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## Diasporic Tension of Female Characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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**Abstract:** Jhumpa Lahiri (July11, 1967), is an English born American novelist and short story writer of the modern age. As a prominent and promising writer, she always prioritizes writing about the crisis of women of the contemporary era. Through her writing, she deals with the experience of a life in two separate cultures: one is the culture she belongs to, and the other is the one, she settles and harmonizes with. Having fallen in-between the dividing lines of two cultures, she faces a number of certain challenges in accommodating with, or imposing values of one culture over the other. The struggle is nicely presented in Jhumpa Lahiri's recent fictional collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, where some of the female characters experience the same tension. These women characters fall between Indian and American experiences in order to find a final meeting point, from where they can distinguish things more clearly, and visualize a future for themselves. The experiences of these women characters also deal with the dynamics of two different generations – older and the recent. There are eight short stories in this novel *Unaccustomed Earth*. In my paper, I would like to explain the cross-cultural conflicts, troubles, disturbance, desires and predicaments of the women migrants in the first three stories of the novel *Unaccustomed Earth*.

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, Women, Conflict, Tension, Struggle, Culture, Identity.*

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There is no denying the fact that, life of an immigrant person is always marked by the experience that he or she has gathered and a collection of memory. The experience of living in a country which is fully unfamiliar as well as unknown, is very challenging and estranged from what one had practiced so far. On one hand, there is a necessity to keep the links to tradition, homeland and memories; and, on the other hand, there is always a sense of sweet taste and demand of freedom in a new culture. In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *Unaccustomed Earth*, there is a deep proof of people who have lost their roots, though they attempt to preserve traces of their inherited society. Through her lucid writing, Jhumpa Lahiri tries to show that life and luck of people may be changed at any time wherever they live because of some unpredicted events. These events are mishaps of fate, condition of weather, love affairs, family and job related crisis, and so on. There are eight different short stories in the novel *Unaccustomed Earth*, and in each story a major female character is described to have suffered the tension of two cultural identities. This book examines the Indian experience in America both from viewpoint of an older generation immigrating to America, and of their children, who are American by birth, but all the time encumbered by the Indian culture. The cultural identity of female characters is focused here taken from the first three stories of *Unaccustomed Earth*-a daughter from the first story named 'Unaccustomed Earth', a wife from second story named 'Hell-Heaven', and a wife from the third story named 'A Choice of Accommodations'. In the first two stories, an Indian daughter and an Indian wife are found caught between a struggle to accommodate new value system of old and new cultures from their parents. The third story demonstrates the conjugal tension of an American wife, who has an Indian husband by root.

The role of women in their families is always very important. They automatically learn from their family many things at the very early stage of life. For example, they have to ensure that, mother language is spoken strictly and maintained the religious rituals within the family regularly. Moreover, they struggle a lot to recreate a stable partnership as well as a happy family life in their new residences after their marriage. Mostly, they always keep their relations and connections with their earlier period, their culture, their languages and their religion. It is only later that the colonial Government have decided to sponsor family migration and women labor which differ according to the colony concerned. With references, Bhaswati

Mukherjee comments that the increasing number of Indian women has introduced a new dynamism to the cultural creativity of the conventional population and the reestablishment of some standards of family. (Mukherjee, 2015)

This observation is also seen in the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, where some female characters migrate themselves because of their familial issues. These women are found to create a new dynamic in order to accommodate in an entirely new environment of a secondary culture. In the recent history, a great number of people had to embrace the life of migrants because of the rapid globalization. Bhaswati Mukharjee observes that, in addition to one billion in South Asia, Indians have a diaspora numbering some twenty-five million worldwide whereas three million in the United States. (Mukherjee, 2015)

A diaspora refers to scattered resident whose foundation lies within a smaller geographic environment. Diaspora can also refer to the movement of the population from its original homeland to another place. This word has come to refer mainly to historical transmission of a typical natural world. Lately, scholars have distinguished between different kinds of diaspora based on its causes; such as imperialism, trade or employment immigrations, or by the kind of social reason within its society and its ties to the native lands. Some diaspora communities keep well-built political bind with their native soil. Many diasporas feel a sense of returning home, participate and preserve some of their own cultural values from their motherland. Some feel building affairs with other communities in a diaspora society. People are always in search for utopia which is absent from their real life. This utopian idea even prevails among the economic migrants who look forward to a better life in the place they chose to move. They migrate for better standards of living, but it becomes hard task for them as they leave behind everything and adjust to an extra ordinary condition, not classic to one, they previously experienced. Unfortunately, the sense of utopia fails at that time.

