

Family Issues in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

Deepak Kumar*

Research Scholar, Department of English, Chaudhary Ranbir Singh University, Jind, Haryana

Abstract – *The 1960s and 70s witnessed an increasing number of Indians immigrating to. The USA in search of the 'American Dream'. In the process of 'striking roots' in an Unknown land, the first generation of Indian – Americans were conscious to maintain strong ties with their own culture, language and 'Indlanness'. As times changed, their offspring, struggled to balance their hyphenated identities. Thus giving rise to the issues of displacement, belongingness, up rootedness and cultural differences. These issues' strongly reflect in the writings of the diaspora writers like Jhumpa Lahiri. Unaccustomed Earth is Lahiri's third work in line. It is a poignant collection of short stories that reveals the tragedies and drama of the immigrant experience. The present paper aims to study the issue of estrangement that arises due to the conflict of dual identities, generation gap, cultural dissimilarities and conflict of interests.*

Keywords: *Diaspora, Indian-Americans, Estrangement, Displacement, Cultural Dissimilarities*

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INTRODUCTION

Socio-cultural dislocations form various diasporas, immigrants, exiles, refugees and moving groups are an essential feature of the globalized world that affects the politics of a nation and culminates, in cultural heterogeneity.. The emergence a new narrative of .dislocation, displacement and immigrant experiences have led to one of the important elements in diaspora studies-'multiculturalism'. The current diaspora writers are advocating their cultural differences as opposed to the first generation of the migrant writers who were more concerned with cultural assimilation. During the '1960s and 1970s the educated class of Indians immigrated to the USA to follow the 'American Dream'. This dislocation affected their families and future generations. While the first generation of immigrants was conscious to remain rooted to their origins, their offspring struggled to balance their hyphenated identities. This struggle led to the issues of cultural dissimilarities, uprootedness and search for personal identity. These issues have been constantly reflected in the writings of the South-Asian writers like Jhumpa Lahiri.

JHUMPA LAHIRI AS AN INDIAN – AMERICAN WRITER

Indian-American writer, Jhumpa Lahiri's works deal with Indians and "their immigrant" experiences. Her works are a stark reminder of her personal experiences as a young Indian navigating between dual identities. In one of her interviews Lahiri

expressed "When you take your own life and its many facets such a living in an alien country, growing up as a child of emigrant parents, learning to adjust to all kinds of cultural differences, you convert them into memorable stories" (Femina, 2008 : 104). The characters portrayed in Lahiri's works share the same ambivalence over identity. Interpreter of Maladies (1999) marked Jhumpa Lahiri's debut in the literary world. It was critically acclaimed and won her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. The collection of short stories deals with the sensitive issues of the Indian-American experience and marital difficulties. In 2003, Lahiri wrote her first novel The Namesake. It addressed the issues of the second generation of young Indians who experience cultural differences with their parents. Unaccustomed Earth published in 2008, won accolades and charted The New York Times bestseller list. Her latest book, The Lowland (2003) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

ABOUT UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

Divided in two parts, Unaccustomed Earth is a collection of eight short stories. The first five are individual stories of love, loss and nostalgia. The second part consists of three interwoven stories that form a trilogy. In the title story, Lahiri has sketched characters of Ruma and her father who share a distanced relationship as a result of communication gap between them. Hell-Heaven portrays the character of Aparna whose marriage is created out of necessity rather than love. Amit and Megan in A

Choice of Accommodations realize that their marriage has lost its charm and that they are living separate lives. Only Goodness narrates the story of an estranged son. The final story Hema and Kaushik has a cleverly constructed plot around Hema and Kaushik who as teenagers and later as adults see their American lives as an antithesis to their Indian values.

UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

The first story *Unaccustomed Earth* is intricately woven around the estranged relationship between Ruma and her father. Retired and recently widowed, Ruma's father maintained a formal relation with her. Most of the times he visited places in Europe and kept limited communication with his daughter. 'Occasionally a postcard would arrive in Seattle; where Ruma and Adam and their son lived.' (Lahiri, 2008:3). Her father 'wrote impersonal accounts of the things he had seen and done' (Lahiri, 2008:4). This indicates a disconnection between them. Their relationship had undergone many changes over the years. One of the reasons for this was her mother's death. Most of their communication was formal; rather 'it was a one-sided correspondence'. (Lahiri; 2008:4). His letters to her were detached and he never included Adam or Akash in his postcards. Ruma and her father never felt a sense of belongingness or attachment towards, each other. She wanted her father to live with her in Seattle only because he was lonely. However, 'Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand.' (Lahiri, 2008:5). On the other hand her father was reluctant to accept her offer because he feared Ruma would not appreciate him and he would become a burden. They were not comfortable sharing the same space and felt uncomfortable around each other because 'Ruma had not spent a week alone with her father Lahiri, 2008:6). She had never had a casual conversation with her father in thirty-eight years of her life. Even though she wanted to strike a conversation with her father, it was difficult for her. During his stay with Ruma, she tried to strike a conversation with her father. Such times 'he wanted to tell her that she was going about it wrong, there was not in the center that needed to be undone first.' (Lahiri, 2008:20.) They never shared details of their lives nor acknowledged each other. Each of them feared that any argument or difference of opinion between them might 'chip away at the already frail bond that existed between them.' (Lahiri, 2008:37). Thus, the breakdown in communication, formality in behaviour and their discomfort to share feelings made it impossible for Ruma and her father to have a healthy relationship.

