories — that leapt straight to No. 1; it's a powerful demonstration of Lahiri's newfound commercial clout".

The eight stories in Unaccustomed Earth fall into two sections. The first section contains five stories (*Unaccustomed Earth, Hell-Heaven, A Choice of Accommodations, Only Goodness and Nobody's Business*) and the second section contains three stories (*Once in a Lifetime, Year's End and Going Ashore*). The title of the collection is borrowed from a passage in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letters*. The passage is featured in the first part of the novel and is entitled *The Custom-House*. "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 strike their roots into unaccustomed earth" (13). The quoted passage presents the struggle of post colonial immigrant generations who crave to recreate a sense of home in a new and unfamiliar place with the hope of establishing new identities.

Until Unaccustomed Earth, Lahiri's literary focus was on the first generation of Indian American immigrants and their struggle to retain their roots as well as to realise their American Dream. In Unaccustomed Earth, she continues to explore the dilemma of the second

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generation of immigrant as they live a successful life, but the gulf between them and the first generation leaves both of them scarred and isolated. In the story the first generation characters are represented by Ruma's father, her dead mother and Mrs. Bagchi, the second generation is represented by Ruma and her son Akash, whose father is American and mother America born Indian, is the representative of the third generation. The first and second generations are still living in their Third Space and the third generation is unaware of their dual identity.

Ruma is a thirty-eight year old married woman living in a spacious house outside Seattle with her American husband and their three year old son Akash. She has been successful as a career woman, but now she is pregnant with her second child. Her mother is dead and her father has retired and now living life on his terms as he travels around Europe on package tours. When Ruma decided to marry Adam her mother harshly reacted to her decision. She did "everything in her power to talk Ruma out of marrying Adam, saying that he would divorce her, that in the end he would want an American girl". (26) Ruma's father communicated his outrage in refusing to even discuss the matter. Their reaction to Ruma's decision is quite similar to the protective attitude of Indian parents who are worried about society and traditions. Though Ruma believes that she has disappointed her parents by marrying a caucasian, but she feels her failure to get selected in Ivy Leagues has caused a major breakdown in her relationship with her father. She has "felt the prick of his criticism as she had all her life". (13) She believes that her father, despite her successful career as a lawyer has more respect for her younger brother "for having graduated from Princeton and getting a Fulbright to go abroad" (37).

The gulf that separates expatriate Bengali parents from their American-raised children is not only of different generation but also of different values and traditions. The lack of communication between the two generations has resulted in breakdown of emotional bonds. Ruma is not able to connect with her father who in turn believes: "that the entire enterprise of having a family, of putting children on this earth, as gratifying as it sometimes felt, was flawed from the start" (54-55). Ruma's father confesses his own neglect of his parents when his father was dying and when he turned his back on his eighty year old widowed mother for the sake of "his ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered anymore, he had forsaken them" (51). Though she has married against the wishes of her parents, but when her father visits him like an excited child she tries to impress him with her new home. "Her father looked out the window, but said nothing. Her mother would have been more forthcoming, remarking on the view, wondering whether ivory curtains would have been better than green". (14) She recalls her childhood fear when she'd cried all night, convinced after her teacher at school had talked about the dangers of smoking that her father would die within a handful of years. The nonchalant behaviour of his father who didn't even try to comfort his little daughter still pained her. This coldness of her father reminds her of her mother's warmth. Her mother was approachable, but her father was living in his own world away from his children. "She had never been able to confront her father freely, the way she used to fight with her mother". (37) Ruma is also worried about her bond with her son "about the profound barrier she assumed would set in with adolescence" (10).

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After initial apprehensions Ruma's parents later on accept Adam as their son-in-law. He is introduced to Indian traditions by his Indian mother-in-law. This she does by cooking Indian food and his favourite Indian cream-filled cakes for him. Ruma's mother establishes a special bond with his American -son -in-law she would chat with him on the phone when Ruma was not at home and exchange emails. After Ruma's mother's death Adam lost all his connections to Indian culture, he is not able to identify with the idea of joint family when Ruma discusses with him the idea of her father staying with them instead he indirectly points out that her father could be an added responsibility to her. But he didn't object to the idea of her father living with them. His willingness to surrender to her whims makes him a loving and generous husband. Ruma's father, though has accepted Adam, but is unable to show any warm gesture for him. The postcards he sent were always addressed to Ruma, her father never included Adam's name or mentioned Akash. In her thirty-eight years these, postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had received from her father. His trips were too brief for Ruma to answer him back. 'It was only in his closing that he acknowledged any personal connection between them. "Be happy, love Baba," he signed them, as if the attainment of happiness were as simple as that'. (4)

