



# LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

## **Feat and Defeat through Assimilation in Jhumpa Lahiri's**

### **"Only Goodness"**

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#### **Abstract**

In Indian cultural tradition, heredity opposes hybridity but in American context this is marked by fluidity. In the larger American cultural paradigm Indian immigrants do not need merely a place for settling down but they search for a position in an indeterminate hybridity to exercise their cultural authority of 'essential' Indianness. The overwhelming sense of loss in the short stories of diaspora writers can be assigned exclusively to the concept of alienation and displacement as experienced among the children of immigrant parents, or to the immigrant parents themselves, in the US. Majority of the writings deal with the concept of Diaspora and continually narrate the loss and re-invention of home. These stories form an integral part of the personal narrative structure that accommodates the themes of home and career abroad which are carried back and forth by the various generations of Indian settlers. This repetition is a kind of spatial redistribution that heightens the difference between India and the USA.

An effort is made in this article to project the concept of success by assimilating the cultural changes through the character Sudha in the short story “Only Goodness”.

### Keywords

Assimilation; Diaspora Writings; Jhumpa Lahiri; *Unaccustomed Earth*; “Only Goodness”.

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Writers of Indian Diaspora commonly deal with narrative of people moving out of their homes – primarily to the US or to the West, where all dreams are believed to come true – to accomplish their own future prospects, gain financially and professionally, and, of course, be tagged and envied as NRIs. But while shifting to a foreign land people do not ask themselves if they will be able to adjust to the life and community there. They come into contact with a culture which is very different from their own which they have left behind.

Jhumpa Lahiri in her second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, paints a powerful picture of life of the Indian American Diaspora. She describes the lives of the first and second generations of Indian immigrants who have settled in America, most of her protagonists being second generation immigrants. These characters face the opportunities and challenges of belonging to two different cultures. They occupy a middle ground which could easily turn into a battle ground between the Indian and the American parts of their identities, but the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* strive to maintain ties to both cultures, identifying themselves as Indian Americans. Thus, no matter how predominantly Indian or American they feel, Lahiri’s characters still remain in the sense of self as Indian Americans. The continuous renegotiation of their identities lies at the core of *Unaccustomed Earth*, offering an interesting perspective on the stories.

The title of Lahiri’s latest collection is borrowed from a passage in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which is quoted on the opening page

of *Unaccustomed Earth*. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne presents the narrator as an autobiographical voice, and the quoted passage as well as the rest of the book thus reads as his personal remembrances and opinions.

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 (13).

Hawthorne's description of how and where his children will "strike their roots" is an image of settling down. These three points in Hawthorne's statement correspond with central aspects of *Unaccustomed Earth* and Lahiri's choice of an opening quotation thus serves as a fruitful context for her collection of short stories. The present article deals with the concept of importance given to career by the second generation immigrants.

Indian Americans have been described as a model minority in terms of their successful careers, middle class aspirations and work ethics. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, most of the characters embark upon ambitious studies, often leading to multiple degrees and professional careers. Lahiri's own scholarly career boasts a total of three master degrees and a PhD - accomplishments that do not stand out in comparison with those of her fictional characters.

"Only Goodness" is well-suited for an exploration of career and its centrality to Indian American identity. It tells the story of the Mukherjee family, from the vantage point of the elder sister, Sudha. She relates her childhood and adolescent memories, and shows how her parents believed their family to be destined for success in America. They raise two clever children who excel at school and are admitted to Ivy League colleges. Thus, when Sudha's younger brother, Rahul, drinks and drops out of college, and fails to live up to the high expectations of his parents, a conflict develops between him and the rest of the family. Sudha lives up to her parents' expectations and becomes an Indian American success story, exemplifying the norm that Rahul fails to live up to.

Career is an important symbol of success in the Indian American community, and Sudha has made her parents proud in this respect. Here Rahul appears as her opposite. Sudha realizes that she has become one of the many Bengali success stories, “her collection of higher degrees framed and filling up her parents’ upstairs hall” (151). Rahul, on the other hand, turns out as the exact opposite, dropping demanding subjects, bringing home mediocre grades and finally being thrown out of Cornell University.

