

## The American Dream in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Only Goodness*

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A substantial part of research on Jhumpa Lahiri fiction focuses on the question of her characters' identity. Inhabiting the fictional world of large-scale transnational migrations, in which borders of cultures are frequently traversed and need to be constantly negotiated, Lahiri's characters are identified as cultural hybrids, whose hyphenated identities are troubled by tension and anxiety (Bahmanpour, Bandyopadhyay, Dutt-Ballerstadt). Critics explore how these diasporic subjects adapt to the American space, and how they are involved in the processes of acceptance and resistance, which are constitutive of the fluid immigrant identity. These issues can be elucidated further when an important element in identity formation is analyzed, namely the American Dream. The following paper is meant to provide a contribution of this kind. Thus, its central goal is a discussion of the depiction of American Dream in two short stories "Unaccustomed earth" and "Only Goodness" by Jhumpa Lahiri. Three general issues will be explored: what the depiction of American Dream reveals about Indian immigrant experience, how the idea of the Dream differs between generations and how it is linked to the question of immigrant identity formation.

The United States has been a country of immigrants, who at the core of their immigrant experience have shared one common idea of a paradise they will eventually reach. To use the words of historian James Truslow Adams from *The Epic of America* (1931) newcomers "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (404). This idea, this dream has a transforming power, it is perceived as a unifying element, connecting all those disparate peoples from all different areas of the globe, "a kind of lingua franca" for those who decide to settle down on the American soil. The American Dream provides a collective vision of the U.S., later re-imagined and reinforced by the new Dream-followers from all around the world (Cullen 6). Jim Cullen calls the Dream the "national motto" and the "most immediate component of an American identity" (5). Cullen suggests in this way that the shared experience of the American Dream has the power of cultural assimilation or simply Americanization of people of different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. What reverberates in his words is the idea of another historian, Frederic Jackson Turner, who, in his so called "frontier thesis", puts forward the view that the desire for land, dream of horizontal mobility translated as vertical mobility had the power of transformation of the distinct nationalities and achieving a new quality: "In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized ..." (32-

47). With his thesis therefore, the Dream embodies a national myth of freedom and Americanization.

As recent experience and fiction show, cultural assimilation understood as “melting”, is a thing of the past. After the World War II the notion of the Eurocentric American nation and a traditional hegemony of a privileging white country dissolves, and the notion of Melting Pot yields to new ways of describing national identity:

Just as the exclusionary immigration policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fostered a monoculturalism that nourished by extension a Melting Pot mystique, the post-war [post-World War II] era produces narratives depicting ‘inconceivable aliens’ (to rework a phrase used by Henry James in *The American Scene*) or hyphenated Americans – “Mexican-Americans”, “Chinese-Americans” – whose cultural differences push American national identity from Melting Pot to mosaic or collage. By extending the frontiers of culture and moving away from the social codes of traditional European immigrants, the new immigrants in American fiction offer fresh models of national identity. (Muller, 16-17)

Muller observes that the American Dream, which is still a driving force for contemporary immigrants, becomes a strenuous experience for them, it must “contend with forces of psychic and cultural dislocation – with the reality that the new immigrants are “others” who because of race and ethnicity, caste and class, culture and religion do not fit comfortably into the traditional mythology of the Melting Pot” (2). The confrontation of the vision of the awaiting paradise with reality often turns immigrants’ dream into a nightmare, which is reflected more and more often in recent fiction. Kathryn Hume, the author of *American Dream, American Nightmare* reaches similar conclusions and speaks about the “Generation of the Lost Dream” since the 1960s in America (8). She studies fiction which belongs to diverse backgrounds, including immigrant fiction (Bharati Mukherjee, Maxine Hong Kingston, Julia Alvarez), in which “the reality of America falls short of the ideal America” (Hume 4), and which presents the failure of the American Dream. Hume notices that writers express their disappointment with the ideals of the country: “Novels of the last thirty years have focused on the estranging aspects of immigration, on the slippage between America’s promises – equality, justice, prosperity – and the actuality of encounters between newcomers and the culture they enter” (10). The fiction Hume explores delves into the great spiritual costs of assimilation, and attributes the failure of the Dream to the clash of immigrants’ expectations with reality.

