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**Diasporic Consciousness: A Study of Identity Crisis in
Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth"**

K.PARTHIBAN,

Research Scholar (FT),
English, PG and Research Department of English,
Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous)
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy),
Trichy, Tiruchirappalli.
Tamil Nadu, India - 620 020.
E-Mail : kalai.parthi3@gmail.com
Mobile : 97866 91100

Dr.A.AJMAL KHAAN

Research Guide & Associate Professor of
PG and Research Department of English,
Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous)
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University,
Tiruchirappalli.
Tamil Nadu, India - 620 020.
E-Mail : aajmal@jmc.edu
Mobile : 94880 15302

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the creative work of renowned diasporic Indian writer Jhumpa Lahiri in her collection of eight short stories entitled "Unaccustomed Earth" where, she has explored the tug of war between the traditional-cultural values sustained by the immigrant parents but was curtailed by their precocious young American teenagers. The oscillation of permanent settlement in the new land and an overwhelming nostalgia for the home land is a persistent theme of diasporic writers. In the introductory part of the research paper diaspora is defined and elucidated. The dispersion of Indian people across the globe and their vivid experiences and suffrages is discussed in the second part of the paper. The central themes of the diasporic writer and Indian diasporic writers and their closeness and correlation to celebrated diasporic writer Jhumpa Lahiri is discussed in the subsequent paragraphs. Diasporic terms like assimilation, adaptation, hybridity, host culture, ethnic and culture conflicts have been discussed in the light of the 'Unaccustomed Earth' by Lahiri. Irresistible past of the immigrants for their land of origin is a perennial source of study among diasporic writers. This paper explores the tug of war between the first-generation migrants who

have the sense of rootlessness, alienation, and nostalgic homesickness on one hand and the hybrid and multicultural third generation and its synthesis of the past and the modern leading to socio-cultural, linguistic, and psychological transfusion widening new dimensions for the next generation in Lahiri's stories.

Keywords: alienation, hybridity, diaspora, cultural conflict, identity crises and adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

Etymologically the term "Diaspora" means dispersion or a dispersed community. It is a kind of physical dislocation, along with cultural, traditional, social, and value-based migration to alien lands. The Greek word 'diaspora' means "to scatter about." Migration is an indispensable element throughout the history of human evolution. Humans leave their homeland due to economic crisis, ethnic persecutions, social and political instability, and sometimes for adventure too and the pursuit is the quest of high economic stability, religious security, high living standard and political and social freedom and different avenues of adventure and explorations. As Dubey states 'they leave their homes to avoid starvation or simply to improve their economic status' (Dubey;2003-p156). Rapid cultural transition shapes the future of the expatriates in an alien land. Jhumpa Lahiri in 'Unaccustomed Earth' tells how characters trapped in the intricacies of familial rootlessness and resentment on one side and restlessness and adaptation and assimilation of new culture of an alien land on the other. In an alien land, people find economic stability, quality life, and religious and social freedom which they scared to lose...for many whose children have grown up in the western environment and cannot adjust to an 'alien' way of life in their own home country, there is no question coming back, leaving the children behind (Dubey; 2003 p-165). Lahiri's stories highlight the emotional conflicts of its characters due to migration. The sense of being between two poles makes migrants lives apprehensive. People of Indian origin have migrated across the globe. Countries like Fiji, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, UK, Canada, USA, Mauritius, South Africa, Bali Islands, Guyana, Kenya, and Uganda have been populated by Indian migrants as of today's report. However, after the repeal of Immigration and Nationality act 1965 large scale migration is noticed in the United States highly educated and skilled class of Indian scientist, IT professional, engineers, accountants, doctors, professors, and business industry professional ranks them as an elite class in the United States today.

Statement of the Problem/Research Questions

What is diaspora? Why do immigrants feel isolation and develop sense of unbelonging to a host culture in an alien land? Why do immigrants suffer identity crisis and ethnic rootlessness in a foreign land? How does cultural hegemony dominate or affect each other in the process of

simultaneous co-existence? What are the challenges to ethnicity of the immigrants? What is the present status of Indian diasporic writers? What is the new outlook of the post-colonial writers to patch the cultural gaps and hybridity are some of the questions taken into preview in this study.