Other Bengalis gossiped about him and prayed their own children would not ruin their lives in the same way. And so he became what all parents feared, a blot, a failure, someone who was not contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children were making across the country, as surgeons or attorneys or scientists, or writing articles for the front page of *The New York Times*. (151)

Sudha takes up the responsibility of her brother’s upbringing that borders on the parental duties. She has done her best to shield her brother from the sense of otherness that she felt whilst growing up. As a child, she would notice all the things that were different about her family, and she has made sure that many of the staples of an American upbringing should be natural to Rahul. Rahul grew up in an Americanized environment. She remembers getting only “a flimsy apron and a weightless mask” (136) for her Halloween costumes, an indication of how foreign this celebration was to her parents. They opted out of this American tradition, but Sudha makes sure that her little brother grows up with these American traditions. When Rahul is old enough to celebrate Halloween, Sudha takes on the role of parent when she thinks up “elaborate costumes, turning him into an elephant or a refrigerator” (136). At school she was aware of being different and remembers being picked on for the “funny things their Wonderbread green” (143). It is as if all Sudha’s efforts at making Rahul’s childhood and adolescence as Americanized as possible are her way of dealing with the sense of otherness that she felt growing up as an Indian

American, making sure that her brother will not feel the same way. In a sense she is healing something from her own childhood and working through the feeling of being used as a mediator between her parents and America.

Sudha waited until she was at college “to disobey her parents” (129). This disobedience included “going to parties and allowing boys into her bed.” Both behaviours would be unacceptable to her parents, who are described as “puritanical.” But while Sudha’s college behavior goes on unbeknownst to her parents, Rahul acts differently. Though he is not yet old enough to buy alcohol, he begins to crave it, even in the family home. Sudha comes to realize that Rahul “consumed the alcohol in stealth that he could not endure her family’s company without” (153). Although Sudha does not explicitly say that she is responsible for Rahul’s alcoholism and how he has turned out, the whole story is centred on her guilt. It is only in the final pages of the story that she reveals her secret. After Rahul has got drunk whilst minding their son, Sudha explains to her husband how Rahul,

...hadn't even liked beer, and then about all the cans they'd hidden over the years and how eventually it was no longer a game for him but a way of life, a way of life that had removed him from her family and ruined him. (171)

Here Sudha finally lets on that she views herself as the prime corruptor of her younger brother that it was she who made him drink something that he did not like the flavor of, leading by example and showing how alcohol and independence from their parents went hand in hand. Saying that alcohol has “ruined” her brother is a strong statement, as it does not offer much hope. Something that is ruined is difficult or impossible to mend and must be thrown away. At the close of the story Sudha metaphorically throws away the hopes that she had on her brother. After her brother has left, she looks at a balloon that he has bought for her son, which has now “sagged to the floor, a shrunken thing incapable of bursting. She clipped the ribbon with scissors and stuffed the whole thing into the garbage, surprised at how easily it fit” (173).

The balloon may be read as a symbol of Rahul. It is an inflatable thing and Rahul, who was clever beyond his years and the hope of his parents, was in a sense puffed up beyond his real size. But just as Rahul is ageing, failing and disappointing his family, so as is the balloon sagging toward the floor, only waiting to burst and be thrown away. When Sudha clips the balloon off its ribbon and stuffs it into the garbage, this echoes how she must now make a clean break concerning her brother. He is obsolete and no longer a part of her family, after her husband has forbid that Rahul should ever come close to their son again. Sudha is surprised at how easily she is able to make that break, finally, after a lifetime of guilt. By confessing her role in Rahul's alcoholism to her husband, it is almost as if she has absolved herself of her sins. To her, Rahul's alcoholism is not just a failure in itself, but also a moral failure of the entire family, and most of all, her own. The fact that she has chosen to keep this from her parents and her husband shows her moral corruption, her failure to be a good daughter, wife, mother and Indian American. Thus the story is centred on Sudha's attempts at dealing with her guilty conscience, and with Rahul's final drunken mistake, she cuts her ties with him and the story ends. The culmination of the story becomes a rite of passage for Sudha, where she finds closure with her childhood and with her parents. She has failed at Americanizing Rahul, who has become the worst kind of American and not the Indian American success story that his family had predicted.

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**MLA (7th Edition) Citation:**

Reddy, Sreekanth. B. "Feat and Defeat through Assimilation in Jhumpa Lahiri's  
"Only Goodness"." *Literary Quest* 1.5 (2014): 140-146. Web. DoA.

**DoA – Date of Access**

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.