

THE STUDY OF FAMILY DYNAMICS THROUGH JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "UNACCUSTOMED EARTH"

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Abstract

The contemporary Indian-American writer, Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the portrayal of the lives of diasporic subjects living in the United States of America in her collection of short stories "Unaccustomed Earth." This paper investigates how diasporic space impacts these subjects and their relationships. Family appears as a dominant theme in Unaccustomed Earth, and is of chief importance to the characters that one comes across in the different stories. The paper will pay precise consideration to the manners in which family as a component of identity is portrayed in the first and second generations of Indian Americans in Lahiri's stories. In addition the paper will also explore the family relations, Lahiri's stories also describe the family-like ties that exist between Bengalis in the USA. The immigrants who travel from India to America leave behind their native land and their family, and often experience isolation and a sense of alienation in their new homeland. In Unaccustomed Earth, some of the stories evidently expose how this sense of seclusion and the sentiment related to lack of indigenous family may be restored by befriending fellow Bengalis and welcoming them into the family. From a postcolonial viewpoint, these constructs are fascinating, as they show the ways in which Indian American identity may be negotiated. Furthermore the paper will investigate the issue of cultural assimilation experienced by Indian settlers in the United States of America.

IndexTerms – diaspora, diasporic space, family, alienation postcolonial, cultural assimilation, identity.

1.Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in a Bengali immigrant family in London in 1967 and was raised in Rhode Island, US. At her younger age, Lahiri journeyed to India in order to get acquainted with her family, where at a time would spend months. These travels during her childhood are responsible for the sense of dislocation that Lahiri elucidates in an interview:

"No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile" (Lahiri, "A Home")

. Even though her writing style cannot be deemed as autobiographical in nature, being a diaspora is the primary root cause of motivation, for instance majority of her characters dwell in expatriate. Lahiri asserts about her characters that

"characters are translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive, "but that her attempt to write stories which are set in India is not an act of translation, but a way she found to "create and illuminate a non-existing [world]" ("My Intimate").

However, although she also claims that her work is not a form of translation, she affirms that she translates herself through writing when she paraphrases.

Lahiri is well known for three works so far she has published: "Interpreter of Maladies", "The Namesake", and "Unaccustomed Earth". Her first book of short stories, "Interpreter of Maladies", was launched in 1999, and

won copious significant awards, such as the Pulitzer Prize. The short stories are centered on the diasporic displacement of first generations. The stories are not only focusing on Indian diaspora predicaments, but also illustration how culture and place affect human relationships.

Lahiri's second story collection "Unaccustomed Earth" proceeds from the former one as Lahiri's characters embark on different phases of progression. The "Unaccustomed Earth" is a collection of eight short stories which inspect the fate of the second and third generation diaspora. As these successive generations turn out to be increasingly more amalgamated into American culture and are affluent in fabricating perspectives outside of their native land, Lahiri's fiction moves to the needs of the individual. With the help these eight stories Lahiri skillfully analyzes the miniscule details of all kinds of relationship such as father-daughter, brother-sister, and husband-wife. Lahiri persuasively analyses various dimensions and different shades of every human relationship in a trans-border situation. She also scrutinizes the various struggles and acquisitions, anxieties and predicaments and the contradictions and confusions of every relation.

Jhumpa Lahiri emulates the predicaments of familial relationships and connectedness between people which results into the quest of identity after moving through the different rungs of alienation, nostalgia and assimilation. This paper will also highlight the modification and evolution in Lahiri's writings from her earlier stories collection as she concentrated on second generation diaspora with more importance to the relocation instead of dislocation. The paper also examines intergeneration gap that is dealt at a psychological level.

Research Questions

1. How relocation and dislocation plays integral role in the formation of the identity of the diaspora?
2. What is the effect of the migration on the family and relationships?
3. How relationships change in society with special reference to time, place and characters?
4. How the ideology and the outlook toward life of the two generation vary and how this leads to an inter-generational gap?

2. Literature Review

Koshy in her 'Neoliberal Family Matters' suggests that Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Unaccustomed Earth' reiterates the; "official immigrant family romance of productive citizenship in short stories which probe how the neoliberal logic that infuses economic migration penetrates the emotional infrastructure of the family, distorting filiality and disrupting belonging" (2013: 6).

She comments that the stories emphasis on the variation in the lives of the first generation immigrants as they struggle to conserve their native cultural identity while chasing a high-quality economic future, and the second generation, who tussle to cooperate with their parental hopes to make respectable professional accomplishment and sustain

"cultural continuity even as they deal with being partial outsiders to American culture"(2013: 6).

Koshy talks about out the notion that in 'Unaccustomed Earth', second-generation immigrant characters experience a sense of dislocation and many of them uncouncted with destabilizing.