Ruma's mother represents the first generation female immigrants who do not have any identity of their own. She remains nameless throughout the story and referred to as wife or Ruma's mother. They are expected to cook, clean and look after their husbands and children. These desperate housewives despise suburban American life and are unable to cope up with the secluded life in America. Alfonso-Forero describes immigrant motherhood as a lifelong pregnancy, continuously feeling out of sorts. Indian American mother acts as the guardian of Indian traditions and values in Indian household, at the same time making their children aware of their roots and inculcating in them a sense of self as both Indians and Americans. Ruma had never appreciated her mother's traditional ways: "She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare", but after her death, Ruma sees herself as the image of her mother. It was only after she becomes a mother herself Ruma's relationship with her mother becomes harmonious. "She came to look forward to their nightly conversations, reporting the events of the day, describing what new things Akash had learned to do". (27) She has recently moved to Seattle from Brooklyn and is trying to adjust herself to responsibilities of stay-at-home-mother. Ruma longs for the friends in Brooklyn, the unfamiliar surroundings, the recent death of her mother awkwardness due to her new pregnancy and the demands of motherhood make her understand the problems which her mother might have faced in a strange country. Ruma has viewed the life of her mother, "as a warning, a path to avoid,"(11) but now finds her life as the image her mother. Ruma is unable to come to terms with the loss of her mother, she feels uprooted as her mother was her only connections to her original roots. It was at her mother's insistence that she spoke Bengali in the home and taught Akash some Bengali words. Ruma's reluctance to venture out, to get acquainted with the city, to make new friends and to look for potential employers represent the same struggle that her mother would have encountered when she first arrived in America. "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" (11).

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Ruma's misses her mother's over protective attitude and her selfless concerns for her. Her death has damaged Ruma's sense of self as part Indian which she might have passed on to her son, Akash. "There were times Ruma felt closer to her mother in death than she had in life, an intimacy born simply of thinking of her so often, of missing her". (27)

The story contains three marital relationships out of them two are arranged and one a love marriage. The loveless forty years old marriage of Ruma's parents is a contrast to the happiest two years old marriage of Mrs. Bagchi. She married a boy she'd loved since childhood and when her husband died two years after their marriage, she refused to remarry, immigrated to America and remained a widow. But for Ruma father death of his wife is the end of all responsibilities, he is now free to embark on his tour of Europe. The central problem with Ruma's parents' marriage is a lack of warmth and love. They have never loved each other the way Mrs. Bagchi loved her husband. Mrs. Bagchi's love for her dead husband makes Ruma's father admit it that Mrs. Bagchi's "had loved her husband of two years more than he had loved his wife of nearly forty" (30). The fact is also that Mrs. Bagchi's marriage has not confronted the challenges of living in a new and alien place away from homeland.

Ruma's father respects Mrs. Bagchi and feels attracted towards her, because "she expected so little, he was generous with her, attentive in a way he'd never been in his marriage" (9). Mrs. Bagchi and Ruma's father have real compassion and understanding for each other. Mrs. Bagchi is opposite of his wife she is independent unlike Ruma's mother and enjoys living in solitude like Ruma's father. Ruma's father's loneliness and concealed desire to remain connected with his roots results in his admiration and intimacy with Mrs. Bagchi. He visits his daughter with a hidden agenda to inform his daughter about his association with Mrs. Bagchi.

Though Ruma's father was shocked by his wife's death, but now he seems liberated this is even noticed by Ruma; "he seemed happier now; her mother's death had lightened him, the opposite of what it had done to her". (33) After his wife's death Ruma's father is a free man, he loves travelling alone and enjoying the staggering breadth of his adopted country. He remembers the hustle and bustle of the endless journey to Calcutta with his wife. These trips to India have caused him anxiety and shame while now he enjoys traveling alone. He had a successful career in a pharmaceutical company which helped him to provide economic stability and comfort to his family. The satisfaction of leading a successful life in his adopted country makes him feel happier. He is happy with his life in America and feels himself connected to American politics and culture. The change in him surprises Ruma as she is surprised by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age. When she compares the attire of her parents she reflects "her mother's colourful saris and striking jewellery would have made her stand out in suburban Seattle, whilst her father's typical American attire and baseball cap made him blend in as an American". (11)

