

Alienation and Assimilation: Diasporic Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Abstract

Diasporic experience portrays the confusion of people who sail between the homeland and alien land. So, diasporans are people alienated from their original homeland, living in the host land by maintaining an imaginary or a real relationship with the motherland. It may also be openly declared that diasporic writing always deals with the identity crisis and the problem of living in an alien society. This conflicting interest finally leads people towards positivity by showing a ray of hope to sustain, to assimilate and to adjust in a foreign land, which will result in a better standard of living and contentment. Jhumpa Lahiri in her short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* explores this situation in the lives of the diasporans.

Keywords: Alienation, Assimilation, Nostalgia, Homeland, Identity, Foreign, Separation

Introduction

People cross the boundaries of their own country to satisfy their desire for a better, secured and prosperous life. This may also happen because of some existential necessity in their life. Their territorial displacement, indeed, brings forth the multifaceted problems like alienation, identity crisis, cultural disruption, nostalgia and the attempt for assimilation with the new surroundings. Alienation is an inescapable facet of the modern life. It is as old as human existence. Literally it refers to estrangement, anguish, disillusionment, frustration and loss of identity. The diasporic figures after being separated from their main habitation, however suffer from the feelings of separation and alienation. Brinda Shah critically demonstrates the various stages of alienation:

The immigrants face different stages of alienation like physical, social and psychological. The most apparent is the physical alienation caused by the loss of root or motherland. The memory of home hinders the process of acclimatization in the host land leading to a fissure between cultural values. This fissure causes the social alienation of diasporic existence. Immigrants are not able to forget the past and adopt the present; the present which presents a new set of values and living, the diasporic existence is somehow accused with an unfathomed sense of isolation which enters their psyche in the long run. (143)

Review of Literature

Michiko Kakutani in her article "Liking America, but Longing for India" Justifies that many of Lahiri's people are Indian migrants who are trying their best to adjust to the new kind of life-style in the United States and at the same time they suffer because of a cultural displacement. Lahiri presents her characters with precision and compassion. She analyses the emotional turmoil of the characters very objectively.

Brinda Shah's article "Dynamics of Culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*" is published in *Dynamics of Culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri*, edited by Nigamananda Das. This volume of articles has made an attempt to understand various aspects of Lahiri's works of art. The articles also focus on various multicultural concerns of the diasporans and their predicaments. These diasporic issues include sense of loss, reconfiguration of human existence and their modes of living.

Armendariz Aitor Ibarrola's article, "The Dwindling Presence of Indian Culture and Values in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*", focuses on the characters' inner landscapes. According to him, the

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collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, also deals with migration related issues and the process of assimilation to different social and cultural environments. It is also full of highly diverse gallery of characters as they are the products of different circumstances and challenging situations.

Monica Wehner's article, "Typologies of Memory and Forgetting among the Expatriates of Rabaul", relates how memory transmits from one definite moment of history to another and the social framework in which such transmission takes place. It focuses on the relationships between memory and time. It contributes as a whole to the psycho-sociological issues of memory debate.

"TRANSPLANTED IDENTITIES BEYOND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH*", an article by M. Vijayakumar and Christopher. W. Rajasekaran, interestingly focuses on the situation of the immigrants who share a common philosophy of becoming an integral part of the country by means of cultural assimilation. Lahiri is the child of immigration and multiculturalism. She portrays her characters both in the light of native and alien culture. The stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* deal with the lives of Indian American characters and their cultural environment.

Leena Chandorkar's article, "The Indian Diaspora in America as Reflected in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction" critically establishes the fact that the Indian diaspora in the USA has grown in confidence. It can be seen in the literature written by the Indian writers settled in America. Most eminent among these voices is Jhumpa Lahiri. She is deeply attached to her Indian heritage and at the same time desperately wants to assimilate into the American society. Her fiction is characterised by a complex biculturalism. Her writings focus on the friction between alienation and assimilation as it is at the centre of every immigrant experience.

Discussion

The diasporans in their process of adaptation into the alien culture, however, confront with many hazards and challenges. Hence they seek refuge in memory. The memory gives solace to the displaced and disenchanting hearts. It also works as the torch-bearer to find cultural connection with their source-land. The members of diaspora hold on to the collective memories of their home country. It is their collective past memories that enrich them in their homeless conditions. Monica Wehner states, "The memory of the lost homeland, lost cultural commonalities often becomes stronger to fight against the dominant culture. These memories do not in obvious and ordinary sense exist of its own unless they are remembered, until they are brought back into waking life and understood by the individual as memories separate from the present" (19).

The South Asian writers living outside emerge as the rising voices in the realm of the diasporic literature. They live between two countries and cultures. Their body of literature emphasises on the distinct and delicate issues of diaspora. Their works focus on the struggle and sufferings of the immigrated characters in the host country. D.K. Pabby

opines that the writings of the South Asian diasporic writers focus on "the issues of race, gender, sexuality, cultural differences ... are bitter-sweet poignant experience of putting bits and pieces together to make a wholesome whole" (153). Jhumpa Lahiri's works weave around a single theme- the theme of diaspora. She seeks to unearth the painful realities of her wonderfully sketched diasporic characters. They continue to oscillate between the east and west and make effort to adjust themselves in the land of adoption. Lahiri, a second generation - immigrant, is caught between the socio-cultural nuances of her Indian origin and the American lifestyle. Her writings clearly drag the attention of the readers towards the perturbed and disturbed life of the Indian diasporas in the U.S. They manifest different issues of diaspora, such as nostalgia, anguish, loss of identity, alienation and eventually the theme of assimilation. Her characters are dislocated from their land of origin and relocated in the world of adoption. During this critical process, they travel through a difficult journey from alienation to assimilation.