Koshy suggests that;

"if parental control over their son's lives is primarily focused on monitoring professional achievement and is slacker in enforcing sexual discipline, the reverse is true for the daughters" (2013: 12).

It is an unquestionable claim that has strong roots in Indian traditions and culture. Koshy also suggests that the character's approach in negotiating their parental commands in 'Unaccustomed Earth' is also depend on the gender of the character. Koshy as a proof suggestion that male protagonists like Rahul, Romi, Kaushik and Amit are competent and they reject their parent's beliefs and leave, whereas the female character's scuffle to do so.

Maswood A.F.M. Akhter essay titled "My Children...Shall Strike Their Roots into Unaccustomed Earth: Representation of Diasporic Bengalis in Jhumpa Lahiri's latest Collection of Short Stories", Akhter observes that both diaspora digress in-middle of the two different worlds. Akhter also proposes that Lahiri receipts this

dislocation to advance in 'Unaccustomed Earth' by unfolding how the predicament of the child-parent relationship alters by the challenge of a life in an alien land. In his words:

"The children tend to question the relevance of the past to the present, of old and distant customs to the new and different environment while their parents fear the impending loss of their dearly nurtured original culture and identity... Yet, while due to the generation gap, the migrants and their children inhabit dissimilar spaces in the host culture, their understanding of rootlessness and displacement can also be of a parallel nature".

Ambreen Hai has also considered the inter-generational disputes between Lahiri's characters. She investigates the conflict amongst the alter-natal family, and the natal, the family that one generates, in her essay "The Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic of Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth". She proposes that the stories in 'Unaccustomed Earth', "dramatize, are centrally concerned with, and structured by, the difficulties of these often conflicting allegiances in the context of middle-class Bengali migration and assimilation into U.S. culture".

Hai also highlights that Lahiri's inborn families are not only foundation of restraint and restriction, but also source of deep love and comfort. Hai proposes that the conflict for Lahiri's characters is fabricating; "an ideal coexistence of natal and alter-natal familial ties that remain healing and regenerative and it is this challenge that for them produces crisis".

I. Family

Family arises as an essential subject in 'Unaccustomed Earth', and is significant to the protagonist and different characters in it. One can observe the ways in which family plays an important role as a constituent element in formation of the identity for first and second generations of Indian diaspora. Being appreciated by a family is perhaps more dominant perception of identity and self even more than the search for a companion, and family is the center of most of Lahiri's stories. The migrants who move from India to America leave their aboriginal family behind and commonly face isolation and alienation in the alien land. Some of the stories in 'Unaccustomed Earth' evidently demonstrate exactly how this sense of alienation and absence of neighboring native family members may be resolved by befriending other diaspora and openheartedly letting them into their home and family.

In "A Choice of Accommodations", the central character Amit Sarkar is confronted with the encounter by conflicting roles of being a son, a husband and a father. He being the son of immigrant Indian diasporic parents, he had to deal with refutation and separation which have troubled his relation with his parents. Within few years his nuptial, Amit and his wife (Megan), were going under a turbulent patch, and he is unsatisfied with their marriage. Finally, he is an Indian diasporic father of two daughters and they seem to be wholly American in spite of being part Indian. While welcoming the pleasures and obligations of fatherhood, he is occasionally tussles with the anxiety that he will not be successful and is concerned he is not a good parent. The protagonist appears averse to identify himself as an Indian diaspora. However, though he does not acknowledge Indian traditions and believes they mean nothing to him, he appears unpleasant with certain aspects of his family life that do not resemble with the standards of the family he has been raised with, particularly with the fact that his wife is the highest wage earner, while he takes on the accountabilities associated with a household feminine role.

Finally, it can be concluded that this section is the investigation of diasporic sensibility mirrored in the eight stories and how on the background of diasporic predicament of characters. Lahiri echoes the impediments of familial relationships and inter-connectedness between people lead to a search of identity after moving through the stages of dislocation, alienation, nostalgia and assimilation. This section also underlines the change and growth in Lahiri's writings from her earlier short stories as she was engrossed on second generation emigrants with more emphasis on repositioning.

II. Relationship

Through short stories of 'Unaccustomed Earth' Jhumpa Lahiri examines the personalities of different diasporic characters trapped in discords interpersonal relationship and traditional culture. These characters try to find

their own individual identities in a foreign country, facing the sense of dislocation, alienation, displacement, and isolation at the same time. These characters feel imprisoned in their disorientated diasporic lives, they struggle to get bond their friends and family for emotional fulfillment. The short stories are corpus of all Lahiri's thoughts and ideas about life and it's about predicaments of deterioration one's pursuit of identity.