Research Objectives

The specific objective of this research paper is to clarify the concepts of hybridity and cultural hegemony of the immigrants. It develops an understanding of the Post Colonial pronouncement of hybridity, assimilation, and adaptation with an amber of nostalgia, anguish and non- belongingness in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. The research paper elucidates how do the modern writings and post-colonial theories contribute in the understanding of diaspora and terms connected with it.

Limitations of the Study

Jhumpa Lahiri's literary corpus is enormous. She has written exhaustively under various themes hence, to encompass her all-literary work is next to impossible. The procurement of documented interviews and statements on diasporic consciousness at different literary summits and concerts is not available hence it is very difficult to cover. Therefore, in this study, a philosophical, metaphorical, emotional connection is limited to 'Unaccustomed Earth.' In addition, Lahiri's assertive personal memoirs and interviews bites available pertaining to the concept of diaspora and its challenges are only taken into consideration for this study.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology is based on qualitative descriptive analysis. A comprehensive study of Lahiri's 'Unaccustomed Earth' novels, notes and assertions at literary concerts and summits and a comparative look into Diasporic Indian consciousness of the author in relation with other diasporic writers is taken into the study. However, the study of critical notes, articles on diasporic theme, Wikipedia, and internet sources for research reviews act as its secondary sources.

Jhumpa Lahiri as Indian Diaspora Writer

Jhumpa Lahiri is one the most celebrated Indian diasporic writer. Born in London in 1967 to Indian parents and migrated to USA at the age of two Lahiri was raised in Rhodes Island. Graduated from Bernard and Boston universities, she is awarded a Doctorate in Renaissance Studies. She is the first American Indian to win the Pulitzer Prize, the PEN/Hemingway Award and The New Yorker Debut of the year for her first collection of short stories 'Interpreter of Maladies.' Lahiri's novel 'Namesake' is ranked a New York Times Notable Book and is Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist also it was selected as one of the best books of the year.

Her second collection of short stories is 'Unaccustomed Earth,' published in 2008.

Indian diasporic writers like V.S. Naipaul, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharti Mukherjee, Menna Alexander, Uma Parmeswaran, Jasbir Jain, Salman Rushdie, and Jhumpa Lahiri have copiously dealt with themes like cultural alienation, cultural hybridity, hybrid cultures, resentment and estrangement to multiculturalism, emotional and psychological conflicts, adaptation and assimilation, loss of inherited ideals and family values etc.

In her literary creative works Jhumpa Lahiri is pre-eminently concerned with the intricacies of emigrants and their struggle in cross cultural adjustments. Born to parents of Indian origin in 1967 she has experienced the pain of unbelonging, alienation, hybrid cultures, loss of inheritance and estrangements in the host culture in America.

The mirage mania towards the lands of colonial powers in most evident cases is economic surge, stability, security, and an orientation towards the free code of life in all forms and manifestation. The diasporic writers have written copiously on account of their vivacious experiences, observations, and imaginative innovations. It is noteworthy that the tempo, ethos, values, norms, and nuances of the period these writers have lived or are living in, have tremendously influenced their writing. A new outlook has predominantly developed by the Post Colonial writers. A self-expressive quest for identity, zealous affirmation for customs, traditions, and an admittance of the remarkable transition from the cultural and religious tenor are a few prominent themes of Post Colonial Indian diasporic writers.

Jhumpa Lahiri's female characters in particular wrangle between subjectivity and psychological adaptations. Transformations of the characters and oscillation between the modern and the traditional, nostalgic for the uprooted land and adaptation of the hybrid, haunting of the past and apprehensiveness of the future are some of the major themes Lahiri has dealt with precision and accuracy. Lahiri being a migrant herself in her interview asserts "It bother me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I full belonged." ([jhumpainterview.htm](#)) It is something like Homi K. Bhabha named as 'hybrid' "in between space"- a space in diasporic consciousness created by counters of the immigrants with new ways of life in a new culture." (Bhabha 1994;1) Lahiri's existential struggle for self-identity is implicit in her statement "I think for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, and the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. One the one hand, the problem for the children of immigrants- those with strong ties to their country of origin- is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This is my experience, in any

case” (Jhumpa interview.htm).The flux of new persona in diasporic land is clearly perceptible in this interview.

