

INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCES PRESERVED IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

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Abstract-*Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri poignantly depicts the immigrant experiences of the Bengalis in diaspora. The author was herself an immigrant who lived in America and was raised by a Bengali family that often-visited India. Her personal level observation and experience of immigrant life can be examined in this collection of short stories. She has highlighted the themes of exile, cultural translation, alienation, identity crisis and rootlessness in *Unaccustomed Earth*. The characters in it are emotionally entangled in the diasporic spirit. Lahiri focusses on the first- and second-generation Indian Americans who are in the quest of their self in spite of the alienation and assimilation. This paper intends to dwell upon how the first-generation immigrants preserve their cultural traditions in a foreign land in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

Keywords—*Indigenous, Earth, Unaccustomed, Jhumpallahiri*

I INTRODUCTION

Indigeneity is a term referred to the ethnic groups who are the natives or the aboriginals of a region before the land was occupied by the colonizers. In literature, colonization has been divided into three eras which are interrelated with each other. The first era was colonization, where the colonizers initially colonized the land by forming colonies replacing the native area. The second era was decolonization where natives struggles to reconstitute the native cultures. The last era was neo-colonization which was an aftermath of post modernism and late capitalism where the western impact still persists among the indigenous people. The historical and contemporary or current form of colonization must be comprehended to understand the position of indigenous people in the world. The indigenous people are marked under the dominance of a powerful ethnic group. It is significant to discover the national and global status of the indigenous individuals that is shifted by the dominant colonizers to marginal societies. There is deriding of the identity of indigenous individuals by suppressing them under the control of the unkind colonizers by stamping them as the 'other'. For instance, the British colonizers who came to India which was not underdeveloped but to an India rich in wealth and resources as quoted by Shashi Tharoor, an Indian novelist in his famous work, *The Great Indian Novel* which is the recasting of the epic *Mahabharata* in the context of Indian Independence movement:

“No.

Ganapathi, they came to an India that was fabulously rich and prosperous, the
came in search of wealth and profit, and they took what they could take.

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leaving Indians to wallow in their leavings..."

The British oppressed the Indians during the colonial period, not just by destroying the financial departments by cruel policies and commercial dishonesty, but also the religious institutions. History reveals that there were untouchables and Indians of lower section of the society, who converted to Christianity to win favor of the British, but remained illtreated. The indigenous experiences of individuals are well defined by the post independent Indian poets. R Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage* has a three-tier structure: *Exile*, *Trial* and *Homecoming*. Critics opine that it was a brilliant and a deeply moving expression to come in terms with himself. Indigenous experience is mainly the conflicting tension between the native tradition and the western culture which seems difficult to adapt. The same idea forms the vital force of Parthasarathy's poetry. Parthasarathy experienced alienation and rootlessness while he lived in England, which he has developed in the form of poetry delineating his humiliating experiences, racial ignoring and the constant fear of discrimination as a segregated exile.

Bruce King says,

"After returning to India, feelings of dissatisfaction and exile remain, as India seems no different from the west and he is exiled within his own country".

The indigenous experience deals with the impact of the West on India or the native land of an individual in terms of the personal development and the foreign setting. The sense of futility and loneliness overwhelms an individual. The loss of motherland due to settlement in a foreign country that gives the indigenous people disenchantment and disillusionment to the utopian vision of the foreign land. Indigenous experiences derive a mental state dominated by the feeling of being ostracized from one's own freedom of living amidst unknown and strange people of a different ethnic group.

Parthasarathy in his poem *Trial of Rough Passage* conveys his relationship with his Tamil culture and traditions which faded from him, even after returning to his native place, he feels like a stranger. He treasured his traditions within himself as he felt his identity was confirmed with the culture to which he was born. He returns to his native place and finds the aping of western culture and thinks to himself:

"What have I come here for from a thousand miles".

The poet remains barren and starved in search of his roots. Roots which defines the identity of an individual, has been plucked off and sown in the European land which breeds despair and longing for home in the mind of the poet:

"Shiver in dark alleys of the mind,
hungry and alone. Nothing can really be dispensed with.
The heart needs all".