Lahiri offers yet new insights into immigrants’ experience. In the two selected stories, the newcomers, the first generation immigrants, are successful, and adapt quite easily to American standards of life. The experience of the second generation, born in the U.S., is different. Their

fulfillment of the American Dream cannot be taken for granted. Lahiri studies familial relations as well as cultural differences emerging between generations, which are presented as crucial in achieving success and the process of identity formation.

In the selected stories Lahiri describes intellectual immigration after the year 1965. These are Indians who come from wealthy families, and are driven by educational and economic opportunities offered by America – they usually strive to obtain a doctoral degree, and seek jobs in white-collar professions – as scientists, academics, lawyers and doctors. By and large they realize their goals, have successful careers, economic stability and achieve happiness – one may say they fulfill their American Dream, although Lahiri draws a gender distinction depicting dreams and attitudes to life in America among first generation immigrants. Interestingly, their America-born children, whose path to success is less steep and crooked, because already prepared by their parents, fail to follow in their footsteps. The experience of parents and children and how it connects to their identity are the questions investigated further in this paper.

#### “Unaccustomed Earth”

The representatives of the first generation immigrants in the story “Unaccustomed earth” are Ruma’s parents and Mrs. Bagchi. Ruma’s parents came to the U.S. in search of better educational opportunities: after her father receives a PhD degree in biochemistry he finds a rewarding job in a pharmaceutical company, which allows the family to live in comfort. The mother remains at home, and she is only a passive participant in the pursuit of the Dream: her goal is to cultivate the homeland traditions in a foreign country. The economic stability the family achieves is part of the Dream that brought them to America. The feeling of satisfaction – happiness – which is a word frequently stressed by the narrative, is a crucial component of the Dream, an indicator of successful life. Ruma’s father, as he grows older, feels happier and happier with his life in America.

Mrs. Bagchi is driven by a different dream when she enters America. She is also successful – she realizes her wish for freedom and independence. The woman escapes India for fear of being forced by her parents to re-marry after her beloved husband’s death. America offers an asylum: the woman can decide about her life there, unrestrained by conventions or customs. She receives a doctorate in statistics, becomes a lecturer at a university, and is fully independent in her life, even though in the eyes of an Indian community she is perceived as a freak, an anomaly, because she is a lonely Indian woman.

In both cases, Ruma’s father and Mrs. Bagchi, the realization of the Dream is connected with a gradual assimilation process. Ruma’s

father feels more liberated when the last ties with India are broken after his wife's death. With a sense of enjoyment he immerses in American culture. After he retires, he undertakes activities typical for Americans. He becomes a volunteer for a Democratic Party in Pennsylvania, and he starts to travel choosing package tours to Europe. Also the journey from the east to the west coast to visit his daughter is not problematic for the seventy-year-old. Furthermore, coming to Seattle, he still feels at home, familiar with the American landscape, which is contrasted with his European travels: "his surroundings did not feel foreign to him as they had when he went to Europe" ("Unaccustomed earth" 28). The change takes place also in his appearance, Ruma is "struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age" ("Unaccustomed earth" 11) with his grey hair and American clothes. Mrs. Bagchi, his fellow traveler, has also Western clothes and hairstyle, but more importantly, her life is a form of rebellion against Indian values and traditions, at the same time being a willing adjustment to the American value system.

Even though assimilating, the representatives of the first generation immigrants are nevertheless cultural hybrids. They know their roots, but they also know that to achieve success they need to adapt to new cultural codes, which they inevitably do, because of the contact with another culture. To use Homi K. Bhabha terms they live in the Third Space, characterized by in-betweenness. No purist view of identity applies to them because entering another culture they are "neither the One ... nor the Other ... but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both" (Commitment to Theory 41; italics in original). Their entrance into the Third Space is a deliberate act. Having the direct experience of the two worlds they are aware of what they leave behind in their homeland and what opportunities are offered in the new country. Thus they find it easier to define their new path of life and identify the goals of their American Dream. Although positioned as hybrid identities, their life is an inevitable progression towards assimilation, however fluid and unstable it may be, because as newcomers they have only this direction of transformation – to acquire (sometimes unconsciously) the elements of culture with which they come in contact.

The representative of the second generation depicted in the story is in a different situation. Being born in America but to Bengali parents Ruma lives in the Third Space all her life. Consequently, her life is marked by a constant tension between the culture of parents and of her homeland, America, which results in confusion and inability to achieve the American Dream.

