

Cosmopolitan tongues in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Abstract

Language plays an important role as the immigrants gain and lose many languages in the cosmopolitan journey. The "Cosmopolitan Tongues in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*" begins with English as a global language and narrows to immigrants' cosmopolitan language. It gives numerous instances pertaining to the language gain and loss. In cosmopolitan life, people mostly lose their native tongue and adopt the world language. This paper deals with the language conflict becomes a branch of multinational life and also sees the linguistic future of the world citizens.

Keywords: Globalization, Diaspora, Cosmopolitanism, Multiculturalism and Language

Introduction

In the globalization process, it is important to analyze the factors that influence the 'language shift' and to produce it apparently in the daily life. The worldwide advancement has the English language as a pillar of support which clears the globalization path by creating equality among the people. The renowned English magazine *The Economist* notes the growth of English in "A World Empire by Other Means: The Triumph of English,"

It is everywhere. Some 380 million people speak it as their first language and perhaps two-thirds as many again as their second. A billion are learning it, about a third of the world's population are in some sense exposed to it and by 2050, it is predicted, half the world will be more or less proficient in it.

The advancement of English language leads to the cosmopolitan goal, but another thought negatively eyes English language like the Sun whose rays is fading the other languages. It may be the 'Sun' from the British Empire on which the Sun never sets, still plays a large role in spreading the language. Having gained the more recent status as the world's sole superpower, the United States "has further reinforced the position of English as a tongue of authority throughout the world" (Johnson 137). Though the other languages fade, the requirement of the world language is seen as a medium to communicate for the international trade that strengthens export and import and also to maintain a healthy neighbourhood with other countries.

Today, the 'world superpower' the United States celebrate its 'melting pot' with more ethnics, cuisines, and languages which again affects the exclusive native language oriented countries. These single-language countries have started to face new problems with the growth of English language through migration, computers, and other technological advancements. In the twentieth century, a huge migration had seen by these counties, when their native people moved out to learn varieties of new science and technologies. This made single-language countries adopt English which has been seen as "English Fever" in China and a "Personal Ladder to Climb" for the career in Europe (Johnson 21).

In migration, most of the people encourage themselves to shift from their own language. The always draw in for support the sociolinguistics and cosmopolitanism that conceive 'language shift' as a social practice. English is seen as a language of influence and strength which creates a bigger notion of being universal rather than being bound to one country; it is also a dangerous tool that destroys the immigrants' mother tongue. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* thus, projects the language loss of Bengali immigrants in their American world that moulds them as cosmopolitans by the very act of acquiring proficiency in English. Her characters either forget or refuse to speak Bengali which Lahiri spotlights on various immigrant generations. This sketches the second and third generations' linguistic loss with the concurrent possession of a new global language which creates a cosmopolitan platform. Lahiri's protagonists attain greater fluency in English than their parents' native tongues and this helps them to be transnational citizens of the world. In the book *Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction*, Anjali Pandey writes, "Most tellingly, in *Unaccustomed Earth*, mother-tongue loss is presented as volitional – an individual choice, rather than the consequence of state – sanctioned practice" (137). Though it is an "individual choice" the adoption of English lays as an only option to survive in the globalization process that ultimately leads to the disappearance of mother-tongue. This is adeptly observed as,

Evident in each of the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, however, is a marked absence of a lamentation for mother-tongue loss. For Lahiri, language loss, the death of mother-tongues – non-western codes – appears to be an inevitable outcome of cosmopolitanism – a necessary linguistic deletion for American assimilation, and part of her peripatetic second-generation protagonists. (Pandey 140)

The protagonists are born in America which definitely accepted as their birthplace, so there is no point in accusing the second generation immigrants. When they step out of their house, they are compelled to mingle with the host society that never understands the immigrants' language. As immigrants, they have to adopt English to communicate with others. In

India, for example, people who do not even know Hindi, speak English when they move out of their state. The IT revolution in India makes many software engineers move to other states or even to the foreign countries that force them to learn and acquire English. In this case, even the people who live in Indian cannot be blamed for adopting other languages and this draws the situation of the immigrants. The readers can empathize the protagonists who appear similar to the youngest generation of native Indians which adopts English to build their career because in India,

Certification of English proficiency has become a big business for those involved in the test administering industry, but test-takers claim it is an even bigger business for them. Described as a “passport to better-paid employment,” the “entrance ticket to the working world,” “the dominant staple in a progressive education,” and “a necessary qualification for many respectable jobs,” the multitude of English fluency exams available fill an important niche in a country where “for many people, proficiency in English is synonymous with the promise of well-being.”(Johnson 148)

This condition is similar to Lahiri’s young protagonists who make various attempts to fit in the cosmopolitan society like America. The conflict of immigrants’ mother-tongue on the one hand and the need to continue as cosmopolites pulls the second generation immigrants on to their sides. When the first generation immigrants get old, the strength of mother tongue gets weakened and thus, gradually let the next generation lose to drown in the host society’s language practices. Lahiri’s characters are representing this conflict which is “unquestioning appropriation of hegemonic Monolingualism in the face of ethnic multilingualism may account for why Lahiri persists in being a favourite in western reading circles” (Pandey 152).

