



## THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A Peer-Reviewed And Indexed Bi-Annual Online Literary Journal

<http://worldlitonline.net/>

ISSN: 0974 - 097X Vol 16. No. II July - December 2020



### Traversing Cultural Clutches: A study of Immigrant Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

Mr. M. Durairaj

Research Scholar

R & D Centre, Bharathiyar University  
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, INDIA

Dr. J. Jayachandran

Associate Professor & Head

Department of English

Anna University, Viluppuram Campus  
Tamil Nadu, INDIA

---

#### Abstract

A discussion on diasporic writing would be impossible without mentioning Jhumpa Lahiri, as she has contributed an array of insights for this genre. Lahiri is an eminent writer belonging to the Indian Diaspora whose writing is food for thought for many researchers. She has carved a niche for herself in the corpus of global diaspora through her works by focusing on the Indian immigrant experience in America. Her writings received world-wide recognition for her lucid and plain style of writing, her selection of themes, her choice of characters and the narrative technique she has adopted in telling the stories. Among the writers of the Indian Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri is the only writer who tries to explore the anxiety of immigrants surpassing different generations. This paper aims to expose the diasporic struggle of three generations of immigrants who struggle to assimilate to the foreign culture and language. "Unaccustomed Earth" is the second collection of short stories by Lahiri that establishes the agony of displacement, identity crisis, problems in integration and assimilation, cultural alienation and homelessness. An attempt is made in this paper to establish the diasporic dilemma of 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants of Indian origin living in the United States of America as portrayed by Lahiri in her work.

**Key words:** diaspora, immigrants, generation, assimilation, displacement

---

#### Introduction

Writers of the Indian Diaspora tend to focus on the life of first generation immigrants from India who have spread across the globe. These were people who went on exile or migrated from India for various reasons. There were forced migration and voluntary movement as well among the first generation Indian immigrants. Since the colonial period, the act of migration in India has been active and people have migrated to different countries as ambassadors and professionals seeking white collar jobs, as indentured labourers and as students with better prospects for higher education. These immigrants always have a sense of longingness towards their homeland and have a nostalgic attitude since they have left a rich culture, language, tradition and identity left behind in their land of origin. On contrary, the second and third generation immigrants (people who do not actually migrate) who were either children or grandchildren of the first generation immigrants are the people who are much exposed to the diasporic struggle. They neither have the longingness towards their ancestral homeland nor do they possess nostalgic attitude. They are caught between two worlds of one (their host land) which they are living in

M. Durairaj&Dr. J. Jayachandran

and the other (their parents homeland) an imaginary world to which they are introduced by their parents. The perplexity of this inbetweenness is rightly captured by Lahiri in her fiction.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born to Indian parents of Bengali origin in London. At the age of three she moved to Rhode Island, USA along with her parents and grew up in America. Her, early life, education, career and marital life were centered in the U.S and currently she resides in Rome, Italy. Though Lahiri had very less association with her ancestral homeland, she had visited India with her parents during their vacation. This helped her to learn about Indian culture and the inability of the first generation immigrants to assimilate to a foreign culture. Lahiri's experience as a second generation immigrant enabled her to shape her characters in many of her stories in her fictions. Lahiri's life as an immigrant has always been a turmoil since she had to perform two roles by being a Bengali at home and trying to be an American out of her home. At home Lahiri's mother insisted her to adhere to the Bengali life style by learning Bengali language and traditional Indian culture in terms of dressing, eating and behaving with people in everyday life. But, For Lahiri it was always easy to adapt to the American culture and life style without any difficulty since she has been acquainted with the American way of living right from her childhood. However, her life has been conditioned to encounter two different cultures and languages which put her in dilemma.

