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## Neither Here Not There: An Assessment Of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* as Migration literature

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**Abstract:** Diapora, migration Literature and literature of exile have been the centre of discussion for last quarter of century. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the lumanaries in the field. The paper aseses her book *Unaccustomed Earth* as a book of short stories deeply enshrining the spirit of migration and disporic literature. The Hindu way of life and the American social systems are two different sets of culture and individuals caught in the whirlwind of having one system and living in another feel torn between the two, is clearly visible in the stories of this book especially in the title story.

Keywords : Jhumpa Lahiri; Migration Literature

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Jhumpa Lahiri is in news again. Her latest novel “The Lowland” has been shortlisted for man Booker Prize and you never know, she might come out as a winner of 2013 award as well. Diaspora is the collective name given to the literature written by the writers away from their native culture. This is a broad term and is applied very loosely. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the undisputed leading writers who are studied as ‘Diaspora’ writer. She actually created a kind of controversy by raising doubts at the use of term immigrant fiction in one of her latest Interviews:

I don't know what to make of the term “immigrant fiction.” Writers have always tended to write about the worlds they come

from. And it just so happens that many writers originate from different parts of the world than the ones they end up living in, either by choice or by necessity or by circumstance, and therefore, write about those experiences. If certain books are to be termed immigrant fiction, what do we call the rest? Native fiction? Puritan fiction? This distinction doesn't agree with me. Given the history of the United States, all American fiction could be classified as immigrant fiction. Hawthorne writes about immigrants. So does Willa Cather. From the beginnings of literature, poets and writers have based their

narratives on crossing borders, on wandering, on exile, on encounters beyond the familiar. The stranger is an archetype in epic poetry, in novels. The tension between alienation and assimilation has always been a basic theme. (Interview NYT)

The modern Indian diaspora constitutes a major part in some respect as a unique force in world literature. A large number of Indian diasporic writers have been giving expression to their creative urge and have brought the name to Indian English Fiction. Writers of Indian Diaspora, who were earlier called the expatriate writers, have carved a special niche in the arena of literature. Tapping their varied experiences and rich exposure to advantage, these writers wrote with a broad vision and perspective. In the modern world of flux, uncertainty and confusion, and constant erosion of identities, they explored major issues like cultural conflicts, immigrants' alienation, psyche and changing social values. The Indian diasporic writers can be grouped into two distinct classes. One class comprises those who have spent a part of their life in India and have carried the baggage of their native land off shore. The other class comprises those who have been bred from childhood outside India. They have had a view of their country only from the outside as an exotic place of their origin.

The writers of the former group have a literal displacement whereas those belonging to the latter group find themselves rootless. Both the groups of writers have produced an enviable corpus of English literature. These writers while depicting migrant characters in their fiction explore the theme of displacement and self-fashioning.

In the fleet of recent diasporic writers, Jhumpa Lahiri is the foremost writer. She can be acclaimed as one of the shining stars in the galaxy of diasporic writers. Migration has been part of her narration. Her book of short story collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and her novels, *The Namesake* (2003) and latest *The Lowland* (2013), convincingly illustrate the lives of both first generation and second generation Indian migrants in the US. Pulitzer Prize winner for the year 2000, she can be categorized as a multi-cultural, diasporic, Post-colonial, marginal, South-Asian woman writer. The daughter of Indian immigrants born in London on 11 July 1967, Nilanjana Sudeshna is now known as an American Writer of Bengali descent who writes about the diaspora and their modes of existence and identity. When she was three, her family moved to U.S because of her father's job. She was brought up in Rhode Island and now she considers herself as an American.

Her teacher decided to call her by Jhumpa which was her pet name because her good name Nilanjna Sudeshna was so difficult to pronounce again and again. At this Lahiri confesses that she always used to feel embarrassed due to this strange name. Even among the diaspora writers, Lahiri's case is typical as she belongs to three Countries- India by heritage, U.K by birth and the United States by immigration; hence she is the product of three countries. In her interview with Barbara Kantowitz to *News Week*, she said, "I've often felt that I am somehow illegitimate in both cultures. A true Indian does not accept me as an Indian, and true American doesn't accept me as an American" (Lahiri Interview)

Like other diasporic writers Jhumpa Lahiri is also caught between two worlds, one which is dead as they have left it behind with the immigration of her parents and the other which is not yet accepted by them. Lahiri's case is different as she belongs to second generation diaspora and does not have firsthand experience of her motherland. She has never lived in India, although she has close ties there. Her family made regular pilgrimages to visit extended family, sometimes staying for up to six months at a time. It was during these trips that the curious observer in her took over. On each visit she immersed herself in Indian life and cultures, scribbling her impressions. The experience gave her a wealth of

characters and plots from which to draw. "The influence of frequent childhood visits to India and parents who are still a part of the Indian world despite their immigration to America thirty years ago shaped her book" (*People Weekly* 138). She finds herself torn between two cultures i.e. culture of her parents which they had left but still cling to it and the culture of the United States where they are residing at present. In an interview she accepts that on one side she wanted to please her parents and meet their expectations but on the other side she also wanted to meet the expectations of her American peers, and the expectations she put on herself to fit into American society. Thus it is a classic case of divided identity.