In “Unaccustomed Earth,” It is Ruma’s mother who sings songs and teaches Bengali rhymes to Akash. But Ruma lacks the discipline to stick on to Bengali though her mother makes her speak it. Though Ruma’s father does not mind the ‘language shift,’ he teaches Bengali to Akash, “Do you remember what I taught you this morning? And Akash recited his numbers in Bengali from one to ten” (Lahiri 50). Pranab, in “Hell-Heaven” overhears Aparna as she speaks Bengali to Usha and as a first generation immigrant, Aparna sticks to Bengali. In “Only Goodness,” Sudha has not “minded when her mother came in the middle of the night to comfort Rahul, sitting in a rocking chair, singing a song in Bengali, something about a fishbone piercing the foot of a little boy, a song that would lull Sudha back to sleep also” (Lahiri 135). These characters represent the first generation immigrants who soil their native tongue inside the next generation.

Ruma never feels like an adult in Bengali, because her peer group speaks English. When Akash starts to speak in full sentences, Ruma let English take over as she does not mind the ‘language shift.’ Aparna’s daughter Usha prefers English, “Deborah and I spoke freely in English, a language in which, by that age, I expressed myself more easily than Bengali, which I was required to speak at home” (Lahiri 69). Pranab’s mixed marriage with Deborah makes his daughters follow English. In “A Choice of Accommodation,” Amit’s classmates appreciate his good English and he marries an American girl, Megan that eventually makes his daughters Maya and Monika

to speak English. Sudha and Rahul in “Only Goodness” marry Americans which also results in the same. In “Nobody’s Business,” Sang has no place to speak Bengali as she lives with American housemates and her family in another country. This condition makes her forget certain terms in Bengali, “‘How do you say ‘bon voyage?’” Paul asked. She told him she wasn’t sure” (Lahiri 191). Lahiri contrasts the monolingual first generations who strictly speak Bengali at home with the multilingual second generation immigrants to explore cosmopolitanism. Her characters display a language exhibition which showcases the “Linguistic Hybridization” (Pandey 155).

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characters display a language exhibition which showcases the “Linguistic Hybridization” (Pandey 155). However, Susan Koshy’s “Minority Cosmopolitanism” argues, “Lahiri’s narratives of naturalization also reconstruct hegemonic vision of cosmopolitanism by elaborating an ethics of affiliation grounded in minority experiences of exclusion or partial inclusion;” which offers a new way to figure cosmopolitanism. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, all the short stories have Bengali terms which represent the Indianism of addressing others. Though second generation immigrants forget or refuse to speak Bengali, they use the Bengali terms to call or refer their own Bengali people.

In “Hell-Heaven,” Usha call Pranab as “Kaku” because she had no real uncles in America, and” her mother teaches “to call him Pranab Kaku.” This makes Usha immediately ask her mother, “if I ought to address her as Deborah Kakima, turning her into an aunt as I had turned Pranab into an uncle.” (Lahiri 68) Accordingly, Pranab also calls Usha’s father, “Shyamal Da, always addressing him in the polite form,” and calls her mother “Boudi, which is how Bengalis are supposed to address an older brother’s wife, instead of using her first name, Aparna.” (Lahiri 60) Though Sudha and Rahul completely get accustomed to their cosmopolitan life, as second generation immigrants wish to pass on the Bengali terms to the next generation kid, Neel.

“Say goodnight to Mamu,” she said.

“What does he call them?” Rahul asked.

“Who?”

“Our parents.”

“Dadu and Dadi...”

“Just like we did,” he said, his voice softening. (Lahiri 166)

Sang in “Nobody’s Business,” happily announces Paul, “I’m going to be called Sang Mashi,” explaining that Mashi was the Bengali word for ‘Aunt’” (Lahiri 191). Though the word sounds strange on her lips, she wishes to stick to the Bengali term which gives meaning to her lonely life in America. In the busy cosmopolitan life, people become transnationalists and adapt according to the country they live and also feel at home. But the traces of relationships and terms to address them foster their Indianism with the effect of making them feel ‘belonged’ and to think of their days with their parents’ age-old Indian roots.

In the alien setup, Lahiri shows a way to learn the native language, value and culture of the homeland through the first generation immigrants. She represents first generation immigrants through Ruma’s father, who blows the native breeze on Ruma and Akash,

She watched as Akash buried things into the soil, crouching over the ground just as her father was... “Not too deep,” her father said. “Not more than a finger.

Can you touch it still?”

Akash nodded. He picked up a miniature plastic dinosaur, forcing it into the ground.

“What color is it?” her father asked.

“Red.”

“And in Bengali?”

“Lal.”

“Good.”

“And Neel!” Akash cried out, pointing to the sky.” (Lahiri 44)

This conversation shows that the second and third generation immigrants are guided by the first generation through which the present and future generations can get accustomed to the homeland and new land. This predicts the next generation’s future with an inevitable mixture of many cultures and practices that will demand their adaptability, which one ensured turns them as the cosmopolitans. In the conflict of language loss and gain too, the practice of uttering full sentences in mother-tongue is lost; it becomes a code-mixture with the terms and phrases borrowed from the new languages. In the cosmopolitan world, Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* pictures the loss and gain of languages with a map to stick on to their mother-tongue.

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