Ethnic and Cultural Conflict in Unaccustomed Earth

The first-generation immigrants undergo endless process of translation. The essence of cultural translation is integral part of diasporic life. To survive in an alien land, this translation is a must to overcome identity crisis but the first-generation immigrants get trapped in the process of assimilation. This cognitive process is the most crucial part for the migrants to curb the trauma developed by migration. Despite being displaced spatially, geographically, and physically migrants fail to assimilate and emulate culturally and psychologically into the host culture and results into inner turmoil, nostalgia, sense of rootlessness, and homesickness. The ethnic distinctiveness of the migrants is discernible in a plural society. In her stories Jhumpa Lahiri talks about untranslatability. Lahiri has shown all shades of emotional surge in her characters, some of them celebrate their shift, some other find a new gamut of life and some other socializing with mixed identities thus under hybridization and translation process and intrinsic human emotions explains diaspora very realistically.

Jhumpa Lahiri's title “Unaccustomed Earth” connotes with the definition of diaspora by Vijay Mishra as he asserts “diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of hyphen but perhaps not press the hyphen for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements (Mishra, 2007). The very title of book implies that every region is an alien land to its immigrants. These people are not accustomed to the new regional social, cultural, and customary lore of life. Though people on earth share same geographical, physical, and humanistic identity, but despite the similarity of our dreams, aspirations and demands from life the stories are suggestive to glare a cleavage on behalf of our traditional social cultural moorings. The dissociation and unification in our cultural moorings have a cataclysmic influence on our social standing. Our social standing differentiates us from others on account of our shared language, values, customs, and our cultural identity. Lahiri implies the earth is ‘unaccustomed’ as everyone have to wrestle for their individual identity as nothing is accustomed to you so, individuals need to carve their identities by shedding the past and stead ahead with hope for future and that is not only a remedy but also beneficial for generation to thrive.

Culture has a lasting and inextricable impact on man. Culture as Mathew Arnold says “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world it is the study of perfection within the

individual, a study that should elevate the “best self” through a fresh and free search for beauty and intelligence”. It is noteworthy Lahiri’s characters wrangle with the feeling of homesickness, being trapped between two clashing cultures where men feel nostalgic and identity ebb, women maintain cultural hegemony in their traditional dress, jewellery, art, homely decorations, food, spices, food habits etc, both men and women play their roles as guardians of religious and cultural practices. Hence, migrants fail to maintain homogeneity. Sudesh Mishra rightly said ‘...home’ signifies an end to itinerant wandering, in the putting down roots, ‘home’ for masala diaspora is linked to the strategic espousal of rootlessness, to the constant mantling and dismantling of the self in makeshift landscapes (Mehrotra: 2017).

Jhumpa Lahiri is endowed with an enormous gift of a storyteller. She has enlivened her characters with supreme dignity and liveliness. The stories of the immigrants are related to their varied experiences after being engrafted into alien lands from their land of origin. The upsurge and regeneration of the central characters in the stories after a strenuous journey of life is stunning and thought provoking. These stories trenchantly reveal the in-depth and penetrative insight of the writer into life. The writer deliberately thrust her characters into psychological recollections; the chaotic welter of their sensation and impressions which is an authentic remark of the writer's keen insight and observation of life. Jhumpa has shown the intensity of American Culture overpowering the native culture through dominance and thus create tension, confusion and remoteness with their own culture and ebbing flood of emotion is pictorially presented by the author in all stories. The vivid and varied experiences of life in its trenchant form reveal her wide experience and keen observation into various facets of life. Through her eight stories Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates how coercion form the land of their true origin and a shift towards distinctive culture, rapid hybridization, emulation, and assimilation in traditional native culture of the land takes place in three stages first rejection, second adaptation and third hybridity.

Most of the immigrants in these stories are literally rooted in Bengal and carry inextricably their social and cultural values with them. The new lands they were engrafted gradually hybridize them. The chemistry of time enabled them to switch over to newly founded values system. They imbibe new values and ideals and gradually get coerced from their original cultural values and moorings. They fail to realize when they switched over to scotch, whisky, gin, vodka, and brandy from the traditional Bengali life style. They desperately fail to understand how the boundless power of time has consumed them up to its inner core. The phase of time made them expert in giving way to draw their wild oats in uncontrollable sex. The uncelebrated sex, sex outside marriage became the customary part of their life style. The traditionally docile Bengali women become assertive and

shattering up their ideological bringing up learn to ogle, gull their well-wishers, and hood wink their parents. They assertively plunge into ogling, giggling, and began to welcome boys up to their bed. The uncelebrated and unapproved marriage by the parents becomes the part of their social standing. They learn to interfere and to welcome male interference into the secluded life of women must against the traditional Bengali Indian familial values. Gradually many sexual relationships outside marriage, bare defilement of familial traditional values, and boredom and pensiveness towards their homeland and social settings and religious rites become an inextricable part of their life.

