

Conflicting Facets in Jhumpa Lahiri's Story *Unaccustomed Earth*

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ABSTRACT

This paper strives to focus on the metaphysical strife that torments the life of displaced immigrants caught in the mires of a cross cultural transmigration. Ruma and her father both cannot surrender links with their Indian moorings, albeit the imposing American culture is breathing on their necks. Mrs. Lahiri poses a study in contrast in this aspect. Little Akash, the second generation immigrant provides the cross current with his fascination for the oriental world and his visualization of Dadu as a representative of the Indian culture; whereas Adam his father is fully American with a lot of respect for his in-laws who hail from a different culture. This essay brings out the neo-colonial design in the fabric of the story spread across generations.

KEYWORDS

Cross-cultural; Neo-colonial; Immigrants.

Jhumpa Lahiri's works can be critically analysed from the neo-colonial view point by virtue of the fact that many of the characters in her praiseworthy oeuvre are the products of a cross cultural conflict that seem to have an almost tangible effect on their very existence. A number of such characters are displaced from their native associations and find themselves exiled into a completely alien surrounding where they struggle with themselves to adapt themselves to the transformed socio-cultural set up. They can neither comfortably belong to the new world, nor can they surrender all their moorings with the culture to which they actually belong. Lahiri's intricately woven delicate meshes of stories revolve around such internal conflicts of the characters that perhaps goad them into concealed paroxysms that eat into their metaphysical existence. The intelligent reader discovers the tussle, the strife that

rocks and rips the life of such characters affecting them severely.

In the story 'Unaccustomed Earth', the first in her collection entitled the same; the happenings are focused around Ruma and her retired father who happens to be a widower too. Ruma's American husband Adam; her late mother; Mrs Bagchi, the woman for whom her father has developed a strong liking, and Ruma's son Akash, help the narrative spin around the primary themes interestingly. Ruma is expecting her second issue and her husband Adam is out on a business trip. Ruma's father, who had moved into a one-bed roomed condominium in a part of Pennsylvania after her mother's demise, is usually engaged in pleasure trips round the western world sharing the company of Mrs Bagchi. He decides to stop over for a few days at Ruma's place at Seattle. During his stay, Ruma discovers her father's world anew. She had always remained

aloof from her father all her life. His stay conjures in her fond memories of her childhood and her dear mother, and she indulges into occasional somnambulism into her past. We discover the conflict in Ruma: her love for her late Indian mother with all her mannerisms and her culture; yet she was inseparably grafted to an American life and tied up with Adam in American culture. Through a plethora of events, Ruma builds up commendable love, respect and admiration for her father. The father discovers a great friend in his grandson Akash, in spite of both being radically different from each other culturally. At the end of the story, Ruma's father departs casting his noble, charismatic impression on them, defying to get entangled in the bondage of family ties, love and affection once again. It was after he had left that Ruma discovered amongst Akash's playthings her father's letter written to Mrs Bagchi. Although it is a jolt to her, she gathers herself together and prepares the letter for the mailman.

Adam plays the role of a perfect husband worried and caring for his family when he is away on a business tour. He looked forward to the near future when, "In a few months, Adam assured her, the trips would diminish" (5). To tide over Ruma's difficulty in his absence and in her pregnancy, "...he encouraged her to hire a baby-sitter, even a live-in if that would be helpful" (5).

He is the perfect representation of the working American husband striving to provide comfort to his family. Though Ruma knew that it would be a strain on their economic resources for she had resigned her job with the legal firm to raise children, yet the influence of her homely mother was too strong an influence upon her to compromise her children's upbringing for her own career. So much so that after two weeks of bereavement for her mother's death, she found it ridiculous to resume her job of overseeing her client's futures rather than

care for her own children. She was delighted to take over the role of a caring housewife with Adam's new job coming through. With the family growing she must have been aware of the increasing expenses. Yet Ruma's decision to quit her job was absolutely personal and quite un-American, and we guess the influence of her native culture that ultimately made her take the decision. Adam who is fully American never makes an appearance in the story. His temporary dislocation from the home is perhaps a ploy to set the stage and provide for a clash of cultures with the arrival of Ruma's father. The story is spread over a period of time as long as the father visits Ruma's house. Nevertheless, with the departure of the old man who is considered as a representative of the alien culture by Akash, we learn that Adam would be returning home later that day. It seems somehow to conjure the sense of a clash between American and Indian cultures that the protagonist finds difficult to live in simultaneously.

The story saunters into the realms of internal conflicts with the prospect of Ruma's father's visit to her house in Seattle. Ruma leads an American life in which, a father visiting a daughter's house is considered to be a temporary guest. Used to such a culture, Ruma feared that a long stay by her father:

...would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash and the second child that that would come in January, conceived just before the move. (7).

Ruma had known much less about her father than about her mother and had never spent a week alone with him. In the absence of her mother, she could not tear herself from the obligation to take care of the lonely man. The influence of her Indian mother was too strong upon her to be indifferent to her father's proposed trip to her home. Thus,

She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare. Still, not offering a place in her home made her feel worse. (7).

