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A Study of Alienation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the sense of alienation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*. The question of identity is always a difficult one, especially for those who are culturally displaced and grow up in two worlds simultaneously. For the first generation immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are most explicit and distressing than for their children. The problem for the children of immigrants those with strong ties to their country of origin, they feel neither one thing nor the other. This paper is all about the problem of the constant sense of alienation.

Keywords

Alienation; First Generation Immigrants; Jhumpa Lahiri; *Unaccustomed Earth.*

Jhumpa Lahiri has remarkably succeeded in portraying the sense of alienation inherent in diasporic existence in all of her writings. So far she has produced three well-acclaimed books: *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). There are nine stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*, which bring to light many of the issues regarding identity faced by the diaspora community. The book contains the stories of first and second generation Indian immigrants, as well as a few stories involving ideas of otherness among communities in India. The stories revolve around the difficulties of relationships, communication and a loss of identity for those in diaspora. No matter where the story takes place, the characters struggle with the same feelings of exile and the struggle between the two worlds by which they are torn. The stories deal with the ever shifting lines between gender, sexuality, and social status within a diaspora. Whether the character is a homeless woman from India or an Indian male student in the United States, the character displays the effects of displacement in a diaspora.

Lahiri has won many awards for *Interpreter of Maladies*. These awards and honors' include the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. She is currently living in New York with her family. Her first novel was released in September of 2003. The novel is titled *The Namesake* and it follows trials of a newly–wed couple who immigrate to Cambridge, Massachusetts, from Calcutta. In this novel once again Lahiri gives us the same treatment as her short stories did, a few characters exiled between India and the United States leading otherwise mostly unremarkable lives. Lahiri deftly portrays the community of expatriate Bengalis in the Boston area; their peculiarly lonely lives with ersatz extended families made up of fellow expatriates; their customs and world view through which

they see their own everyday experience; and the struggle of their American children with their own questions of identity and belonging.

The question of identity is always a difficult one, especially for those who are culturally displaced and grow up in two worlds simultaneously. For the first generation immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are most explicit and distressing than for their children. The problem for the children of immigrants those with strong ties to their country of origin, they feel neither one thing nor the other. This makes Jhumpa Lahiri very complex and heterogeneous; it is a confluence of cultural encounter, and lived by real people with deep sense of possession, alienation, discrimination, as well as cultural assimilation.

The short story "Unaccustomed Earth" in *Unaccustomed Earth, a short story collection by Lahiri*, exhibits the father- daughter relationship, in which he has to live alone as a widower. The daughter Ruma felt her father's visit to her home will bring her burden. She is accustomed to alienation, since there are no relatives or siblings to taken care of her, from her very childhood days. Once her father visited her home, her mind changed and she started longing for her father to visit again. It was a new experience for her to have another person, even though it is her father, at home.

> Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child that would come in January, conceived just before the move. She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare. Still, not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse. (7)

The similar dilemma continues when Ruma engaged in telephonic discourse with her husband, Adam, on the visit of her father.

> "I can't imagine my father living here," she said.
>
> "Then don't ask him to"
>
> "I think the visit is his way of suggesting it"
>
> "Then ask"
>
> "And if he says yes?"
>
> "Then he moves in with us"
>
> "Should I ask?"
>
> She heard Adam breathing patiently through his nose. "We've been over this a million times, Rum. It's your call. He's your dad." (25)

Ruma's dilemma is the outcome of her upbringing. Children acquire the sense of filial duty from their family set-up, and the second generation diasporans, like Ruma, are removed from the concern for the aged members, the concern that binds the family in India. The modern western family is basically nucleus, and, hence, isolates the elders; every one constitutes a family in himself/herself. It is the influence of such western family pattern that puts Ruma in dilemma despite her Indian origin. Her father himself admits this aspect of her nature to Mrs. Bagchi:

> Now that he was on his own, acquaintances sometimes asked if he planned to move in with Ruma. Even Mrs. Bagchi mentioned the idea. But he pointed out that Ruma hadn't been raised with that sense of duty. She led her own life, had made her own decisions, married an American boy. He didn't expect her to take him in, and really, he couldn't blame her. For what had he done, when his own father was dying, when his mother was left behind? By then Ruma and Romi were teenagers. There was no question of his eighty-year-old widowed mother moving to Pennsylvania. He had let his siblings look after her until she, too, eventually died. (29)

However, very soon Ruma realizes that her father turns out to be a great help, rather than a burden. Her father's living pattern has built on the anvil of self-sustenance, and prefers to do everything himself, and this habit of him keeps him engaged. For a retired and aged soul, engagement is necessary to shun off loneliness:

> After finishing with the dishes he dried them and then scrubbed and dried the inside of the sink, removing the food particles from the drainer. He put the leftovers always in the refrigerator, tied up the trash bag and put in into the large barrel he'd noticed in the driveway, made sure the doors were locked. He sat for a while at the kitchen table, fiddling with a saucepan whose handle-he'd noticed while washing it- was wobbly. He searched in the drawers for a screwdriver and, not finding one, accomplished the task with the tip of a steak knife. When he was finished he poked his head into Akash's room and found both the boy and Ruma asleep. (27)