There are huge changing paradigm shifts in the society as change is the only inevitable thing in the world. Change is the fearful element in the indigenous experiences as it is terrible and also an intense struggle where the mind shuttles between the conflicting ideas of accustoming with the western or native traditions. Indigenous experiences are also a way for self-assessment to formulate the spiritual ambivalences and psychological tensions. It is a survey of the follies while living in a foreign land which was a chill promise of home and helps in finding a remedy to reconcile with the feeling of alienation and rootlessness.

Diaspora refers to the minority community living in exile. It is living away the homeland and the adjustment of living in a foreign land amidst strange and alien people. The tradition of Indo-Christian purely justifies the diasporic situation, where the fall of man to the temptation of the Satan, discharges man from the Garden of Eden, that was the paradise offered to man by God. Separation of man from God metaphorically denotes the diasporic situation. The term diaspora is derived from the Greek word *diaspeirō*(dispersal). It refers to the scattering of people from their native land to a foreign land that shuttles them between the desire and longing for homeland and being the voice for the minority rights, constructing new home and identity and confronting multiple challenges. Diaspora is of two types: one is the forced alienation where homeland remains unreachable due to poor transportation facilities and lack of finance and suffer double identification and psychological alienation; and the second type is that natural inclination to migration for material gains. The sense of displacement and dispossession is precisely deciphered by V S Naipaul in his *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Biswas expresses his feeling of emptiness and sense of loss in the following lines:

“Every man and woman he saw, even at a distance, gave him a twist of panic. But he had already grown used to that; it had become part of the pain of living. Then, as he cycled, he discovered a new depth to this pain. Every object he had not seen for twenty-four hours was part of his whole and happy past. Everything he now saw became sullied by his fear, every field, every house, every tree, every turn in the road, every bump and subsidence. So that, by merely looking at the world, he was progressively destroying his present and his past.”

Postcolonialism is related to the history, culture and literature of the Third world countries like Asia, Africa, South America and Caribbean Islands during colonization, decolonization and neo-colonization. The key aspects of postcolonialism are ‘the othering’ that means inducing an inferior feeling in an individual or suppression in a nation; ‘Diaspora’ is the dejection from homeland where a collective memory of home is possessed; and ‘Hybridity/ Syncretism’ which is the split consciousness possessed by an immigrant, trying to assimilate both the native and foreign identity, but fails to exhibit either one as whole or complete. ‘Double consciousness’, a concept formulated by W. E. B. Du Bois connotes the divided or multiple shades of the self. ‘Subaltern’ is a term introduced by Antonio Gramsci to refer the working class, but this term was popularized by Gayatri Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* This essay emphasises on the authoritativeness of the voice of a subaltern. Other concepts such as history, nation, race, black feminism, mimicry, gender and neo-colonization also comprise postcolonialism.

Identity is the definition of the self of an individual. There are several factors that influence the identity of a person: Family and friends, personal interests, culture and traditions and workplace. An individual’s chiseling of identity begins from the family he/she is born into, as family plays an important role in shaping the individuality of an individual. A person gains self-confidence and motivation from a family that is positive and encouraging by engendering togetherness and communicating a variety of ideas (political, social, economic) helping the individual to develop a civic-consciousness. If the family environment is aggressive, intolerable and dull, the individual will develop his/her personality that may sometimes turn unfavorable to the society. The likes and dislikes of an individual also helps in shaping the identity of the individual. The work environment of a person also deals with the development of the personality of the individual such as the discrimination based on the salary earned or the position in the official institutions; whether the work done is encouraged and appreciated or are the positives less regarded and mistakes more often pointed out, which can demotivate a person.

The essence of an individual can be identified by the culture, traditional customs, ethnic moral values, attire, religion and nationality. Culture plays an important role in shaping the identity of an individual as W. Somerset Maugham opines:

“It is very difficult to know people. For men and women are not only themselves, they are also the region in which they are born, the city apartment or the farm in which they learned to walk, the games they played as children, the old wives' tales they overheard, the food they ate, the schools they attended, the sports they followed, the poets they read, and the God they believed in. You can know them only if you are them.”

