



Examining major themes in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Unaccustomed Earth'

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to throw light on the fundamental themes of identity, alienation, isolation, and assimilation in Jhumpa Lahiri's second short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*. Since independence, Indian writers have made substantial contributions to world literature, and Indian fiction continues to thrive in the worldwide market. Lahiri's literary works are focused on the diasporic postcolonial condition of the Indian and Indian-Americans, who are caught between two identities and two cultures: the Indian traditions which they have left behind and the Western society in which they must live. They see America through the eyes of an Indian, and it is this perspective that allows them to perceive the world in a different light. As a result, they have a better ambiance and opportunities.

Writers like Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, Uma Parameswaran, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, and others are currently exploring the issue of alienation in their works. Jhumpa Lahiri's creative world is preoccupied with the protagonists' experience of alienation and isolation from themselves, society, and others. She portrays modern man's predicament. Alienation, solitude, and integration have all become important themes in literature. Her works reveal her admirable graphs of biculturalism and commanding grace.

Keywords: alienation, cultural dissimilarities, displacement, identity, and diaspora

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri is a well-known Indo-American author. She is one of the Diaspora writers who brings the remarkably new Indian sensibility with her overseas experience and expresses it in impressive form through her fiction. She was born in London to a Bengali immigrant family on July 11, 1967. Her parents relocated from England to the United States when she was three years old. She learned about her Bengali roots from a young age, visiting Kolkata on a regular basis and spending time with her extended relatives. Her father registered her as Nilan Jane Sudeshna Lahiri in kindergarten in Kingston. Her teacher, on the other hand, decided to call her "Jhumpa," her pet name.

Lahiri's second collection of eight short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* won Frank O' Connor Award, the richest short story prize in the world in 2008. The title of this sort story collection has been taken from the Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom House." *Unaccustomed Earth* creates a beautifully literate journey that clearly illustrates her power of writing. This story collection is divided into two sections. The first section comprises of five distinct stories and the second section consists of a trilogy.

Like her novel *The Namesake*, Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* deals with the topic of being stuck between two cultures. Because each story features a character or family stranded between cultures and often generations, alienation, isolation, and bodily identity crises are common themes in the book. It is from the perspective of immigrant children born in the United States who must navigate between their parents' traditional traditions and their peers' modern American ones.

Ruma, 38 years old, is a physically dislocated and culturally displaced individual in the collection's title story, *Unaccustomed Earth*. She plays host to her widower's father while raising her son Akash, who is a toddler throughout the novel. Ruma's difficulties are revealed as a result of his father's visit, leading to an identity crisis and a sense of alienation. The reader gradually realizes that her cultural heritage is extremely important in her life. Ruma is caught in an unusual predicament because she inherited her parents' sense of exile and grief. Her life was transformed by mental anguish and a persistent sense of estrangement.

Ruma has always been closer to her mother, a traditional Bengali woman, and the father-daughter connection in the story is difficult. Ruma was born in the United States, yet she brings with her the emotional burden of tradition. She marries her American boyfriend Adam, despite her parents' opposition. Ruma's decision to minimize her alienated feelings was a huge risk on her behalf. Ruma was taken aback by her mother's death and was unprepared for life without her, but her father appeared to be unaffected.

Ruma's social isolation and inclination for solitude, which inevitably leads to alienation, stand in stark contrast to her father's socializing and travel adventures. Ruma is compelled to accept her father's new ways after

discovering the letter intended for his girlfriend, Mrs. Bagchie. She laments the loss of her mother while also realizing that she should quit interfering in her father's life.

As a result, the story explores the issue of problematic intergenerational relationships from the perspective of a migrant. Ruma, a second-generation immigrant, shows typical indicators of integration and progressive detachment from Bengali culture, which her father recognised as his children grew older. Ruma is keenly conscious of certain losses, despite her straying away from her Bengali roots. Even her affluent American husband, Adam, is unable to provide the needed comfort. Ruma has the feeling that "she and Adam were separate people leading separate lives." (UE)

Usha and her Bengali migrant family are depicted in the story "Hell-Heaven." The story revolves around the Bhadrakok (a Bengali caste) who migrated to America in the 1970s, as well as the crosscurrents and undercurrents that exist between the two cultures. The tale of estrangement is about Pranab Chakraborty, the protagonist, and Usha. Pranab moved to the U.S. from Calcutta to study engineering at MIT, is new in America, and feels lonely in Boston. He awakens in an alien land, surrounded by an alien culture. He meets the Bhadrakoks at this point, and they take him with them, feeding him on a daily basis. Pranab drew Usha's mother's attention since she felt isolated. Pranab has been reliant on her mother, whom she affectionately refers to as Baudi (Auntie). Pranab falls in love with and marries Deborah, an American woman, during the course of the novel. Usha's mother is angry and feels betrayed. Deborah and Pranab had quite different cultures, morals, and attitudes, as well as a very diverse social upbringing. As a result, their relationship becomes a crisis in and of itself.