Moreover, she recollects the past life and joys merely with the presence of her father. She notices how her son, Akash, mingles with her father, and both together become a reservoir of family satiety for her. Her father too engages in reminiscences of her wife as Ruma now resembles her a lot:

> For several minutes he stood in the doorway. Something about his daughter's appearance had changed; she now resembled his wife so strongly that he could not bear to look at her directly. That first glimpse of her earlier, standing on the lawn with Akash, had nearly taken his breath away. Her face was older now, as his wife's had been, and the hair was beginning to turn gray at her temples in the same way, twisted with an elastic band into a loose knot. And the features, haunting now that his wife was gone- the identical shape and shade of the eyes, the dimple on the left side when they smiled. (27-28)

Significantly, in course of her father's stay at Seattle, Ruma gets accustomed to her father. In fact, she had never been so closer to him before her marriage with Adam. While having conversation with her father when the latter is engaged in gardening, it is obvious that she wants him to stay with her, quite contrary to her initial response:

> "If I lived here I would sleep out here in the summers," her father said presently. "I would put out a cot."
>
> "You can, you know".
>
> 'What?'
>
> "Sleep out here. We have an air mattress."
>
> "I am only talking. I am comfortable where I am"
>
> 'But,' he continued, "if I could, I would build a porch like this for myself".
>
> "Why don't you?"
>
> "The condo would not allow it. It would have been nice in the old house." (45)

The mentioning of the 'old house' sends her in tormenting flash-back which reveals how much Ruma misses the milieu of her parental old house. Her recollection of how her mother used to manage the household work, and the way she departed to her heavenly abode instills in her a deeper sense of filial duty, however tinged with her own selfish desire. In the scene where she asks her father to stay with her, one can easily feel that her father is no way interested in staying back which pains her much as she herself finds it difficult to bear the solitariness of her domestic life:

> "It is a good place, Ruma. But this is your home, not mine."
>
> She had expected resistance, so kept talking. "You can have the whole downstairs. "You can still go on your trips whenever you like. We won't stand in your way. What do you say, Akash," she

called out. “Should, Dadu live with us in here? Would you like that?

Akash began jumping up and down in the pool, squirting water from a plastic dolphin, nodding his head.

“I know it would be a big move,” Ruma continued. “But it would be good for you. For all of us.” By now she was crying. Her father did not step toward her to comfort her. He was silent, helping for the moment to pass.

“I don’t want to be a burden.” he said after a while

“You wouldn’t, you’d be a help. You don’t have to make up your mind now. Just promise you’ll think about it.”

He lifted his head and looked at her, a brief sad look that seemed finally to talk her in, and nodded. (52-53)

The loneliness of Ruma is well comprehended by her father as he finds her in the position of his wife. His wife has also experienced the pang of managing the family alone in an alien land and has suffered deeper solitude. Like her mother, Ruma, though acquainted with American life-style, is not exception to the solitude of life, and so craves to have her father with her. Her father himself admits this:

He knew that it was not for his sake that his daughter was asking him to live here. It was for hers. She needed him, as he’d never felt she’d needed him before, apart from the obvious of things he provided her in the course of his life. And because of this the offer upset him more. A part of him, that would never cease to be a father, felt obligated to accept. But it was not what he wanted. Being here for a week, however pleasant, had only confirmed the fact. He did not want to be part of another family, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it. He did not want to live in the margins of this daughter’s life, in the shadow of her marriage.

> He didn't want to live again in an enormous house that would only fill up with things over the years, as the children grew, all the things he'd recently gotten rid of all the books and papers and clothes and objects one felt compelled to possess, to save. Life grew and grew until a certain point. The point he had reached now. (53)

At the level of relation, both Ruma and her father are intrinsically selfish. Her father has been an escapist right from the beginning as for as the execution of his final duty is concerned. To build his life and career abroad, he ignored the needs of his aged parents in India, and, ironically, he is left in the similar circumstances, though self-chosen. Even this choice of her father is motivated by his deep-rooted selfishness and desire not to be entangled further in the maze of family relation. He has turned into a kind of solitary wanderer, an *aghori;* a person who denounces all relation and a live a life of wanderer. In case of Ruma's father, no doubt, the denouncement of committed relation is inspired by the desire of uncommitted relation. It is this uncommitted relation that characterizes diasporic existence in its entirety and extremity, apart from instilling a sense of isolation. For any kind of association, commitment is imperative; the lack of it results in the breakdown of even the most intimate relation. Her father's choice of Mrs. Bagchi instead of her is, in fact, an expression of his desire to be uncommitted, free from any kind of bondage; the bondage that makes us suffer. Thus, in "Unaccustomed Earth" we witness that the characters are lonely at the heart of their heart which accounts for much of their suffering. However, here we also witness the transfer from physical alienation to that of the metaphysical one in order to attain unttainted, uncommitted bliss and liberty.