The basic subject of her writing is based on human relationship in all its varied hues tints. These stories deal with the relationships between siblings, lovers, husband and wife parent and child. Jhumpa Lahiri as a writer of human relationship scrutinizes how dislocation from aboriginal land creates tensions among diaspora that eventually can manage or destruction both conventional and unconventional human relationships.

'Unaccustomed Earth' the stories are about the diasporic experiences of first, second and third generations. The title story focuses on the sense of emptiness and isolation faced by second generation emigrant. Ruma as she is torn between family obligations and requirement of adapted culture and norms of the society which leads to a sense identity crisis. Like her mother she also faces identity crisis. Though she is born and lived most of her life in America, she could not give up her mother's impact on her perspective.

Although Lahiri is dealing with traditional relationships, she also portrays some of the attributes which are not fitting into the setting of a traditional relationship. Specifically the relationships outside the institution of marriage. Although these relationships are often viewed as illegitimate relationship, Lahiri realizes that these relationships have been formed out of some physical or emotional need but they are not accepted by society. As in 'Hell-Heaven' the story deals with the relationship between Usha and Pranab on the background of the diasporic circumstances.

Hawthorne's epigram from 'The Custom House' on how children;
"strike their roots into unaccustomed earth."

Applied to 'A Choice of Accommodations' where Amit's struggle in creating roots in between two cultures is scrutinized. His insufficiency in the interracial marriage and the following anxiety and indecision which leads to absence of passion in wedlock. Through the story, she examines how the marriage between an Indian American and an American perform in the diasporic conditions. Amit feels entirely misplaced in the disagreements between the family he has created and the one in which he was born.

In the part two of 'Unaccustomed Earth' the three stories, entitled "Hema and Kaushik", are closely linked, grasping episodes in the relationship between the characters from youth to middle age. The stories of Hema and Kaushik are full of despair ending in unsatisfied love. "Once in a Lifetime" show how a sense of relocating and of being replanted occur in the stories. The turning point comes with the demise of Kaushik's mother. In "Year's End" when Kaushik's father espouses Chitra, he fails to realize the physical and emotional needs of his father, Chitra and the two young children. Both Kaushik and Hema try to abscond to their own isolated and protected worlds. Kaushik's leads him to take roots in the unaccustomed earth. After some failing in doing so he finds of his life in the arms of Hema. But that too is traumatized, summing to his final relocating from life itself. Life progresses with Hema, even though love is unfulfilled, with the fetus growing inside her, giving significance to life through "Going Ashore".

The Diasporic dilemmas in relationships are well fashioned out by the Lahiri when she let her characters take different paths, rather opposite of those took by their migrant parents. And they loss their ties with their cultural and familial in the unaccustomed earth. They become outsiders in their own worlds and have to explore their own existence in diaspora as Kaushik suffered.

"From childhood, he realized now, he was always happiest to be outside, away from the private detritus of life" (309).

Hema and Kaushik have to abscond their parents and their past to begin to live in unaccustomed earth and to set up their families.

The short stories are sensitive readings of characters caught in between struggles of family relation and cultural traditions. These characters attempt to find their individual identities in a new environment, at the time experiencing a sense of isolation, alienation, and displacement. These individuals, caught up in the confusion of their migrant lives, need to get connected to family and friends for emotional fulfillment.

To conclude the aspect of relationship in all the eight stories in 'Unaccustomed Earth', that all the stories are well fabricated on the background of diasporic predicament of characters trying to adapt with complexities of familial relationships and emotional link between people. The writer looks profoundly into the mind of her characters and establishes the need for reaching out in improved emotional communication between them. These stories depicted the diasporic sensibility through family relationships and interpersonal among characters who try to deal with their emotional predicament and they seek to establish their identities in a foreign land. As Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz has remarked on the dilemma of second generation migrants;

"This identity formation process proves especially challenging- and often torturous-for second generation immigrants because, while they can rarely achieve a complete assimilation into their host society, they cannot easily identify fully with their ethnic roots or seek the support of their co-ethnics, as their progenitors did." (Ibarrola, 2010:44)

'Unaccustomed Earth' as the title of the work is also of great importance as the short stories are about Indian migrants resettlements expatriate to the 'unaccustomed' earth of America and adapting to this Unaccustomed Earth. There is frequent of resettlements of families and relationships such as; mother-daughter, brother-sister, father-daughter and many others, and the dynamics of these relationships changed. Lahiri emphasizes on the unhinged families and the conflicts they are confronted as migrants had to redefine relationships after their displacement.