She writes about the human predicament and the crisis of identity in the alienated land of America though she has made it her homeland. Marginality, alienation and nostalgia are the chief features of her writings. She writes with sensitivity about her family's ethnic heritage and the lives of South Asian Immigrants in the United States and succeeds to explore the multi-dimensional anxieties of émigré life. Her stories revolve around the themes of loss of identity, clashing cultures and homelessness. In 2008, once again a collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* was released on 1<sup>st</sup> April and listed in *The New York* best seller list. In this work also characters are again Bengali

immigrants, mostly academics, and their second generation who are born on foreign soil. The book is divided into two main parts, the first part contains five short stories and the second, entitled "Hema and Kaushik", consists of three stories. Just like her two other works, *Unaccustomed Earth* is also a reflection of life with two separate cultures, and how people cope with one another in different culture. Here Lahiri explores the cultural issues and differences between the American born second generation Indians and their parents, who migrated to the U.S. in the 70's-80's. The story *Unaccustomed Earth* is the first story and the title is also used in the book, so centrality of the book around this story is obvious. It is not only the first story of the collection but also serves as a motif for all the other stories of the collection. In the whole book stories are about those people who live around us and whom we love and further adds that the stories seem to criticize modern man's selfishness- showing parents who give preference to their needy than their children and the children who have no sympathy for their immigrant parents' trauma. At this point it is important to note that *Unaccustomed Earth* is a collection of stories about the children of Bengali immigrants who struggle to define their identity in the land of their parents which is left behind and in the land they inhabit. Lahiri talks about second generation

immigrant as she also belongs to the same category. In this book he finds differences from her two other works. Here the second generation immigrants cross the boundaries of states not for the sake of ambition like their parents but even for the sake of love, peace or to make a search for self. Lahiri has travelled extensively in India and experienced the issues of the diaspora as it exists. She feels strong ties to her parents' homeland as well as the United States and England. Growing up with ties to all three countries created in Lahiri a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted. Lahiri explains this as an inheritance of her parents' ties to India:

It's hard to have parents who consider another place 'home'-even after living abroad for

30 years, India is home for them. "We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There's nobody in this whole country that we're related to. India was different our extended family offered real connections. I didn't grow up there, I wasn't a part of things. We visited often but we didn't have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us" (Int Vibhuti Patel).

Yet her familial ties to India were not enough to make India "Home" for Lahiri. Growing up in America under the supervision of a mother who wanted to raise her children to be Indian, it is no surprise

that Jhumpa Lahiri puts so large an emphasis on the stories of Indians in what for them is a strange land. Modern dilemma, rootlessness, alienation, emotional sterility and even isolation are the main themes of her writing: "The contemporary literature, which deals with emotional problems, clearly reflects the pathetic condition of the modern man. Getting uprooted from the native cultural traditions and values, the loss of indigenous, language, man's position as a mere outcast or an unaccommodated alien together with multiple injuries and lacerations of psyche" (Asnani 184).

We notice that all critics find that being a diasporic writer Jhumpa Lahiri voice the pangs of exile and alienation of the adopted land. The available criticism, I feel, has failed to capture some other issues related to diasporic concerns in her work like condition of women in the diaspora, psychological effect and especially the link between culture and relationship. Every culture takes its shape in a geographical area and language, eating habits, dressing up and means of survival and existence of every culture have their own logic. These are so spontaneous and automatic that cannot be explained as the sole means of explanation (i.e. Language and logic) are part of culture and hence unable to define itself. This is a typical situation but can very easily be understood by the analogy that our eyes can

see the whole world but to see our own face we need a looking glass where its reflections only are visible. In the same way my culture becomes the standpoint and we analyze other cultures in comparison and contrasting terms of my own culture. The postcolonial native/imperial, and the feminist self/other binaries are very much relative here when we analyze a dispersed work since the location of the story is interestingly poised in such cases. The geography of the story is located in one place while the culture in another and sometimes within one story the binaries get overlap and the criss-cross creates a quagmire. A culture which is an offshoot of life itself becomes an issue and morality, kinship and life philosophy appear to be changing and in flux.