ONLY GOODNESS

Only Goodness narrates the story of Rahul, a troubled teenager with a serious drinking problem. He shared a disconnected relationship with his family. Considered as a black sheep of the family, he began to feel the aloofness and detachment because of the conflict between his' American way of living and the

conventional Indian values of his parents. The constant comparison between his sister Sudha and him made him realize that he was a failure. The dilemmas that he faced and the choices that he eventually made led him to estrangement not only with his parents but also with his sister who truly cared about him. He drifted in and out of the house without informing anyone and disliked anyone questioning him about his life. He shut out his parents from his life because he thought that they would never understand him or his choices. 'His aloofness troubled Sudha, but her parents said nothing' (Lahiri, 2008:139). With time Rahul turned into a rebellious boy and eventually stopped speaking to his parents. He was aware of the fact that his parents resented him because he had not lived up to their expectations. Expectations which he chose not to fulfill. 'And so he became what all parents had feared, a blot, a failure, someone who was not contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children around were making across the country, as surgeons, or attorneys or scientists, or writing articles for the front page of *The New York Times*.' (Lahiri, 2008:151). And, then one night he left without informing 'anyone. Therefore, Rahul's parents' inability to understand his point of view and, Rahul's incapacity to communicate his feelings resulted in a failed relationship.

HELL-HEAVEN

Unaccustomed Earth addresses marital estrangement as one of its major themes. *Hell-Heaven* is an elaborately constructed plot that revolves around Aparna, an estranged wife trying to fill the void in her life by befriending an MIT student Pranab Chakraborty. Aparna found happiness and contentment with Pranab's presence in her life. He was Aparna's escape from her lifeless marriage. She secretly began to love him and looked forward to his visits. The narrator of the story Usha describes her parents' marriage as one that was created out of necessity rather than love. She says, 'my father was a lover of silence and solitude. He had married my mother to placate his parents. He was wedded to his work, his research and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate.' (Lahiri, 2008:65). Therefore, her husband's detachment and Aparna's isolation led towards estrangement from each other.

A CHOICE OF ACCOMMODATIONS

A Choice of Accommodations true to its title shares with us the story of Amit, an Indian married to Megan, an American Woman five years older than her husband. Lahiri has described a night in the life of the couple who were away from home for a classmate's wedding. Alone, in their hotel room, they – realized that things were not the same anymore. Situations, the birth of their children and the frustrations of mundane life had estranged them

from each other. The love they once shared had been lost and forgotten about. Amit realized that in the past few years Megan had not been a part of his children's life at all. It was he who took care of the girls, bathed them and fed them. He watched the television alone. He realized that 'she had lived in the apartment, slept in his bed, her heart belonged to no one but him and the girls and yet Amit felt as alone as he had felt at first at Langford. And there were times he simply hated Megan for this.' (Lahiri, 2008:114). It was as if they were two strangers sharing a common space. The beauty of marriage had been lost and they both resented each other. In brief, none of them 'Made an attempt to confess it aloud or to reach out to the other to make things right..

THEME OF ALIENATION AND DISCONNECTION

In most of Jhumpa Lahiri's writings alienation and disconnection from one's roots are the recurring themes. Some of her stories have been inspired from personal experiences; while others are her observations of the immigrants she came in contact with during her formative years. In both the situations she realized. That staying on foreign land had loosened her ties with her origins. In *Unaccustomed Earth* Lahiri has emphasized the issues of alienation and disconnection delicately in each of her stories. The title story draws our attention towards immigrants like Ruma who have estranged from their culture and native language. 'Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping away from her.' (Lahiri, 2008:12). While growing up on foreign soil, the second and third generations of Indians have become more Americans than Indians. The first generation soon realized 'the more the children grew, the less they seemed to resemble either parent-they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way, from the texture of their hair to the shapes of their feet and hands' (Lahiri, 2008:54). In *Only Goodness*, Rahul and Sudha are more comfortable with their American mannerisms. They prefer to follow the norms of the country they were born and brought up in rather than follow the customs of a country they had rarely been to. Thus, the protagonist Kaushik, in 'Hema and Kaushik' was relieved when his parents decided to immigrate back to the United States. Hema confessed that she found their trips to India dull.

CONCLUSION

The irony in these situations is that Lahiri's characters feel comfortable in a culture which originally considers them foreign. They have acquired this culture rather than inherited it. The acquaintance they feel with a foreign culture is juxtaposed to their estrangement to their native land. Jhumpa Lahiri has aptly quoted

Nathaniel Hawthorne in the beginning of the book, '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 their birthplaces, and so far, as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.' This is a clear indication of what will happen to future generations of immigrants. Whether they will want to trace back their origins or continue to lose ties with the land where they – truly belong?

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Corresponding Author

Deepak Kumar*

Research Scholar, Department of English, Chaudhary
Ranbir Singh University, Jind, Haryana