'Unaccustomed Earth', the title story of the book, is about three generations and the relationship between the three characters – the father, his daughter Ruma and her only son Akash. The themes of this story are both cultural and universal. It explores some of the difficult gender roles in America; such as, Ruma's decision to leave her flourishing official career to raise children and her husband's hard work to support the family. It also discovers the family problems connected with Ruma's Indian heritage, including her sense of responsibility to care for her father by keeping him with her present family. Ruma is living abroad from her childhood with her parents and after her marriage with Adam, who is an American, she settles in Seattle permanently. Her father, a retiree and a recent widower, comes to visit them for few days after his travels in Europe. Actually, he starts travelling all around the world after the death of his wife to get rid of his loneliness. Ruma does not feel prepared for looking after her father, though, it is true that, after her mother's death, her father becomes her responsibility: 'She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare.' (Lahiri, 2009, p. 07) As Adam is away from home because of his work for couple of days, during his absence, Ruma's father likes to play the role as her guardian. It is because Ruma is carrying for the second time, and Akash, her first baby, is still young and needs someone to look after him always. Her father does this responsibility very well, though she does not like his concern in her family. Here her father merely becomes an outsider to her. The gap in the outlook between Ruma and her father persists, and to a great extent, collides.

Living for a long time in abroad, Ruma's father, being an Indian, thinks and works like a pure American. Every time he pushes Ruma to be practical and to adjust with the practical life by building up her legal career while being a mother. But Ruma, though she leads her life like a pure American, unintentionally follows the typical Indian ladies who always give priority to their families more than their rising career. She is waiting for her second issue and in reply to her father about building up the career, she says, 'I am working, Baba. Soon I'll be taking care of two children, just like Ma did'. (Lahiri, 2009, p.36) She shows the example of her own childhood when she and her brother went to India with her parents. That time her father says, 'We had no alternative. Our parents weren't willing to travel. But I will come here again to see you.' (Lahiri, 2009, p.47) In one sense, it can be said that it is one kind of compromise as well as a sacrifice for the family. But Ruma never feels sorry for it. One thing is very clear that, in spite of living in America from her childhood, unintentionally she always loves to think, behave and work like an Indian woman.

In spite of a great distance between two geographic locations, certain things are peculiarly connected to the origin. There are certain things a diaspora cannot overcome. Whatever and wherever he or she is, he or she cannot avoid loving the land he or she belongs to. Ruma's American husband Adam maintains and continues a good family life unlike other Americans. It is because he has married an Indian girl through whose attachment makes him this type of caring character which is not common and familiar in other Americans. Ruma's mother always had a negative idea about Adam. Before she settled the marriage between Adam and Ruma, she commented about Adam to Ruma was very harsh and negative: 'you are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian, that is the bottom line.' (Lahiri, 2009, p. 28) Actually, she bore a prejudice and over generalized idea about an ordinary American. Later, her words come false and it happens that 'she grew to love Adam as a

son, a replacement for Romi, who had crushed them by moving abroad and maintaining only distant ties.' (Lahiri, 2009, p.25)