Culture is a mixture of beliefs, customs and practices of a particular ethnic group. A child is born into the culture of the ethnic group to which it belongs and practices in his/her daily life, this process is known as acculturation. According to Catherine G Latterell acculturation is the “social and cultural forces that help shape our sense of identity are not neutral. Instead, they operate like a powerful lens through which we make judgments about ourselves and others”. Culture may pass judgement on an individual that may question the identity or shall help in enforcing the strong sense of self.

Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, (born July 11, 1967, London) is popularly known as Jhumpa Lahiri, who is an English born American novelist and short story writer. Her works explore the immigrant experiences of East Indians. Lahiri was born to Bengali parents from Calcutta who settled in Rhode Islands and raised their children incorporating the essence of their East Indian cultural heritage. Lahiri became a prolific writer after graduating with B.A. in English literature from Barnard College and accomplished three master's degrees in English, creative writing, and comparative literature and arts and a doctorate in Renaissance studies from Boston University in the 1990s. She is a Pulitzer Prize winning author, known for works, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Lowland* and *The Namesake*. Her works dealt with the themes of alienation, loss of culture and dislocation of immigrants. *Unaccustomed Earth* was No. 1 New York Times best-seller in 2013. The title of *Unaccustomed Earth* is acquired from a line in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Custom House* (the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*):

“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 other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.”

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* focusses on the second-generation immigrants who easily get accustomed with the cultural intermission due to the unfamiliarity with the roots of their parents (the first-generation immigrants). They have a flexibility in adjusting with the American – Indian or the hybrid identity. This paper intends to delve into the aspect of cultural inheritance and preservation among the first-generation immigrants in the novella. In Nico Israel's study of diaspora *Outlandish: writing between exile and diaspora*, he theorized the ‘diasporic self-fashioning’ and ‘exilic emplacement’. The ‘haunting ghosts’ mentioned by Mishra is referred to the gaps and silences that arise due to the difficulty in translating linguistic and cultural identities, home, roots and tradition which are interpreted in Lahiri's novella as painful absences, loud silences and secrets of the family. Diasporic self-fashioning is suitable for the second-generation immigrants who translate themselves into new idioms trying to assimilate with the new cultural exposure in an alien land. Exilic emplacement means the inscription into a particular place. Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* portrays her Bengali immigrants who are in a constant oscillation between displacement and numerous emplacements which infuses in them a longing for home and thereby creating imaginary homelands.

In part one of *Unaccustomed Earth*, the title story 'Unaccustomed Earth' explores the cultural intermission or melting of two different culture with the exogamous marriage of Ruma (hybrid of inherited Bengali culture and willfully adopted American culture) and Adam (a native of America). Ruma's mother who nurtured the cultural proximity in a strange land found exogamous marriage unacceptable. She preserved her culture in America and would not let her children speak to her in any language other than Bengali to maintain her tie with her native culture in America. She dissuaded Ruma from marrying Adam as she felt that cross cultural marriages will not work out, but she was the first to accept Adam as her son-in-law when their relationship worked out:

"Over the years her mother not only retracted her objections but vehemently denied them; she grew to love Adam as a son, a replacement for Romi, who had crushed them by moving abroad and maintaining only distant ties. Her mother would chat with Adam on the phone, even when Ruma was not at home, e-mailing him from time to time, carrying over a game of Scrabble with him over the internet. When her parents visited, her mother would always bring a picnic cooler filled with homemade mishit, elaborate, syrupy, cream-filled concoctions which Ruma had never learned to make, and Adam loved."

The character of Ruma is interesting as the undercurrent of ancient culture can be traced in her life as well as her disagreement to the affair of her father with Mrs. Bagchi after her mother's death, points out the ethnic moral values she preserved in her. Ruma's mother was a homemaker and Ruma wanted to follow the same footsteps by taking care of her family and mending the house, rather than working which was irreconcilable in America and made her father upset with her decision of not having a job, as he thought homemaker was compatible in an Indian society. He followed the Indian culture in his food habits, of having Indian food and not the packed American macaroni and noodles in tins. He ate with his hands unlike his daughter who used spoons imitating the American culture.

"She ate with her fingers, as her father did, for the first time in months, for the first time in this new house in Seattle. Akash sat between them in his booster seat, wanting to eat with his fingers, too, but this something Ruma had not taught him to do".