The title 'Unaccustomed Earth' holds immense significance as the stories are about Indian migrants transplanted to the unaccustomed soil of America and becoming accustomed to the Unaccustomed Earth. There is recurrent of relocations of families and relationships such as; father-daughter, brother-sister and many others, that have changed how someone felt towards that person and vice versa. Lahiri touches upon a maladjusted family and the struggles they had redefined relationships after relocation and death. Like in her previous works – *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*, the themes of restlessness, migration and exile are

recurrent in this book also. This volume consists of two parts- part one having five stories and part two only three stories interconnected with each other. These stories have wide geographical canvas and take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand.

The title story "Unaccustomed Earth" which primarily deals with the lonely condition of Ruma's father after his wife's death. He is now retired from a pharmaceutical company and has begun travelling in Europe frequently in France, Holland, Italy etc. The father always maintains a distance from Ruma, who is now 38, having an earning husband, Adam, and a son called Akash of barely three years. She and Adam has purchased a house on the eastside of Seattle (U.S.A.). Ruma's father writes a postcard to her, expressing his desire to see her new-bought house, and she invites him gladly – "You're always welcome here, Baba" (UE 4). There is a touch of formality between them, but this kind of formality was totally absent in her relations with her mother. Her mother had died on the operating table, of heart failure (UE 5), all of a sudden, leaving behind a disconsolate husband and two sad children , a daughter Ruma and Romi, a son, who is living far-away from his parents. Ruma is expecting another child when her father arrives in Seattle. He is heartily received by Ruma. He develops intimacy with Akash

while working in the garden and planting new flowers and vegetables there. Then, the day of parting comes, as he does not want "to be a burden" (UE 52) on his daughter and her family. The father-daughter relationship, like all relationships is a typical product of culture. Ruma is married to an American, a typical American love marriage not an Indian arranged marriage, is a lawyer by education, again a typical American profession and in all ways of lifestyle, outlook and existence have everything on an American but for her father. She expects him to be a typical Indian Hindu father who can have nothing of a companionship when her mother has died. The moment she finds an Indian looking woman (Ms. Bagchi) somewhere close to her father in a video she is on all alert- "She's gone now. A woman who looked Indian" (UE 40). The father who has been feeling guilty of having a woman companion feels "It was an opportunity to tell Ruma. It was more difficult than he had thought, being in his daughter's home, being around her all day. He felt pathetic deceiving her. But what would he say? That he had made a new friend? A girlfriend? The word was unknown to him, impossible to express; he had never had a girlfriend in his life. (UE 40). Cultures around the world have evolved on the grounds of necessity and morality has accordingly been modified. The Indian Hindu culture has been social in

nature and we have always given importance to every relation and we can easily understand this paradigm by the fact that every single relationship has a specific name a la charge, Bua, mama, fufa etc. As Oprah Winfrey put it so dramatically during Jaipur literary festival that all over the world it is a common that one of the partners dies before the other. Accepted beyond doubt that it is something common that happens everywhere for ages but let us not forget that the responses to the biological death of life partners are different in different cultures. Hindus have a great buffering and there are kith and kin around the old surviving partner and he/she doesn't feel the loneliness. In typical Hindu families the old have their duties to rear up their grandchildren. The cliché expression of Dada-daddi ki kahaniya and nani ke nuskhe are typical hindu. If still they have time they should be doing kitchen gardening. Look around you and you would find numerous examples of this in your houses and neighborhoods. You go to the USA, you find Indian grandparents babysitting their grandchildren while their sons, daughters, son-in-law, daughter-in-law are writing programs for different Inc. Americans on the other hand have a different arrangement. It is quite common for them to look for companion once the life partner passes away. In the *Unaccustomed Earth* this is the point of contention. Father who has been a

typical hindu has a companion when his wife is no more and his daughter Ruma, who has everything American cannot think of another woman in his father's life. We can understand this relationship from an American cultural perspective, even Jhumpa Lahiri puts it in her words- "In a way he (Father) preferred knowing that she ( Mrs. Bagchi's) heart still belonged to another man (her dead husband). It was not passion that was driving him, at seventy, to be involved, however discreetly, however occasionally, with another woman. Instead it was the consequence of being married all those years, the habit of companionship." (UE 30) Rumina Sethi in her book "*The Politics of Postcolonialism*" compares diaspora writing for the postcolonial writings and her logic is that like the native-imperial binaries in colonial/postcolonial praxis the binaries in the Diaspora are born/living cultures. It is a question of a clash of cultures and the very terminology leads to dominance and hence is political by nature. The ECB, the cricket board of England was warned by the British media to be sensitive to the fact that there is more support to the Indian sub-continent team when they are playing against England in England itself. This may be post postcolonialism or something else, I lack the knowledge and confidence to name it anyhow, but we need to dig deep at it and understand it thoroughly. The naive looking

short story gives us a window to look at it. And mind you the way technology is erasing the borders and the concept of Nation state getting beaten by globalization we need to be wary of the political agenda that is already working around us.

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