When he expresses his desire to spend a week with his daughter, it surprises her because after her mother's death, it was Roma who had always called him up to know about his well being and kept a track of his trips. "You're always welcome here, Baba," (52) she'd told her father on the phone. "You know you don't have to ask." (52) This conversation between father

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and daughter expresses the distance between them. Her mother would not have asked. She would have enthusiastically announced "We're coming to see you in July," she would have informed Ruma, with the plane tickets already in hand. There had been a time in her life when such presumptuousness would have angered Ruma. She missed it now". (5) Adam believes that Ruma's father will be able to help her if he stays with her, but Ruma disagrees as she recalls how her mother had helped her after Akash's birth "taking over kitchen, singing songs to Akash teaching him Bengali nursery rhymes, and throwing loads of laundry into the machine" (6) while her father sat in an armchair reading Times waiting for the time to pass. But during his one week stay Ruma's father does his best to fill the emotional vacuum created after her mother's death in the life of his daughter. It appears as if he has taken this trip with an aim to build bridges with his daughter. He helps around the house, plays with Akash and even teaches him Bengali numbers and colours. Akash also enjoys his company and goes out with him for his swimming lessons. Ruma is surprised to see his secluded father having fun with his grandson and she confirms that it is the first time her father had fallen in love. His grandfather who never showed any interest in the swimming lessons of his own children considers days with Akash as the greatest gift. It is his grandson with whom he feels a "sense of himself reconstituted in another." (16) "He was suddenly conscious that he would probably not live to see Akash into adulthood, that he would never see his grandson's middle age, his old age, this simple fact of life saddening him" (51).

Ruma's father never expressed his pains and worries to his family and struggled all alone to provide a comfortable life to them. Ruma his own daughter drifted away from him. "All his life he didn't feel condemned by her, on his wife's behalf. She and Ruma were allies. And he had endured his daughter's resentment, never telling Ruma his side of things never saying that his had been overly demanding, unwilling to appreciate the life he'd worked hard to provide". (40) But Ruma is oblivious to these other aspects of her father's life. Without apprehending the extent of the hardships he confronted as a husband and first generation immigrant, she blames him for being reclusive unapproachable and unexpressive father.

When Ruma's father goes to work on her garden he establishes a special connection with his daughter and grandson who "felt flattered by his interest in the place in which she lived, by his desire to make it more beautiful". (42) She also acknowledges that her father is "self-sufficient and helpful, to the point where she had not had to wash a dish since he'd arrived". (47) In addition, it also provided Ruma's father an opportunity to pay tribute to his wife, who he realised, was a girl when she took responsibilities of a wife and mother. He seems to feel guilty for not having provided her with a happier life. He honors her memories by the act of planting his wife's favourite plant hydrangea in Ruma's garden. He never appreciated the culinary skills of his wife, but while eating food cooked by his daughter, who is an ordinary cook in comparison to his wife he repeatedly tells her how delicious the food is. Earlier, he was never conversant during meals but in the presence of his daughter and grandson he makes small conversations. Ruma also reflects his loving gestures "the small little ways her father had come to her rescue" (34), his quiet way of monitoring her driving, glancing now and then at the speedometer, looking along with when she was about to switch lanes. He wants to shield his

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daughter against the surprises of life and therefore tries to persuade Ruma to seek employment and become self-reliant and financially independent. He is concerned that his daughter will be unhappy and an isolated stay-at-home-mother like his wife.

He has no plans to live with his daughter and Ruma is also hesitant to ask his father to live with her. She knows "that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to" (7). Hence there is no reawakening of Indian values of a daughter looking after her old father it is just mere Americanism, the need of the situation. The fact is that she needs him more than he needs her. "He knew that it was not for his sake that his daughter was asking him to live here. It was for hers". (53) He leaves Seattle without telling his daughter about his secret affair with Mrs. Bagchi. Ruma comes to know about it when she finds the postcard addressed to Mrs. Bagchi. It devastated her, reminding her with "more force than the funeral, more force than all the days since then, that her mother no longer existed" (59), eventually she mails the postcard to the other woman for the sake of her father's happiness.

Immigrants leave their native country in search of better lives and opportunities they arrive in countries like the United States of America to fulfil their dreams of successful and luxurious life. The pressure to maintain a balance between their dual identities takes its toll on their relationships. The approaches that the first and second generations have to each other, and to relationships that is between husband-wife and parent-child, are widely diverse. They stand at the crossroads of attachment and detachment. When the first generation has adapted to the values and traditions of their adopted country and the second generation has attained successful career instead of being happy they grieve the loss of their relations and original roots.

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