III. Intergenerational gap

Jhumpa Lahiri through Unaccustomed Earth have pointed out the conflicts between the first and the second-generation diaspora, the lack of communication they tackle every day, and the friction between diasporic parents and their half-American progenies. The reason behind this difference is their conflicting ideology about the word 'home'. The first-generation migrants believe that 'home' can never be any other place but India, but for their children 'home' is the place of where they are born and where they live after and not their parent's indigenous land.

Second-generation characters are torn between affection for their parents and a wish to form their own family and pursue their own path, free from their parent's values and expectations. At the same time, they have to accommodate their hybridity. These dilemmas between two different generations coping to live in the migrated landmark the spirit of 'Unaccustomed Earth'. In this connection, Shubhashree Mukherjee rightly points out;

"A cultural drift, pulling the second and third generations embracing a new and fascinating way of life is brought forth through the espousing of Americans by the non-native Bengalis. Several couples in the stories are shown to perform inter-community marriages or possess secret ties with American or British nationalists of the opposite sex. Untoward happenings failed love affairs, unsuccessful marriages, alcoholism and unlawful relationships make the lives of second and third generation immigrants miserable. (Mukherjee, 2010:63)"

The title story 'Unaccustomed Earth' rotates around a father-daughter relationship on the background of the recent unexpected and premature death of Ruma's mother. The story has highlighted the generational issue with fresh and new viewpoint. Earlier stories by Lahiri focused mainly on the conflict between the teenager second generation ignoring parental cultures whereas holding fast to American ways of life and the first generation parents enforcing their native culture on their wards. Tejinder Kaur has captured the different situation of this generation on the issue of culture and value system. As Kaur observes;

"They also face the cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at, and there is a threat to their cultural identity. They stand bewildered and confused and show resistance also to the discourse of power in various forms. In the following generations, these confusions, problems and yearnings become less intense as they get less influenced by the culture of the native country and also adapt themselves to the culture of the country of their residence. (Kaur, 2002:192)"

Lahiri does not propose Americanization as a preferred identity that could satisfy her protagonist. Although Ruma's father advocates returning to the career path, and he also thinks that to accepting American values:

work, self-reliance, and ultimately attaining contentment, he does not force Ruma to complete acculturation. The story indicates that everyone has to acknowledge the position in which they have found themselves.

The story faithfully reflects the gap in values and expectations of the two generations, painting a portrait of a small, close-knit family slowly falling apart. In the extract below, Sudha, the daughter in the story perceptively reflects on the rift and gap between the two generations. Sudha had never dared until college to violate her parents' norms that they got by Indian inheritance. Before entering the college life, she had lived as per their expectations. She had done very well academically; her social life limited as if only to guarantee that one day she would be set free. Out of sight in Philadelphia she studied attentively

“but on weekends she learned to let loose, going to parties and allowing boys into her bed. She began drinking, something her parents did not do.” (Lahiri, 2009: 129)

Her mother declares that the problem with America was as the text describes; “[t]oo many freedoms, too much-having fun.” “When we were young,” she says, “life was not always about fun.” (Lahiri, 2009:143)]

The children, on the other hand, are irritated with the nostalgia that shapes their parents' existence. While Sudha considered her parents' partition from India as a sickness that ebbed and flowed like a cancer, Rahul was resistant to that aspect of their life as well as he comments;

“No one dragged them here,” he would say “Baba left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do.” (Lahiri, 2009: 138)

The third story ‘A Choice of Accommodations’ is a about space, once again used, to reflect how migrants resolve their identity issues. The story portrays the details of a wedded couple Amit and his American wife Megan and their two daughters. The story focuses on the conjugal relationship between Amit and Megan and that was progressively failing after the birth of their second child.

The story by Jhumpa Lahiri vividly show how disconnection between the two generations and the way that they approach nostalgia and assimilation.

Conclusion

The stories of ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ have convincingly depicted diasporic sensibility of second generation migrants and tried to demonstration how the two generations of Diaspora are practically strangers. The first generation immigrants remain huddled together, sharing their dreams, memory, or legend about their aboriginal homeland. Although they left their for the opportunity of better life in a liberal adopted country, however they know that they are not acknowledged by their new society and, feel cut off from the new world. The second generation, being accustomed with the new culture moves from ‘dislocation’ to ‘relocation’. This affects the family dynamics of the diaspora which leads to a sense of isolation and loneliness, in the alien land.

Deterioration diaspora relationship is a direct result of the absence of a mutual language between two generations. The second generation migrant children acquire the language of their new country, which remains everlastingly alien for the parents. This loss of a communal language faced by both the generations hampers with personal communication.

Lahiri intertwines a vivid netting of relationships, which are truly a part of everyone's existence even in the contemporary times. Although the narrative of the stories are about diverse theme and ideas, yet the essential part of these remain the breaking and developing of relationships.

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