Adam, on the contrary, did not quite understand the dilemma of Ruma. The pure bred American regarded the father-in-law's visit as a boon, "Perfect..... He'll be able to help you out while I'm gone." (6). He considered the father's visit as a quandary from his worries and anxieties about leaving his family to fend for themselves during his trip that would last for days. Ruma, however, was divided about her father's visit apprehending that he might live on with them and be a part of their immediate family, yet she could turn a blind eye to her obligation to her father.

Ruma and her father share between themselves a concept of missed connections. The father expects Ruma to be a different lady from what she projects herself to be. He does not expect her to trudge the way of life in the same footsteps her mother did. While driving over to Akash's weekly swimming lessons, Ruma's father suggested that she should take up a new job in Seattle, and push her successful legal career forward.

He had always assumed Ruma's life would be different. She'd worked for as long as he could remember. Even in high school, in spite of his and his wife's protests, she'd insisted, in the summers, on working as a bus girl at a local restaurant, the sort of work their relatives in India would have found disgraceful for a girl of her class and education. (40)

Ruma attempted to evade the topic saying that she would be working for the next five years looking after her children, but he wondered if that would make her really happy. "She had never been able to confront her father freely, the way she used to fight with her mother." (37).

The father was thus probably aware that this decision of Ruma was not

quite as expected from her. He expects Ruma to be a fully Americanised lady, even in her thoughts. Ruma, however, delights basking in the allurements of her Indian heritage, enriched with the happy memories of her complacent mother. She is successful in concealing her shift towards her heritage fearing that it might upset her father. The handling of the conflict in Ruma is so intricately superb that her mundane activities and thoughts are aglow, lending a sublime hue to her experiences in life.

In his days of yore, Ruma's father felt himself enmeshed in the snares of a cross cultural immigration. In spite of having relocated, he could not separate himself from his oriental moorings. His occasional returns to India had been "a fact of life for him, and for all their Indian friends in America." (8). Hence he continued with the visits only till his parents lived, in spite of the expenses and the children's growing reluctance to visit the country. He also bore a sense of shame and sadness every time he visited Calcutta; a feeling he developed because he wanted to straddle both American and Indian cultures simultaneously.

Lahiri strikes a note in contrast with the example of Mrs Bagchi. Ruma's father looked upon her as an anomaly, an Indian woman alone. She did not hesitate to migrate to America alone at 26, to prevent being married off again by her parents after her husband's death in an accident. In sharp contrast to Ruma's father, she returned to Calcutta only once to attend her father's funeral. Able to detach herself more effectively from the country of her origin, Mrs Bagchi enjoyed complete tranquility; an aspect that Ruma's father tastes much later in life, after being a widower. Mrs Bagchi thus plays a chiaroscuro effect to bring out the metaphysical conflict ripping the life of Ruma's father.

When her father arrived at her house in Seattle, Ruma was eager to

receive him. She was probably meeting him after a long time. The apparent metamorphosis of the father is explicit in the lines, "She was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere." (11).

The changeover had been triggered off with the death of his wife after which he had started considering himself an emancipated man; free from the shackles of every sort. Thus he did not hesitate to reserve in his own name the tour Ruma had planned for her mother and herself. In spite of having travelled a long distance to Ruma's house, "his surroundings did not seem foreign to him as they had when he went to Europe." (28).

After his wife's death somehow strangely he started enjoying the solitude that was all around him and basking in the desultory life he led. At the sight of a shelf of clouds, he felt it was like miles of densely packed snow across which one could walk. "...this was his life now, the ability to do as he pleased, the responsibility of his absent just as all else was absent from the unmolested vision of the clouds." (8).

He sold off his old house, shunning all associations with it and relocated. He exiled himself deliberately from his familiar world turning his back upon it with a spirit of *déjà vu*, and embarked upon embracing a more independent and free existence that somehow shone on him with a charismatic light. Not that he was indifferent to his wife's demise. On the contrary, he was perhaps overtaken by a sense of guilt at having had too many happy assumptions about life. Somehow he could not absolve himself from the guilt of unpreparedness at facing exigencies in life and considered himself at fault for the sorrow that he invited upon Ruma and the family. Hence he decided to estrange himself from his familiar world and end the conflict that was eating into his mind.

It was a relief not to have to maintain the old house, to move and rake the lawn, to replace the storm windows with screens in summer, only to have to reverse the process a few months later. It was a relief, too, to be living in another part of the state, close enough so things were still familiar, but far enough to feel different. (30)

It was the urge for the emancipated life that somehow made Mrs Bagchi seem fascinating to him. He liked her western appearance, her clothing and mostly her beautifully measured voice and words. He felt he was attentive to her as he had never been even to his wife. Yet he could not speak of her to Ruma. While showing the videos of his tour, Ruma noticed the woman who looked Indian. He could have told her then but did not get himself to do so. In view of the limited communication he had with his daughter, he found it impossible to express himself. He had silently borne the resentment of Ruma who sided with her mother always. Nobody appreciated the hard work he put in to provide for his family. At the death of his wife it was this world that Ruma's father detached himself from. He had found in Mrs Bagchi a respite from all his anguish and yet he could not tell Ruma about her fearing that the knowledge might severely upset the expecting Ruma. He could not help being mentally transposed to the world of his past, his days with his wife during the childhood of Ruma, in completely different circumstances. He himself would never have imagined doing any such thing then.