However, what makes the story more compelling, is the limited communication between the father and the daughter, both are afraid, in some way, to acknowledge that they have moved away from their culture of origin and have embraced aspects of the new culture. Ruma is disengaged with her community and life outside her home. This is also an example of an ordinary Indian girl. Ruma requests her father to move in with her family, but he does not want to be part of another family. Though dragged along on a family visits to Kolkata, Ruma lacks an appetite for Indian food, language and spouse. She cannot read Bengali and lose Asian habit of eating with her hands. When she finally marries an Adam, her parents interpret her choice as a refusal to her origins. After her marriage, Ruma starts and continues her successful career in a law firm. But after two weeks for bereavement due to her mother's death in an unsuccessful surgery, she decides to quit her job and stay home, taking care of her child. Unconsciously, she leaves behind a condition that gives her independence as an individual to devote herself to household, repeating her mother's social role like an Indian lady. Gradually, things she has never thought before, start to appear in her mind automatically: the perfectibility of her mother running her household without any complain to anyone, the excellence of her ability as a housewife and a cook which had never been praised by her husband, and all the more, her pure love and devotedness to family without recognition.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, the preservation of memories is responsible for the perpetuation of a sense of identity, and it is in society that people normally acquire, recall, recognize and localize their memories. Thus, he argued that it is impossible for individuals to bear in mind in any logical and unrelenting fashion outside of their group contexts. (Halbwachs, 2004) The diasporic women and children experience that borrowed memory in a more acute way, due to fact that they have never had a true contact with their parents' lands. In the writings, the children who were born abroad, focus on the complexity of relationships in a different way from their parents. Unfortunately, they have neither a native land to remember, nor traditions to be kept alive. They adjust their life easily as they settle their mind to do it. Surrounding atmosphere help these children to settle and adjust their present life in this case. Ruma is the true example in this regard.

The second story of the novel *Unaccustomed Earth*, 'Hell Heaven' is about an Indian housewife Aparna, the mother of the protagonist, Usha. Aparna's family settles in America for three years. According to Usha, 'before that, we lived in Berlin, where I was born and where my father had finished his training in microbiology before accepting a position as a researcher at Mass General, and before Berlin my mother and father had lived in India, where they were strangers to each other, and where their marriage had been arranged.' (Lahiri, 2009, p.61) In America, they meet Pranab Chakrabarty, a fellow Bangalee from Kolkata. He is a young bachelor, becomes familiar person to Usha's 'Shyamal da' and addresses Aparna as 'Boudi'. As Aparna's husband is always very busy with his official work, Pranab fulfills the blank space of Aparna's husband. He loves to pass time Aparna's family always. Aparna also loves to cook food for him, prepares tea for him, even she loves to go outside with him. There are many things common between Pranab and Aparna. They go out for picnic and at that time everyone thinks that it is a nice family trip. Aparna's husband is thirty seven years old, nine years older than Aparna, and Pranab is twenty-five. Aparna feels free to call him 'Pranab' whereas, according to Usha about her mother Aparna: '...she never called my father by his first name.' (Lahiri, 2009, p.65)

In absence of a busy husband, Pranab always plays the role of a lover, and unconsciously, Aparna falls in love with him. That's why she never loves to see the presence of any lady in Pranab's life. Later, Pranab falls in love with an American girl named Deborah and marries her. As Aparna never loves to see Pranab and Deborah together, she constantly sends Usha to Pranab and Deborah so that they cannot pass time with one another intimately. Her tension, as a beloved (unrequited though), is reflected in small twists of actions and words she uses. This tension is very unreasonable yet in the very core of her heart, she cannot accept the reality of their togetherness. As a female diaspora, accepting an American lady for Pranab is not very easy for her. So, she resists in a very subtle way. It may happen that, Aparna passes a good time before Pranab starts his marriage life and she unconsciously feels comfortable staying and passing time with Pranab always.

As a pure Indian housewife, Aparna never allows Usha to have her date, nor attending the dance party that is held on the last Friday of every month in the school cafeteria. In front of her, when Aparna says with firm belief that, like Pranab, Usha will never marry an American though she is thirteen, Usha becomes very upset. Every time Aparna says that an American lady like Deborah can never be able to be a good wife like an Indian woman. She becomes frightened by envisioning this tension of cross-cultural identities – Indian-American -in her daughter. She would rather impose her personal choice over her daughter's and would occupy the space of liberty and freedom, certain rights and privileges of being an American. On

the other hand, she cannot accommodate with the changes that life has to offer her in her new surroundings. It is because, as a diaspora, she could never cross her own limitations.