Jhumpa Lahari as a creative writer has a successfully depicted the profound Indian consciousness in her collection of short stories. She universally highlights the sensibilities and experiences of a community of migrants through the gamut of Indianism in them. Most of her character consciously, unconsciously, invariably or through inheritance grapples and struggle for or against ideal Indian socio-cultural sensibilities.

The title story revolves round the inner conflict and reminiscences of Ruma, a middle-class Bengali woman. She was migrated to America with her parents and now married to an American boy of his choice much against the consent of her parents. Her life style and permanent residence in America and vacillation between her past and present haunts her even after a span of over seven years. Her father's second visit to her conjuncts and modifies her past and present Indian sensibilities. Ruma acts as a responsible and dutiful daughter "after her mother's death it was Ruma who assumed the duty of speaking to her father every evening, asking how his day had gone"(4). She consummately ensures the safety of her widower father "on the day she was scheduled to fly she watched the news, to make sure there hadn't been a plane crash anywhere in the world."(3).

The geographical displacement could not rob Ruma's consciousness deeply rooted in Indian sensibilities. Indian customary ideology refutes the technical utilitarian association of personal relationships. As a matter of fact, blood relations, parental relations, and marriage are considered as something 'sacred' and 'pre-natal.' Ruma purposefully resigns from the law firm weighing it insignificant for the sake of her new born baby Akash "all she wanted was to stay home with Akash not just Thursdays and Fridays but every day" (5). The story is permeated with the sweet reminiscences of her late mother. In the wake of his father's arrival to stay with Ruma for a week she dejectedly longs for her mother instead of his father. It was her mother who would have been the helpful one, taking over the kitchen, singing songs to Akash and teaching him Bengali nursery rhymes, throwing loads of laundry into the machine (6).

Women had always been an embodiment of love, compassion, endurance, and sacrifice in Indian context. In a family Indian woman plays a vital role to bind the various strands of the family into one. The same consciousness grapples Ruma and she ponders “she knew her father did not need taking care of, and yet this very fact caused her to feel guilty; in India there would not have been no question of his not moving in with her.” (6).

Lahiri has mentioned both the old and new generation. The new generation gradually gets hybridized with the American culture and resultantly turned aliens to the traditional roots of their parents. They had no knowledge of their language, values, culture, tradition, and familial values of their native homeland. The older generation migrated to America in the quest of higher education found better financial placement and higher status of living and decided to finally settle in America yet they retain and sustained their cultural and traditional values associated with their familial values. Their decoration, hymns, local songs, spices and greeting etiquettes remained linked with their homeland on the other hand the succeeding new generation is oblivious to it and they reacted pensively and are unenthusiastically to visit their homeland. And so, they had gone despite the expanse, inspite of the sadness and shame he felt here turned to Calcutta, inspite of the fact that the older his children grew, the less they wanted to go” (8).

In sharp contrast to the young generation Ruma's mother had vehemently denied her marriage proposal to an American boy “saying that he would divorce her, that in the end he would want an American girl” (26). Ruma's recollects “how bold she'd had to be in order to withstand her mother's outrage, and her father's refusal to express even that, which had felt crueler”(26). Her mother repeatedly asserted “you are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian that is the bottom line”(26). Ruma's brother Romi frustrates his parents by “moving abroad and maintaining only distant ties”(26). Ruma feared that her father would be an added responsibility all she wanted was her house, husband, and son and the second child on its way and was due in January. She could not imagine herself tending her father as her late mother accustomed to. After the death of his wife, during his tours to Europe Ruma's father develops fondness for Mrs. Bagchi, a co- traveller. Being both Bengali they naturally come closer. They had agreed to see each other only when they were abroad but this time, they had agreed to share a room. Mrs. Bagchi was adamant about not marrying, about not sharing her home with another man. This prospect, of her companionship more it appealing. The Indian ideology to shoulder the responsibilities of family and older parents is evident in both Ruma's father and Ruma herself. Mrs. Bagchi suggested the idea to move in with Ruma to her father. But he reflectively points out:

Ruma had not been raised with that sense of duty. She led her own life, had made her own decisions, and married an American boy. He did not expect her to take him I, and really, he could not blame her. For what he had done, when his own was dying, when his mother was left behind? By then Ruma and Romi were teenagers. There was no question of his moving the family back to India, and also no question of his moving the family back to India, and also no question of his eighty-year-old widowed mother moving to Pennsylvania. He had let his sibling look after her until she, too, eventually died. (29)

The various strands and commitments associated with the life of Indian women are manifested in the persona of Ruma. She was brought up in Americanized society but her affinities remained unquestionably Indianized. Her mother was stiff enough that Ruma had spoken exceptionally in Bengali to her never in English. But in her forties, she realizes her own Bengali was slipping away. A sense of guilt overshadows her when she shows her new house to her father showing it off to her father, she felt self-conscious of her successful life with Adam, and at the same time she felt a quite slap of rejection, gathering, from his continued silence, that none of it impressed him (15-16).

Jhumpa Lahiri has sustained the warmth of personal relationships the psychological regeneration of Ruma and in the sympathetic love relationship between her father “Dadu” and Akash her son. Ruma takes peculiar efforts to cook food according to taste of her father. Cultural synthesis between the two manifests when Ruma delightedly eats with her hands as her father did. Yet she was apprehensive of Akash's Americanized way of eating habits.

Ruma's father was outwardly cold but inwardly sympathetic and emotional. He unconsciously recollects the image of his late wife in the persona of his daughter in her forties. He realizes “something about his daughter's appearance had changed; she now resembles his wife so strongly that he could not bear to look at her directly” (31). The remarkable relationship between “Dadu” and Akash infuses life into the story. Ruma's father develops deep affinity with her grandson Akash so much so that he does not want to let him out of his sight. He enjoys his petty queries, demands and tantrums. He shows gusto towards his swimming exercise, beach adventure, and driving.

It is evident that the immigrants perpetually grappled by homesickness. Comparing her daughter's present house with their ancestral house Ruma's father with a deep sigh reflects “it would have been nice in the old house”(45). And it was sufficient to bring tears to Ruma's eyes. It was the perfect reflection of her suppressed homesickness. She imagined the transformation of her parental house she imagined:

She imagined a wall in the dining room broken down, imagined speaking to her mother on the telephone, her mother complaining as the workmen hammered and drilled. Then she saw her parents sitting in the shade, in wicker chairs, having tea as she and her father were now.

Her father's visit to her is a regeneration of her Indian sensibilities. It was a symbolic transmission into her childhood. The modified personalities of Baba's grandson Akash symbolizes the percolation and fostering of a new culture. A subtle change in the behaviour, colour, dress, language, and accent of Akash compels him to think over:

The more the children grew, the less they had seemed to resemble either parent- they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way, from the texture of their hair to shape their feet and hands. Oddly it was his grandson, who was only half Bengali to begin with, who did not even have a Bengali surname, with whom he felt a direct biological connection, a sense of himself reconstituted in another (54).

The story is a departure from the original ethics and the tracks of the characters emboldened by social and cultural alienation.

CONCLUSION

All eight stories of 'Unaccustomed Earth' portrays the psychological trauma the characters have undergone under the dominance of host culture and the impact of hybridization, assimilation and adaptation is shown holistically with precision and humanistic infirmities; thus, the author has enlivened her characters. The suffrages of human relations where the unpredictability of the future and wrangling of the past and present is presented with artistic accuracy. The follow up migration with nostalgia, rootlessness, sense of identity crisis, redefinition, ethnic and cultural conflict of characters, sense of non-belonginess and generation gap and alterations which as a diasporic writer Lahiri had a first-hand experience is portrayed with artistic and creative brilliance. The migrated generation to an alien land America is by choice of the first generation their identity crisis begins and ends up with acceptance, hybridization and assimilation but ironically ended into nothingness. The tussle between first generation and the following generation remains perennial due to two cultures clashes between Indianism and the Americanisation where the diaspora is trapped amid two variant cultures. The first-generation parents themselves remain rooted with their traditional and cultural values at least with their religious rites, hymns, local songs, dressing sense and familial bonding and eating habits and so forth and they expect their progeny to follow the same as otherwise it gives a sense of nothingness to them but paradoxically the following generation winding towards American wilderness makes them the inhabitants of another world altogether. Here, each character must undergo the process of transformation to evolve, merge and reemerge to make their true original self, a true version of their individuality.

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