He wondered if this was how his children had felt in the past, covertly conducting relationships back when it was something he and his wife had forbidden, something that would have devastated them. (19).

When Ruma did discover the affair through the misplaced letter which he wrote to Mrs. Bagchi and which Akash had

playfully planted in his garden plot, she was overtaken by a surge of mental upheavals. Unfamiliar with the Bengali alphabet, she somehow guessed the contents and realized that “[it] proved with more force than the funeral, more force than all the days since then, that her mother no longer existed.” (59), yet perhaps the hydrangea that his father had planted with his own hands in her garden bespoke his love for her, Ruma wondered.

The handling of the theme at this stage is peculiarly reminiscent of Thomas Hardy. When Ruma was mentally eulogizing her father after his departure, this discovery hinders her from branding him as ideal and makes him seem only too human, noble though in spite of his idiosyncrasies. At this juncture Ruma is clearly put to test. The reader is held in suspense wondering if she would accept her father after knowing about him or would she get along with her life and care nothing about him anymore. The decision of Ruma to set the card ready for the mailman to take away is clearly a victory of her liberal minded American nature over her native cultural traits. In spite of all happenings, she accepts the reality and honours the metamorphosis of her father into a liberal new life. She realizes that her father had deeply embraced aspects of the western culture and had estranged himself from his heritage, but continued to remain her loving father.

The interaction between differing cultures is dealt with quite interestingly in yet another aspect of the story: the relationship between Akash and his grandfather, Ruma’s father. Akash is a third generation immigrant, son to the fully American Adam and the second generation immigrant Ruma. He is totally alien to Indian culture. However, in the story we see how his grandfather who represents a foreign culture becomes dear to him. Akash is fascinated by his ways and even by his language, and is eager to learn more of it by virtue of his curiosity.

The grandfather also discovers in Akash a very affectionate successor who would happily inherit the aspects of Indian culture. The friendship thus grows immensely strong and blooms colourfully. Ruma’s efforts to bring up Akash in the way she was brought up seems apparent in the words at the dinner table:

“I hate that food.” Akash retorted, frowning at her father’s plate. “Akash, don’t talk that way.” In spite of her efforts he was turning into the sort of American she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother: imperious, afraid of eating things. (23)

Yet Akash took to his Dadu (grandfather) quite easily and they became good friends. Dadu read stories to him from books at bedtime, taught him the love of gardening, understood him thoroughly in spite of belonging to a different culture, and even lend him a foreign vocabulary. Dadu created a small plot for Akash where the latter enthusiastically buried things in the soil.

Akash nodded. He picked up a plastic dinosaur forcing it into the ground.

‘What colour is it?’ her father asked.

‘Red’.

‘And in Bengali?’

‘Lal’.

‘Good’.

‘And neel!’ Akash cried out pointing to the sky. (44-45)

Ruma’s father had indeed lent a different world to Akash; a different earth to which he was not accustomed, a totally different world with a sky coloured totally neel. The bond between Dadu and Akash was cutting in on both deeply. Akash was the only temptation for the old man which made him wonder whether he should consider staying in with Ruma’s family. Very oddly for him, with Akash he

somehow felt a biological mooring, a sense of a successor that transcended all the barriers of a cross cultural barrier.

Akash's psychological bond with his grandfather is so overpowering that at Ruma's proposal of her father living with them, the elated Akash began jumping up and down in the pool, squirting water from the plastic dolphin, nodding his head. Akash refuses to fall back into his usual lifestyle when the old man had gone. Later although Ruma tries to console and divert him with the thought that his father would be coming back that day, hoping that the idea would make him happy, but Akash rejects it pathetically crying out, "I want Dadu" (57). He fails to understand the intricacies of the world, why Dadu went home, why Dadu has to live in his own home. The world of his Dadu of which he had a glimpse seems immensely fascinating to him and he finds it extremely difficult to detach himself from it.

The title of the story 'Unaccustomed Earth' speaks of conflicting concept of the earth that the

characters face and live in. Jhumpa Lahiri presents to us how the characters fight with themselves, how they adapt themselves to an earth that is frivolous to them; an earth they are not accustomed to. Ruma keeps on delving into her fond memories and tries to pass on the good things to her son Akash attempting to bring him up in the way she had been. All throughout her father's stay she had reminiscences from the familiar past; her known earth in which her father led a life known to her. At the denouement of the story she discovers her father's affair and the changed earth he walks upon. She has only to adapt herself to this unaccustomed earth. Both Ruma's father and Akash also live in their newly discovered unaccustomed earth. Akash discovers a new earth with his grandfather, and with his departure falls back into his accustomed life pining for the unaccustomed earth that his grandfather had introduced him to. The story makes delectable reading with all the conflicts that the characters face and surmount.

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