Pranab Kaku and Deborah eventually divorced. Usha grows up in a cross-cultural environment, having crushes, dates, and foolish love affairs that lead to sleeping with various men, including Matty, who, like others, betrayed and alienated her, and finally a heartbreak as Pranab's story comes to an end.

The story, "A Choice of Accommodation" proves that alienation is a fundamental element of human existence as Kaufman opines that "alienation is neither a disease nor a blessing, but better or worse, a central feature of human existence." (ACPTAFSA; Sag, Abraham)

Amit, the story's central character, appears to be alienated and isolated. Amit, together with his wife Megan and two kids Maya and Monika, is the managing editor of a medical journal and lives in America. He and his wife Megan have come to Langford Academy, where Amit has been a student for the past eighteen years. They've come to celebrate the wedding of Pam (Amit's old buddy). Pam attended the same university as Amit. Amit had a previous relationship with Pam, which ended abruptly. Megan feels envious of Pam since she makes the same guess. The wedding begins, and Amit loses himself in nostalgia, recalling his high school days as a student when his parents decided to return to India for his father's business. Amit's father, who is a doctor, decided to work in a Delhi hospital.

Amit had never felt at ease in America, yet he was left alone there by his parents. Amit was transferred to Longford after a while, where he felt isolated and alienated because he "was the only Indian student, and others usually thought that he had been born and grown in that country and not in Massachusetts." (UE). He didn't like his new school and felt lonely, like a baby bird that had been abandoned by its parents. As a result, the young boy's alienation was exacerbated by the loss of a familiar environment and culture.

Sudha and Rahul's parents immigrated from India to London in the story "Only Goodness." The protagonists are confronted with questions of identity, guilt, schism, alienation as a result of animosity, and the relationship's perplexing nuances while uprooting themselves to start a new life. This narrative is about the effects of alcoholism on a family. Only Neel, who is too young to notice the cracks forming beneath the surface, can conceive of pure "goodness." When Rahul Mukherjee went to visit his sister Sudha at college, she gave him his first taste of alcohol and gave him his first bet. Drinking took its toll on them as they progressed through life. Sudha later attends the London School of Economics, where she meets and marries Roger.

In "Nobody's Business," Jhumpa Lahiri analyses how children of immigrants who are born and raised in the United States confront a difficult choice between supporting their family's place of origin (native culture) and mainstream American society (host culture). Although second-generation immigrants want to integrate into the host society, their parents often insist on adhering to the natal culture's norms and traditions.

Sang (Sangeeta), a lovely college dropout, is the protagonist of the story "Nobody's Business." Sang lives with Paul and Heather in shabby rented rooms filled by three housemates and they're sometimes in love after discovering a suitable housemate advertisement. They frequently act as if they are buddies and treat one other with informal sociability.

The protagonist, Paul, a graduate student, lives with two young ladies, Heather, a minor character, and Sang, a lovely, intellectual, poised young Bengali-American woman to whom he is attracted. Paul is alone and alone at the beginning of the novel, and he feels alienated. He has no pals and his parents have passed away. In the same way that his room is semi-public, his life is essentially semi-public, offering neither seclusion nor emotional closeness. His limited environment can't accommodate the presence of another person because he's so alienated. Sang and Paul, too, have adopted outer norms that state that they were never more than roommates and that she owes him nothing but money. There is a great deal of unacknowledged connection and alienation in this, and it affects Paul, Sang, and Farouk as well. Lahiri makes a pointed reference to American society, which lacks rituals of appreciation and closure for transient intimates, and where profound emotional realities go unaddressed. The story's relationships are two overlapping triangles. Paul has two female roommates (Sang and Deirdre), but

neither of them is emotionally or physically intimate with him. Farouk is sexually intimate with two women but lives with neither of them.