Ruma is an example of upward mobility. Well-educated, hard-working, she becomes a lawyer in New York. Her successful professional

life is accompanied by equally thriving family life: an American husband, a 3-year-old son, Akash, another pregnancy and a new house on the west coast, in Seattle, where the family moves after Ruma's husband receives another job. Suddenly, the pursuit of her American Dream comes to an abrupt halt, she resigns from most of the things she has achieved so far: her professional career and independence. She decides to take care solely of the family and household, but this does not bring her happiness: "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" ("Unaccustomed earth" 11).

Ruma's life between Indian and American culture is a constant negotiation between them. Her mother's death makes her identify strongly with Indian heritage. Ruma lives immersed in the memories of her dead mother, and even though it contradicts her American upbringing, she starts imitating her example. She does not reject American clothes, taste for American food, nor does she use Bengali, her parents' native language. She rejects something more fundamental: her independence, professional success, and sense of equality with her husband. She accepts her position according to the Indian tradition: serving the husband (her mother always did it), being mainly a mother and a housewife. And still, although her husband generously accepts all her decisions, "nothing [is] making her happy" ("Unaccustomed earth" 7).

Ruma is able to identify neither with her homeland India, nor with America, thus she suffers from "double displacement". She suffers from her estrangement as a woman and as a second-generation subject (Dutt-Ballerstadt 54). Her unwillingness to pursue the American Dream is indicative of her problems with identity. It informs of her lack of belonging, which is emphasized in the narrative by her movement, going on "routes" rather than growing "roots" – she left her home in Pennsylvania to work in New York and then moved with her family to Seattle. The position of in-betweenness, living between two cultures, is uncomfortable and confusing for her.

Lahiri does not propose Americanization as a desired identity which could satisfy her protagonist. Although Ruma's father advocates resuming the career path, and he equals that to adopting American values: work, self-reliance, and eventually achieving happiness, he does not push Ruma to complete acculturation. The narrative suggests that everyone has to accept the position in which they have found themselves. It is impossible to obliterate one's place of origin, and immigrants' children need to preserve the consciousness of their original roots and accept their living in the Third Space. This message is conveyed best by the example of Ruma's father's influence on his grandson, Akash. Understandably, since Akash is the third generation, he is "an American

child" even more than Ruma was. The older he grows, the more unwilling he is to learn and practice elements of Indian culture that Ruma wants to pass on to him. Ruma gives up her efforts but her father does not agree to this situation. During his short visit he tries to acquaint Akash with at least basic elements of Bengali culture, teaching him simple things: colors and numbers in Bengali, while some aspects of Indian tradition, such as eating with fingers or taking off shoes when entering the house, are eagerly picked up by the boy himself.

In the story Lahiri encourages a celebration of hybridity but with a view to differences between generations of immigrants. The process of acculturation and growing roots into the host country, which for next generations becomes a homeland, is undeniably important and called for, nevertheless the awareness of one's origins is important. The message is reinforced by the image of planting a garden, organizing a fragment of landscape near Ruma's new house. According to Bhabha, the landscape is a recurrent metaphor, which can be considered as "the inscape of national identity" (Dissemination 205). Ruma's uncultivated, unaccustomed garden signifies Ruma's dislocation and lack of belonging. It shows the sense of strangeness, lack of roots and the need to grow them, the need to make the unaccustomed earth – America – familiar. Ruma's father cultivates the garden by connecting various elements: his Indian wife's favorites, American daughter's needs, and American grandson's toys and garbage collection. Those elements from disparate backgrounds share one space, which can be viewed as an expression of Ruma's national identity consisting of Bengali and American cultural influences. Moreover, it can be metaphorically read as a wish for peacefully co-existing multicultural America. The centrality of the landscape metaphor is emphasized by the title of the story "Unaccustomed earth", which is also the title of the whole story collection, and which can be treated as a filter for the stories analyses and interpretation.

#### "Only Goodness"

The first generation immigrants in "Only Goodness", Rahul and Sudha's parents, are again Bengali immigrants, who first emigrate to London in search of successful life. From there, disenchanting, they move to the U.S., which draws them with the ideals of equality. They wish to escape racial scorn of London of the 60s, where "half the rentals ... said WHITES ONLY" ("Only Goodness" 135; capital letters in original). Nevertheless, they experience the strangeness of the new land. The town in which they settle down is "the shock. Suddenly they were stuck, her parents aware that they faced a life sentence of being foreign" ("Only Goodness" 138). Even though what they encounter in America is the equality of opportunities, and they are not discriminated against because of their race, culturally they are not prepared to take advantage of this

situation. The mother cannot drive, she does not get a job, neither she nor her husband is familiar with American habits, and they both have problems with language. As a result, in many everyday situations they have to rely on their children. Despite these initial problems, they achieve economic success in the atmosphere of equality – realize the American Dream they strove for. Still, remembering their hardships, they transfer the wish for successful, prosperous and easy life on their children, with greater expectations laid in son Rahul than daughter Sudha.