Lahiri emerged as a renowned diasporic writer with the publication of her first debut collection of short stories titled "Interpreter of Maladies" in 1999 which earned her much name and fame. Her Novel "The Namesake" published in 2003 exposed Lahiri to majority of the reading public, especially to the second generation immigrants as they can closely associate themselves with the characters in the novel. "Unaccustomed Earth" is Lahiri's second debut collection of short stories in two parts consisting eight stories. It won the Frank O, Connor International award in 2008 and has been placed on top in the Newyork Times Book Review List of "Ten Best Books of 2008." Part I of Unaccustomed earth consists of five stories which can be read individually as they have independent characters, separate themes and settings whereas Part II consists of three stories that are interdependent as they revolve around the life of Hema and Kaushik. All the stories share certain common features such as hybrid identity, cultural conflict, alienation, displacement, integration and transnational survival. Through the stories Lahiri tries to span across three generations of immigrant struggle by way of analyzing the mental trauma that her characters undergo in the stories.

### **Cultural Divergence**

Assimilating to a new culture in a foreign country had always been very difficult for the first generation immigrants since they have been accustomed to their native culture in their homeland. On the other hand, the second and third generation immigrants are confronted with two different cultures of one which they are living in the present and the other being their ancestral culture which they are accustomed to because of their parents. The title story "Unaccustomed Earth" travels across three generations, Ruma and Adam being the second generation immigrants, Ruma's father and her expired mother belonging to the first generation and Ruma's son Akash of the third generation. The central character of the story Ruma struggles to manage between two cultures. She could not completely discard her ancestral culture as she often recalls how her expired mother had brought her up. At the same time she could not completely adapt to the American way of living as she carefully nurtured her son Akash by exposing him to Indian culture. The following lines make it clearly evident that the second generation immigrants live in a state of cultural dilemma of neither discarding their ancestral tradition nor following the western tradition:

"When Akash was younger she had followed her mother's advice to get him used to the taste of Indian food and made the effort to poach chicken and vegetables with cinnamon and cardamom and clove.... In spite of her efforts he was turning into the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother" ( Lahiri UE 23)

The presence of Ruma's mother is felt throughout the story though she is presented off screen. Unlike her father, Ruma's mother is symbolic of traditional Indian mother with a close affinity towards her culture. She rejects Ruma's idea of marrying an American as "You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian that is the bottom line." (Lahiri, UE, 26) For her, the marriage would lead to the annihilation of her rich culture and tradition which has been preserved as a treasure by them for generations.

Ruma's father, a widower finds consolation in travel who visits Europe, Holland, France and Italy. He also develops a relationship with Mrs. Bagchi in order to get rid of his loneliness at his old age and he maintains it as a secret without revealing it even to his daughter. He writes letter to Mrs. Bagchi in Bengali to conceal his secret relationship from his daughter. Ruma's father is a representative of the first generation immigrants who tend to develop friendship with people of their home country, feel comfortable to converse in their native language during a family function or gathering, tasting their native food and sharing their cultural values irrespective of the fact they do not belong to their native country anymore.

Adam is a typical second generation immigrant who easily assimilates to the host culture. He leads his life by working for a hedge fund and often he is on business trip. Unlike a traditional Indian husband who expects the wife to nurture the baby, he advises Ruma to hire a babysitter to take care of their baby so that Ruma can continue with her job. He welcomes the idea of Ruma's father coming to their house and he even encourages that he can stay there permanently so that he will be a support for Ruma while Adam is away on his business trip. Ruma hesitates to request her father to stay with them and she postpones the discussion with her father. But, Adam encourages her and instills the confidence in her to open up the topic with her father; however her father is determined in his decision of going back to his apartment.

### **Hybridity of Identity**

Identity crisis is a major problem encountered by all immigrants in common irrespective of the generation to which they belong. Lahiri's characters struggle to create an identity for themselves in diasporic space. Ruma's father tries to create an identity by staying away from his daughter even after his wife's death. He neglects the idea of living with his daughter in Seattle as he does not want to be a burden for her. Unlike the traditional Indian familial system in which the parents spend their last days of life either at their son's or daughters' house, Ruma's father rents an apartment for himself and continues to live by himself thereby creating an identity for himself in the American life style. When Ruma requests him to stay with them, he says, "It is a good place, Ruma. But this is your home, not mine." (Lahiri, UE 52) The narrator asserts Ruma's father's stance of being independent further through his inner feelings as:

"He knew that it was not for his sake that his daughter was asking him to live here. It was for hers. She needed him, as he'd never felt she'd needed him before, apart from the obvious things he provided her in the course of his life. And because of this the offer upset him more. A part of him, the part of him that would never cease to be a father, felt obligated to accept." (Lahiri, UE 53)

Ruma wears two identities in this story; initially she works with a law firm before giving birth to Akash where she oversaw her client's futures, prepared wills and refinanced mortgages. She established her identity as an independent advocate who is capable enough to earn her living but her childbirth shifts her identity from law practitioner to a responsible mother. She completely gives up the idea of going to the law firm as she wants to take care of Akash. She even rejects Adam's idea of hiring a babysitter for Akash as no traditional Indian mother would want her child to be taken care of by a stranger.

Akash is too young to ascertain an identity for him but unknowingly he also undergoes unprecedented identity crisis in the story. Ruma follows her expired mother's advice in upbringing Akash in the Indian way by avoiding packed foods and feeding him with poach chicken and vegetables with cinnamon, cardamom and clove added in his daily food. Ruma feels disheartening when she finds Akash adapting the American life style thereby losing his ancestral personality.

### **Transnational Belonging**

For the diasporic community, life in a foreign country is always a calamity since they have no unique identity, language or culture. They have to operate across boundaries by assimilating adapting themselves to the countries tradition to which they have migrated. Lahiri in her epigraph to "Unaccustomed Earth" quotes from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom House" as:

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 birth places, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall sterile their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Lahiri, UE)

The above lines establish the author's idea of confronting the diasporic challenges not as a calamity but as opportunities to disperse across the world and spread their roots in every part of the earth. The second generation immigrants portrayed by Lahiri have a strong affinity to their ancestral homeland and culture but they try to surpass the generational clutch from their ancestors and try to accommodate themselves with the mainstream culture of the host country. They possess a sense of belonging not just with the host country but an abstract space away from their parents' homeland. The Indian immigrants are a transnational community who do not want to be marginalized in terms of gender, race, culture, religion, nation or ethnicity. Ruma's father, Ruma and Adam in this short story are representative of the transnational migrant community who continues to survive and leave their imprints in a land where they didn't belong never before.

### **Conclusion**

Diasporic writers portray the life of immigrants to be more painful and are always reluctant to assimilate and integrate to new cultures and languages. Lahiri views this struggle from a different angle and paints her characters on a positive note. Though the second generation immigrants are caught between their ancestral Indian tradition and their adopted western tradition, they are always ready to adapt themselves easily to the mainstream American tradition unlike their predecessors. Lahiri not only excels in depicting the diasporic struggle of the immigrants but also ascertains her characters stance to overcome the generational gap in assimilating and integrating to new cultures across the globe.

### **Works Cited**

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Unaccustomed Earth*. India: Random House, 2009.

Field, Robin. "Writing the Second Generation: Negotiating Cultural Borderlands in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *the Namesake*." *South Asian Review* 25.2 (2004): 165- 167.

Karthigadevi, C.J. "Diasporic Experiences in JhumpaLahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*." *Language in India* 15.1 (2015): 118-127.

Roddannavar, Prabal J. "Themes seen in Indian Diasporicwriting." *Asian Journal ofMultidisciplinary Studies* 2.3 (2014): 17-24.

Sahoo, Ajay Kumar, and Laxmi Narayanan, K. Indian Diaspora: Trends and Issues. India: SerialsPublications, 2008.

Samanta, Sugata "Transplanted Individuals: Anxiety of Dislocation and Cultural Alienation in JhumpaLahiri's Unaccustomed Earth." The Criterion: An International Journal in English 5.6 Issue. (2014): 307-317.

Sumalatha, D. "A study on selected themes of Jhumpalahiri's novels." Research Journal of English Language and Literature 1.4 (2013): 352 -358.