As a result, in terms of the sense of alienation, the story "Nobody's Business" is profoundly suggestive. There are no rules, standards, or mutually agreed-upon expectations of how people should act in the story, making it all the more difficult for them to coexist in the same physical structures. One version of the American spirit of place in the novel is utopian, while the other is dystopian. There are no emotional connections between any of the characters in the novel. None of these characters, whether by choice, as with Farouk, or by circumstance, as with Paul, are members of any American community. As a result, such cultural non-acceptance signals create a deep sense of alienation in the immigrant's life.

Lahiri's other Bengali character Kaushik Chaudhary, whose life one follows from the age of nine until his late thirties in the narrative trilogy of "Once in a Lifetime", "Year's End" and "Going Ashore", is less successful with his efforts to establish a sense of autonomy. In "Once in a Lifetime", Hema recollects her childhood in Massachusetts when she meets Kaushik, the son of her parent's close friend. The second story titled "Year's End" picks up the thread of narration years later from Kaushik's point of view as he deals with his father's second marriage after the untimely death of Kaushik's mother. In the final story titled "Going Ashore", Lahiri examines the theme of alienation through cultural conflict between America and India as it reflects on the character's decisions.

Kaushik is a professional photographer who has suffered from war-related grief and isolation. He was also an expert in battle photography and reporting. The involuntary transfers back and forth between India and Cambridge, Massachusetts, exacerbate Kaushik's feelings of isolation and homelessness. His dilemma is exacerbated by insecurity at home and a sense of belonging. He abandons his hunt for a home in favor of a nomadic existence. Hema and Kaushik spend a few weeks in Rome, where she observes that they do not discuss their plans or where their days together will go. Identity formation is an open, dialectical and dynamic process of constant renegotiation. The two characters Hema and Kaushik negotiate and come to terms with their identities with entirely different approaches.

The heartbreaking story of material loss is, in fact, the most powerful story about alienation in the trilogy. Every day, Hema sees a peek at the tragedy that fills Kaushik's vision. Due to his mother's unexpected death, Kaushik takes the wrong path. After his mother's death and his father's remarriage, Kaushik travels to the East coast of the United States, supported by his father, to explore deathlike landscapes that remind him of his mother and her death. Rupa and Piu are his father's two daughters from this new marriage. Because Chitra is Kaushik's stepmother, they are unable to develop any intimacy or attachment to one another. After a two-decade separation, Hema and Kaushik reunite by coincidence in Italy later in the novel. Hema, now a college professor, is haunted by her prior love affair with a married man, and she intends to settle down by marrying someone else. After all, Hema and Kaushik are familiar with each other here. Hema, on the other hand, is unfamiliar with many facets of Kaushik's daily life, such as his considerable travel, the gruesome photographs, and his sense of estrangement as a result of his mother's death, to name a few. Despite her affection for Kaushik, she is unable to form a lasting bond with him. As a result of his impulsiveness, she marries according to a pre-arranged engagement and becomes pregnant, living happily (but still thinking of Kaushik) until she learns of his death. Given the photos captured by Kaushik's camera, one can only conclude that Lahiri foresees these ruffled sentiments of estrangement on a worldwide scale. Hema's sense of meaninglessness in life, alienation, and isolation from her husband implies that suffering and disillusionment will continue. The death of Kaushik's mother (Parul) foreshadows Kaushik's death and its influence on Hema, who is saddened by his loss. It also symbolizes Lahiri's anticipation of the dissolution or loss of Bengali-American cultural and emotional bonds, which affected both male and female characters.

Thus, the imagery, metaphors, characters, interconnecting patterns, and iconic moments in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* convey a strong sense of alienation, disaffection, and hostility. In this selected work, the use of race as a marker of identity exemplifies how Lahiri draws attention to the consequences of estrangement and racism on South Asian American identity. Despite the fact that Lahiri does not directly address race in her writings the rapid social developments of the modern age resulted in a complete collapse of living and economic simplicity.

Her earlier works focused on Bengali immigrants to America, but *Unaccustomed Earth* frequently features characters relocating to other locations inside America, as well as characters traveling to London, Italy, and other locations around the world. Lahiri continues to examine the issue's of cultural dissonances, alienation, antagonism, and other feelings encountered by immigrants caught between the culture of their birthplace in India and the strange traditions of their adopted country. Jhumpa Lahiri's sense of alienation and isolation in her novels is even more relevant today, as the world has become a global village. She is continually concerned with her creative world with the protagonists' sense of alienation from themselves, society, and others. She depicts modern man's predicament.

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