The expectation of Rahul's success that is made prominent in the narrative. However, his story becomes the American Dream reversed – a gradual downfall of a young man. Rahul and Sudha's parents create excellent conditions for their good start, and are satisfied with no less than ivy league schools. Sudha graduates from Penn University, double majoring in economics and math, and later decides to study in Europe, in London School of Economics. Yet it is Rahul's career that interests the parents more and it is his successes that bring them more satisfaction.

Compliant in the beginning, Rahul suddenly becomes resistant to his parents' dreams. His path is more difficult than his older sister's, the expectations having been raised by Sudha, an obedient student, who dutifully fulfils their parents' wishes. From the start Rahul does not share his family's enthusiasm about going to a prestigious university of Cornell and it is not a surprise when he eventually drops out of it, and when alcohol becomes a solution to his problems. He takes up a menial job managing a laundromat, and with little finances he is forced to live with his parents. All of this embarrasses them, and they prefer to keep the comedy of lies rather than admit Rahul's failure as well as his drinking problem, and seek help for him. His failure becomes their shame:

Other Bengalis gossiped about him and prayed their own children would not ruin their lives in the same way. And so he became what all parents feared, a blot, a failure, someone who was not contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children were making across the country, as surgeons or attorneys or scientists, or writing articles for the front page of The New York Times. ("Only Goodness" 151)

Rahul's failure to fulfill the American Dream is the result of the conflicting position he has found himself in. Similarly to Ruma from "Unaccustomed earth" he is a hybrid, and in the same way he finds it distressing to live in-between two cultures, his alcoholism being a symbolic expression of distress. Neither he nor his parents accept his border position; while he wishes to live like an American, they want him to preserve the Indian way of life, yet take advantage of opportunities that America offers, such as excellent education and job. They still

separate the two worlds, India and America, creating paradoxical situations: on the one hand they want to think their children live an idyllic life in the American Paradise, free from the burden of the Indian past as the narrator comments: "In their opinion their children were immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India, as if the inoculations the pediatrician had given Sudha and Rahul when they were babies guaranteed them an existence free from suffering" ("Only Goodness" 144). On the other hand, they resist the idea that their children come in contact with and therefore might be influenced by American reality: "'[d]epression' was a foreign word to them, an American thing" ("Only Goodness" 143-4), which is why they do not acknowledge Rahul's problem. Rahul is suspended between the strains put on by his Indian parents and his already acquired Americanness. The Indian way of life pressed upon him by his parents stifles his American spirit of individualism, desire for freedom and self-fulfillment, expressed by his wish to engage in artistic activity and other attempts of breaking away from the parental control.

Rahul is a dislocated subject. He does not want to identify with his Indian family and Indian way of life. However, when he eventually finds strength in himself to abandon his parents in order to live his own way, the American way with an American girlfriend, he fails. His failure should be read symbolically – as a hybrid, he cannot be the One, or the Other, he cannot live as an American or an Indian. He will not succeed until he agrees to his middle position, his in-betweenness. Only from this position he can start building anew.

### Conclusion

The examination of the American Dream in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories is an investigation of Indian immigrant experience in America. It informs of the goals and motives that drive immigrants to another continent, and consequently it reveals the vision of America that inhabits immigrants' imagination. What is more, it shows difficulties and obstacles in building a new life in a new country, whether posed by the country or immigrants themselves. Finally, it gives insights into immigrants' identity, interrogating the issue of continuity or discontinuity of a diasporic subject, the question of his/her assimilation or preservation.

Lahiri's stories discuss a new model of American identity. It is performed on the thresholds of cultures, in border situations, in interstitial spaces. The hybridity of the characters from her stories directs attention to the idea of multiculturalism – celebration of cultural diversity and preservation of one's ethnic roots. Thus, Lahiri's works become an important voice in the question of rewriting the story of what it means to be American.



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