The third story 'A Choice of Accommodations' from *Unaccustomed Earth* deals with a family tale which introduces us with Amit, his American wife Megan, their two kids, and Amit's friend Pam Borden, who happens to be the headmaster's daughter from the old boarding school. Pam, in a way, is an adorable character for Amit for some reasons. Firstly, Amit, all his school life had been studying in boys' boarding school and Pam, the headmaster's daughter is the only young teenage girl lodging in the entire campus. Pam is particularly attractive and knows the art of drawing the attention of strangers very well. Being the only attractive young girl, Pam enjoys the privilege of being adored by almost all young boys of the boarding school. This story revolves around an incident related to Pam's wedding at the old boarding school many years after. Amit receives an invitation from Pam for her wedding. In the meantime, Amit is married and father of two daughters named Monika and Maya. His American wife Megan comes of a middle-class family and is also a decent girl with reasonable understanding of her married life. She is also five years older than Amit which, however, does not have an impact on their conjugal life. But Megan always suffers from a sense of insecurity. 'She was insecure about Pam, defensive the one or two times they'd met, as if Amit and Pam had once been lovers'. (Lahiri, 2009, p.88)

The sense of Megan's insecurity comes from knowing a fact from Amit's life. Megan came to know that Amit was particularly interested in Pam and admired her. His devotion to Pam was a little bit more than usual. However, it was, all way through, one sided. Pam never had reacted to such inclination except in one incident where she comes to kiss Amit under the effect of alcoholic intoxication. She immediately withdraws from such behavior and pulls her back, yet maintains a usual friendly relationship with Amit. But, for Amit, it has been a long cherished in memory. However, Megan does not know the incident of this particular detail. But Amit's devotion makes her absolutely uncomfortable and till today, she bears a sense of contention towards Pam. So, when Amit gets an invitation from Pam, Megan does not take it easily. She thinks that the very liking for Pam still exists.

Megan struggles hard to come to this stage of her career. From the story we come to know :

She was the youngest of five children, her father a policeman, her mother a kindergarten teacher. She'd gotten a job after graduating from high school, in a photocopy store during the days and as a telemarketer in the evenings, not beginning college until she was twenty, going part time because she'd had to continue working. (Lahiri, 2009, p.95)

On the other hand, Amit's family has migrated to America from India: 'His father had perfected a laser technique to correct astigmatism that earned him invitations to work and teach hospitals all over the world.' (Lahiri, 2009, p.97) Amit's father worked in a number of different places ranging from Switzerland to Saudi Arabia. Because of constant changing of the places, he fails to get the comfort of a warm parentage, and therefore, can never forgive his parents for this detachment. Yet Amit has learnt to live alone himself. This solitary life makes him self-concentrated and introvert. He can hardly share his in-depth thoughts and feelings even with Megan. This is once again another discomfort for Megan, who is, therefore, deprived in a twofold ways. In one hand, she bears the uneasiness of Amit's admiration towards Pam, and , on the other, she has the uneasiness of a tacit husband who hardly speaks out of the inner thoughts and feelings to his partner. Though Megan has come to understand Amit after many years of togetherness, she cannot come out of her sense of awkwardness about Amit. And this makes their married life all the more stressful. Her consciousness about Amit is so sharp that she even does not miss the very glitter of Amit's eye when Pam converses in the party. She comes to question about the glitter and cannot take it easily as she thinks there is something else in Amit's look, something strange, something complicated and something beyond the norms of decency.

Amit makes the situation more complex by leaving the wedding party having been heavily drunk. He leaves the party, comes back to hotel and feels unwell so much that he literally lost his consciousness and falls on to his bed with his suits and boots on. This incident is so abrupt that it has nothing to do with Amit's so called admiration towards Pam, nor the fact that he feels terrible about Pam being wedded. Amit falls back onto his bed simply because of the overdose of alcohol. He, however, never could explain this behavior to Megan. Megan receives a shock from Amit and thoroughly misunderstands him for not getting a sensible explanation from him. Megan could have critically reacted for what Amit has done on the wedding night of Pam. But she represses, yet burst into a slight anger demonstrating she is not at all happy about what had happened last night. Her reaction is quite reasonable and Amit, very sensibly, tries to compensate his reaction by overdoing

something that he had never done before. It is comforting for her that he is trying to overcome the clumsiness of last night's occurrence.

