

Multiculturalism in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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ABSTRACT

In the galaxy of the feminist voices in literature, Jhumpa Lahiri has carved a niche for her innovative style. She is a miniaturist, a micro cosmologist helping one to understand the world of multiculturalism. Every character in her fiction is pulled in various directions. Parents pull characters backward in time, children pull them forward, America pulls them to West, and India pulls them to East. The need to marry pulls them outward, the need for solitude pulls them inward. *Unaccustomed Earth* is a narrative of the cultural pull visible in the life of the second and the third world immigrants. This paper presents the inner world experiences of the immigrants and makes an emotional investigation of the various aspects of multiculturalism.

KEYOWRDS

Multiculturalism; Solitude; Immigrants; Inner World.

Jhumpa Lahiri, an American – based Indian writer, is an important writer in the galaxy of women writers of Indian origin. She was brought up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. In spite of her brought-up in America, she inherited the sense of exile and up-rootedness from her parents. In contrast to this belongingness with Americanization, the images of native soil and innate bonding with ancestral relations gripped her consciousness and played a significant role to give direction to her creative impulse. The dilemma of past and present, native and alien, innate and acquired prepared a twilight view floating in all the three collections of stories – *The Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. In her imaginative reconstruction of the canvass of life in Calcutta, Lahiri focuses on the various dimensions and possibilities of personal relationships that essentially prepare the ground for multiculturalism. She doesn't confine herself only to the complexities of

marital harmony but covers a wide range of multicultural aspects such as familial and extra – familial relationships manifesting the poetics of exile, alienation, nostalgia, dislocation, relocation and uncompromising bonding of emotional affinities. Most of her characters are caught between two cultures and suffer from a sense of loss due to cultural displacement.

Jhumpa Lahiri has a comprehensive insight in the diversity of responses of the three generation of immigrants. The first generation of immigrants suffers the trauma of alienation along with a deep sense of loss and the haunting images of nostalgia. The second generation promotes the aesthetics of acceptance and reaffirmation and assimilation. However, the third generation that comprises the children of immigrants is free from the burden of divided consciousness but they inculcate the psyche of an aloof-self both in homeland and host-land. In this context Jhumpa Lahiri exposes the invisible chaos

operating within the consciousness of these children. They are more isolated and insecure about the images of life. In Lahiri's stories the first generation of immigrants retains their native cultural identity, longing for personal relationship, idealizing homeland and assimilating two distinctive cultures. However, the children of immigrants, in spite of being native born, cannot fully segregate themselves from their ancestral cultural heritage and subsequently bloom to inspire them to reclaim their native cultural identity.

The story of *Unaccustomed Earth* is a narrative account of the expatriate sensibility of an educated Indian Bengali woman Ruma along with the predicament of her son Akash who is born and brought up as a native immigrant in Seattle in the company of his Indian mother Ruma and American father, Adam. In this narrative of contra-acculturation, the novelist presents inner world of the experiences of counteracting emotions at play in inter-racial marriages

Ruma is settled in Seattle with her husband Adam and son Akash. This marriage with Adam is celebrated against the desires of her parents who were concerned with her security in marital relationship. She takes her own decision but she eternally survives violating the will of her parents. When her mother dies during surgery, she suffers terribly and becomes obsessed with the well-being of her father. Her father finally manages his personal life in his own way without being an undesirable liability for the sake of his daughter. He enjoys his life with foreign tours but during the time of his tours, Ruma keeps a strict vigilance to ensure her father's movements and checks for any plane crash anywhere in the world. Through the post cards of her father, she shares an impersonal account of his life. Similarly, he sends postcards without taking the pains to make a lively correspondence. Her agony increases out of the realization that in those postcards,

there is no mention of Adam and it is an indication that her marriage with Adam is not accepted by her parents, After a long pause, once during his visit to Prague, her father plans to spend a week with Ruma and to enjoy living in the house Adam has bought on the East side of Seattle.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma's anxiety for her father suggests that Indian immigrants have an irresistible passion to define and redefine the nature of their personal relationship beyond time and space. Like a sensible daughter, after her mother's death. Ruma assumes the duty of speaking to her father every evening. The news of the arrival of her father makes her think about her past and to construct the images of future to compensate the undisclosed fear and guilt. She is pregnant and her husband is on a business trip. In her exile at this state, Ruma was faces three issues: a) The obsessive burden of pregnancy, b) The unfamiliar conditions in Seattle, and c) The anxiety of the new job, in order to balance the commitments of a woman in the form of motherhood and the ordeal of cultural encounter that she is destined to face in Seattle. The dilemma of choice between the professional life and the personal life haunts her. She looks forward to the arrival of her father with three considerations that often determine the psyche of woman immigrants: a). Better growth rearing of Adam in the company of his grandfather, b) the possibilities of the positive acceptance of her relationship with Adam. c) the possibilities of the compensation of her own guilt. Jhumpa Lahiri accepts that with the children of immigrants, it is a serious issue as to transmitting cultural heritage to their children. Ruma curiously longs for the company of her mother.