The familial relationship is given a sacred value in the Indian culture, but Ruma's father experienced a sense of loss as is felt by every sensible Indian parent as their children pursue individualism like the Americans:

"That loss was in store for Ruma too; her children would become strangers, avoiding her. And because she was his child, he wanted to protect her from that, as he had tried throughout his life to protect her from so many things. He wanted to shield her from the deterioration that inevitably took place in the course of her marriage, and from the conclusion he sometimes feared was true; that the entire enterprise of having a family, of putting children on this earth, as gratifying as it sometimes felt, was flawed from the start."

In *Hell-Heaven*, Aparna, mother of Usha is an epitome of Indian culture which is followed in Massachusetts also disregard of the racial ignoring and discrimination in the dressing style. It is clear through her appearance:

"my mother was wearing the red and white bangles unique to Bengali married women, and a common Tangail sari, and had a thick stem of vermilion powder in the center parting of her hair..."

Reverence to elders forms an integral part of the Indian Culture. Elders in India are not addressed with their names. To cite an example, in Tamil tradition, a man will address his elder brother as 'peri Annan'. Seeking the advice and blessings of elders rather than putting forward one's own opinions strongly is encouraged. Children and adults in Indian Culture prostrate and touch the feet of their elders in recognition of their great humility and

inner attainment. The diasporic experience in USA emphasize the intellectual and monetary pursuits more than the familial relationships. The second-generation immigrants who follow the American way of life pursuing American dream tend to disregard their parents' fruitful advices and as in today's world dump them in old age homes, a custom that is deniable to the Indian culture. A similar trait can be traced in *Hell-Heaven* where Usha gets frustrated with her mother who compels her to wear a traditional dress for the Thanksgiving Dinner:

"I was furious with my mother for making a scene before we left the house and forcing me to wear a shalwar kameez".

Pranab Chakraborty, who was adopted by Usha's family as he moved to Boston for graduation. He addressed Usha's mother Aparna as '*Boudi*' as Bengalis are supposed to call an elder sister-in-law. Aparna was not able to accustom in Boston as she longed for her Indian homeland which was recreated by Pranab through films, poetry, cooking and music.

II CONCLUSION

The Sanskrit adage, "Atithi Devo Bhava," meaning the guest is truly your god dictates the respect granted to guests in India. The hospitality in India is extremely strong. Indian give their guests a warm welcome, with a smile on their face illumining brightness and positivity in the environment, possess a 'ready to help' attitude and exude genuine happiness on meeting the guests. In the second part of *Unaccustomed Earth* titled as *Hema and Kaushik* where the generosity and hospitality is explicitly elucidated through the Bengali Families of Hema and Kaushik. Kaushik's parents readily accept to let Hema's family live with them under the same roof, on their sudden return to America. Kaushik carries within him the essence of Indian culture unable to accustom himself with the alien land where he is in a quest for his identity and travels several places in search of himself. His father distanced from Kaushik and married a woman with two daughters, with which he was unhappy and felt the palpable emptiness within him. He also reacts to his step-sisters who in a conversation with him insult his mother, to which he aggressively reacts, preserving the Indian culture embedded in him of reverence towards parents and elders and not to hurl abuses on elders. The second-generation immigrants judge their parents (the first-generation immigrants) according to the American standards as their parents find it difficult to adjust with foreign way of life and for their changing existence into a "life sentence of being foreign", observed in *Only Goodness*.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* traverses the Indian diaspora in America, in the context of deracination, assimilation to a foreign place, impact on familial relationships and renegotiation of transnational identities. First-generation and second-generation immigrants find difficulty in readjustment to a new land and mentally accustom themselves in translating into new idioms of two distinct cultures namely, Indian and American, which they simultaneously inhabit. Lahiri focusses on the conflict of the feeling of alienation and multiple belonging and draws out the exilic emplacement through her short story collection. Her characters are put in the mode of translation where they internalize a new reality both in the cultural and linguistic dimensions of the world inhabited by them. Lahiri formulates the philosophy of life in a diasporic world where reflection of the self is significant in deriving meaning to life.

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