The story ends in a happy note where Amit and Megan are found having sex like the teenage boy and girl being oblivious of their surroundings and whereabouts. We do not know whether Megan is very happy for the compensation Amit wants to give her. After so many years, Megan left with Amit leaving their daughters in charge of her parents for a perfect romantic escape. On top of that, Amit is found to adjust with a life with Megan still. For Megan, coming to Pam's wedding and facing clumsiness of the situation is very heavy. Yet she represses and keeps her composure and maturity. She knows the art of adjustment and she has to bear a sense of uneasiness all through her married life as she cannot completely trust and love Amit because of his introvert attitude. She also knows that Amit is trying to harmonize their conjugal life without a sense of implicit devotion towards Megan.

The diasporic situation tops down in this story where, we find the fact that, though not being a typical diaspora, Megan shares the tension of a diaspora, the kind of tension, Ruma from the first story, has, and Aparna, from the second. Their situations are peculiar and typical to their needs and demands. Yet the tension is very much present there, hovering between their two cultural identities. This is the tension of a female diaspora who dreams of a much better life but can hardly catch it. The tension prevails in between their choices and expectations.

Jhumpa Lahiri's another novel *The Namesake* focuses on the complementary experiences of the two generations of emigrant named Ashoke and Ashima who are not liable towards getting Americanized, while their children Gogol and Sonia, face the need to belong. In this novel, the author wonderfully portrays the struggle involved in the family, the emotional disturbance and uprooting they live with, revealing the experiences and perceptions, their hopes and aspirations traumatizing their consciousness, their growing up, the circle of life and one's identity. Like the previous novel, Jhumpa Lahiri wants to show in this novel that Indian women leave their country and spent their best years of their lives in home for their children and husband. Ashima represents the majority of women expatriates who are reluctant to change or adapt to the culture of the host country and the social, cultural, religious and ideological conflicts faced by them in the host country. Ashima Bhaduri, the protagonist of the novel, is a student in degree class who becomes Ashima Ganguli after marriage and later she shift and settles down to Boston permanently. The novel closely describes the mental condition of Ashima who is upset, homesick, emotionally alienated from her ancestral home, trying to recreate the taste of her favorite Indian snack, thereby trying to reconstruct her past. She thinks of her past with nostalgia of her home and spends her leisure in reading Bengali poems, stories and articles. Her immigrant experience, identity problems, the tension between India and United States and between family tradition and individual freedom, the generation gap, the relationship between parents and children, and the uneasy status of the immigrants are the major themes dealt with in this novel. At first, Ashima finds it very difficult to accustom to the host culture and Ashoke always feels guilty for bringing her to this alien land. But she is determined to settle there both physically and mentally, and becomes mother of two children. She suffers and struggles a lot to adjust herself in that foreign land by thinking the future of her children. At the end of the novel, the readers find that she gives her children full freedom to move out and explore the world, teaches the culture of her own country but never force them to do or practice it. Ashima is depicted as the silent sufferer and upholder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society. Born and brought up in India, she upholds Indian values, traditions and culture even in America.

V. S. Naipaul (17 August, 1932-11 August, 2018) comments about diasporic Indians that they develop something they would never have known in India, a sense of belonging to an Indian community though they are bound to stay far from India by keeping a distance.(Naipaul, 2007) This is reflected very well in almost all the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri. Being an immigrant child, born in England and raised in the U.S.A., Jhumpa Lahiri is the true and best example of a diaspora. She depicts the characters in her fiction, imbued with her experience of life as a diaspora. In the story, her first female character Ruma bears the values of the Indian hegemony in a family relationship. Being a daughter born in an Indian family, she can never forget her mother's code of conducts as far as maintaining a family is concerned. She was born in America, yet the very rootedness of grooming up a nice family environment has been her priority. She does not, necessarily act like an American, but demonstrates the value-system which is heired by her Indian parentage. Aparna, in the second story, falls in the trap of an unrequited love which creates a tension within her. Unreasonably, she feels a rivalry against Deborah and feels a sense of animosity. The separation with Deborah, therefore, brings a sense of contentment in Aparna which is a very reflection of her hostile diasporic attitude. Megan, in the third story, has also some sense of possessiveness which makes her envious about Pam, though Pam has nothing to do with Amit's life. In all three situations, the female characters are the victims of their own self grown animosity and tension – the kind of tension which is found among the modern diasporic people.

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