The note of alienation continues to run throughout Lahiri's "Hell-Heaven" in *Unaccustomed Earth,* which seems to be a saga of broken hearts. The important women characters: the narrator, her mother and Deborah are presented in such circumstances where they feel alienated in relation to their

men. At the centre of the story lies the incompatible relation of the narrator's parents, Shymal and Aparna, resulting in the alienating feelings of Aparna. The narrator herself admits this,

> My father was a lover of silence and solitude. He had married my mother to placate his parents; they were willing to accept his desertion as long as he had a wife. He was wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate. Conversation was a chore for him; it required an effort he preferred to expend at the lab. He disliked excess in anything, voiced no cravings or needs apart from the frugal elements of his daily routine: cereal and tea in the morning, a cup of tea after he got home, and two different vegetable dishes every night with dinner. He did not eat with the reckless appetite of Pranab Kaku. My father has a survivor's mentality. From time to time, he liked to remark, in mixed company and often with no relevant provocation, that starving Russians under Stalin had resorted to eating the glue off the back of their wallpaper. One might think that he would have felt slightly jealous, or at the least suspicious, about the regularity of Pranab Kaku's and the effect they had on my mother's behavior and mood. But my guess is that my father was grateful to Pranab Kaku for the companionship he provided, freed from the sense of responsibility he must have felt for forcing her to leave India, and relieved, perhaps, to see her happy for change. (65-66)

Aparna finds a source to get rid of her tedious and monotonous domestic life in Pranab, and their intimacy grows to such an extent that they might have been taken for husband wife,

> Wherever we went, any stranger would have naturally assumed that Pranab Kuku was my father, that my mother was his wife. (66-67)

However, the entry of Deborah, an American, in the life of Pranab fetches a jealously bitter touch in Pranab-Aparna episode which enhances to such an extent that Aparna feels a sea of change in Pranab brought out by Deborah,

> He used to be so different. I don't understand how a person can change so suddenly. It's just hell-heaven, the difference. (68)

Aparna turns more bitter and isolated after Pranab-Deborah wedlock as she starts viewing anything American to be unethical deducing from the experience of Deborah- Pranab relation where the latter denounces his family, the family which has cherished a lot of expectation from him. Significantly, she conflicts the Indian social values with the new and changing values that she dwells amid and suffers excruciatingly. Her daughter, the narrator, with her biological growth, adjusts with her American social milieu contrary to her advice. To avoid her irritation, or any confrontation, the narrator conceals many facts about her life from her mother, particularly her experience with boyfriends and alcoholic indulgence. Aparna turns so isolated and at times frustrated that she appears to be grudging or complaining soul:

> When my mother complained to him about how much she hated life in the suburbs and how lonely she felt, he said nothing to placate her. 'If you are so unhappy, go back to Calcutta,' he would offer, making it clear that their separation would not affect him one way or the other. (76)

> When she screamed at me for taking too long on the telephone, or for staying too long in my room, I learned to scream back, telling her that she was pathetic, that she knew nothing about me, and it was clear to us both that I had stopped needing her, definitively and abruptly, just as Pranab Kaku had. (76-77)

Aparna, thus, has none to call her own who can genuinely provide her company and counsel. That she means nothing to her husband is quite evident from the outset, and the one whom she has loved secretly and deeply also denounces her, apart from her own blood, that is the narrator, Usha. She is, in fact, a perfect example of the victim of the fragmented pattern of diasporic relation and existence. Deborah, like Aparna, also suffers the pang of alienation caused by her inability to understand her husband despite their long conjugal life. Aparna has always feared the fact that someday Deborah will go out of Pranab's life in preference of an American man, which is a common conception among the most Indians about the Americans. However, it is Pranab who divorces Deborah despite their two children, and marries a Bengali woman, leaving Deborah at lurch to look after the kids. Here, we witness the dirty facet of materialistic attitude as the aftermath of globalization. The confluence of various cultural and social values under the aegis of globalization, unfortunately, transfers man to the level where individual materialistic concern matters more than anything else. Pranab is a typical global materialistic man who denounces his parents to procure the youthful love of Deborah, and when she loses her youthful luster he denounces her too in order to get another woman of his community. Here, too, we witness a lack of committed relation as in "Unaccustomed Earth." Pranab is, by nature, flirtiest and fluid in his relation, however, those who come in his contact are sober and committed. Both Aparna and Deborah are connected in the parallel game of destiny which leaves them to suffer the pang of alienation throughout their lives.

Alienation in diasporic realities is mostly the artifact 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. In the contemporary global society, everything is tested on the anvil of production and reproduction. It is the productive and

reproductive aspect of an object or entity that determines its value and utility. And relationship is not impervious to this paradigm. Such paradigm of globalized couple with de-centered, de-rooted, and displaced realities of diasporans that accounts for incomprehensible and abysmal alienation of diasporic existence as couched in the above discussion of relation and circumstances of characters in the short stories "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Hell-Heaven."

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