Jhumpa Lahiri's second story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* is a narrative of the psychological tussle and emotional experience of the Indians living abroad. The Indians, living abroad in Lahiri's fictional world, desire for Indian cultural warmth and richness. The title story of *Unaccustomed Earth* begins with the protagonist, Ruma, who is an Indian-American. It is a long story in which Ruma's father has taken retirement from his job and he prefers to travel throughout Europe after the demise of his wife. The author clearly brings out the difference between the Indian cultural ethos and the western cultural setup, which is expressed through the story of Ruma and her father. The modern western family is a nucleus family and each person himself/herself forms a family. So having Indian origin Ruma is neither able to imbibe Indian values and culture nor able to mingle herself into the American customs. As a result, she feels like living in a vacuum, being displaced and uprooted. Ruma is neither able to emotionally identify herself with her homeland, India nor with America. Michiko Kakutani rightly remarks, "Many of Ms. Lahiri's people are Indian migrants trying to adjust to new life in the United States, and their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a more existential sense of dislocation" (48).

The story brings before the readers the dreams and tensions of Indian born parents for their beloved children. They are very disturbed because their children are neither able to adopt Indian culture nor they are able to accept American traditions and culture. Hence they have an inexpressible agony of separation and displacement. Brinda Shah quite rightly expresses, "Alienation in diasporic realities is mostly the artefact of conflicting personalities, since the personalities are shaped by socio-cultural values and the immediate milieu, conflict of values, overt or covert, might be regarded as the root of alienation" (331). It is a story of contemporary crisis where the writer prepares the readers for both sides of the truth and in turn makes the characters more realistic and life-like. The protagonists in the story, Ruma

continues to travel from place to place in the U.S. and her father moves around Europe. This constant moving makes it almost impossible for them to assimilate with their reality and whereas assimilation is an existential requirement to lessen the burdens of alienation.

The theme of alienation still preoccupies another story of the writer, "Hell-Heaven". Usha is the only daughter of Shyamlal and Aparna, a Bengali couple. Usha's father is deeply devoted to his work and he never gives his time and leisure to his wife and he never shares his ideas with her. On the other hand, Aparna feels very lonely and accepts her fate as it is. She feels estranged and displaced within herself. Pranab Chakraborty is a fellow Bengali, an Engineering student in America who meets the Bengali couple from time to time. They usually invite him for food and celebration. This gives them a platform and helps them to assimilate faster on a foreign soil. Pranab and Aparna have similar choices and they enjoy discussing on the topics of common interest. In this way, the story writer, Lahiri shifts the focus from alienation to assimilation. By fulfilling and sharing the emotional needs of Aparna, Pranab gets closer to her. Later Pranab's marriage with Deborah ultimately makes Aparna helpless. Subsequently, the gap between Aparna and Pranab gets wider and Aparna is not able to adjust with her host land. Her obsession to hold on to her native land by all means pushes her into difficult situations.

It can be summarised that the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* are structured on the background of the diasporic crisis of the characters struggling hard to accommodate with the intricacies of situations. Lahiri tries to go deep into the subconscious mind of her characters to make a better realisation and appropriate presentation of their situations. These stories display the diasporic sensibility through interpersonal and familial relationships among the characters who try to adjust with their emotional confusion and seek to settle their identities in the host land. Commenting on this Identity formation process Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz says, "This identity formation process proves especially challenging and often torturous for second generation immigrants because, while they can rarely achieve complete assimilation into their host society, they cannot easily identify fully with their ethnic roots..." (44). Lahiri, herself being a second generation diaspora, portrays the major emotional and psychological issues in the lives of migrants. She focuses on various cultural concerns and emotional predicaments of the diasporans in her works. Split personality or multiple personality emerges from the collision or confusion of two different cultures. Being in such a position, the immigrants choose a middle path. They make difficult attempts to be assimilated into the available new society and culture. Therefore, confronted with alienation, the immigrants have realised the much needed necessity of getting involved into the available reality.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri is a noted Indo-American diasporic writer of the postcolonial period. She deals with the themes of home, exile, alienation, dual identity and assimilation. Her literary works are made to explore the diasporic aspects and the related complications. Like in other diasporic works, the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* feel the effects of diaspora and pass through the same alienation, displacement, aloofness and rootlessness. They begin to live on the margins of different worlds, oscillating between two cultures, customs and traditions. The immigrants share the ideologies, traditions and cultural ethos of the two nations, which ultimately results in their identity crisis, alienation and conflicts. The condition of displacement is an emotionally demanding task on the part of the immigrants. When these immigrants try to accustom themselves in an adopted land, they naturally confront an alien cultural setup. The difficult situation faced by these immigrants is related to the problem of learning and evolving to adjust them in an unfamiliar culture. This problem can be very challenging if the new culture is very different from the one they left behind. Diaspora does not only mean to surpass the border, it also involves a difficult journey across the traditional values, space, time and ethnicity. As a part of their existential necessity, the diasporans make a determined effort to settle in a new place. They move from alienation to assimilation.

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