For Ruma, it was not only the return of her father but also the occasion of the return of her past that was an integral part of her essential self. She recalls the image of the house with the rooms which her mother had decorated and the bed in which

she used to sit up and do crossword puzzles. She and her father represent two contradictory dimensions of the consciousness of immigrants: a) her father looks forward to the mode of assimilation because he doesn't want to disturb the personal life of Ruma, b) Ruma still survives with her Indian sensibility. Jhumpa Lahiri admits that women immigrants suffer an acute trauma of cultural displacement and, therefore, assimilation is a greater challenge for them.

In spite of her longing for the company of her father, Ruma is apprehensive of the fusion of two cultures, two times and two spaces. She stands in between her father and her son. Her mental crisis is poignant and deep. Her dilemma is the dilemma of all women immigrants. In the process of the reconstruction of her past, she also presents the life of Mrs. Bagchi who moved to America as a widow to escape the apathy of her parents. During one of his European tours, Ruma's father develops a relationship with Mrs. Bagchi because both of them share a common language and appearance, people mistook them for husband and wife.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri focuses on the predicament of the children of immigrants. In the canvass of the story, three generations – father, Ruma and Akash – come under one rubric. Ruma is anxious of Akash's ability to adjust with Dadu as there is no emotional and cultural bonding between them. Besides Akash, she also suffers due to her isolation, cultural alienation and the burden of household responsibility. Her memory turns back and she identifies herself with the words of her mother and in such recollection she finds more loss than gain. In marriage with Adam and subsequent migration, she finds herself alienated.

In the case of Akash, there is no sentimental bonding with Dadu. Distance had brought all difference in personal

relationship. Even Dadu was not aware of the exact age of Akash. Ruma makes desperate efforts to promote the bonding and warmth of emotions between Akash and his grandfather. In the presence of her father, every time she is anxious of the fact that Akash must not turn out to be an American child, ignorant of his Bengali upbringing. It is evident that in inter-racial marriage, she feels herself weak and insecure. The warning and apprehensions of her mother haunts her consciousness. Ruma suffers terribly after the death of her mother and realizes the impact of her mother's death on her life. Similarly, after the second homecoming, in Ruma's family, her father perceives the image of her diseased mother. He returns after a considerable time but realizes that something about the appearance of his daughter has changed. She now resembled his wife so strongly that he could not bear to look at her directly. Swayed by such sentiments, he gradually gets involved in the life of Ruma and Adam. On one occasion he defends Akash when he gets wet during an outing with him. It manifests the Indian way of developing a relationship. For him life seems dull without Akash. Immediately after his breakfast, he goes outside to enjoy with him.

Jhumpa Lahiri, through the dilemma of Ruma, suggests that Indian women, even in immigrant spaces fail to get rid of their innate feminine inhibitions. Lahiri also proves that all immigrants suffer from nostalgia. When Baba makes a mention of the old house, tears start trickling from her eyes. She recollects her old house, her mother speaking on the phone, her mother complaining as the workmen hammer and drill. Mother, whom she has almost removed from her memory, suddenly becomes alive before her eyes. At every possible opportunity Ruma expresses her anxiety about the cooking of different Indian dishes for her father and fills the shelves of refrigerator with Indian food. In the company of her father, for the

first time in her life, she eats with her fingers. It indicates her rare Indian sensibility to culture.

Adam still feels that Ruma might be tired of taking care of her father, but with Baba's power to give happiness to Akash and her, she felt deeply attached to him and couldn't imagine life without Baba. But later he decides to leave that place. Baba did not want to disturb the personal life of his daughter with his presence. His only purpose was to mould the personality of Akash in accordance with Indian values.

Finally Baba leaves the place with his mission to seek the pleasure of his life in the company of his co-partner, Meenakshi Bagchi. Jhumpa Lahiri deconstructs the multicultural attitude in the psyche of the second generation with specific focus on the predicament of the children of immigrants; Ruma's emotional crisis in *Unaccustomed Earth* establishes that in spite of the self-chosen fate of immigration, new immigrants can't escape the emotional and mental crisis arising in a multicultural society.

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