

Generational Differences in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Unaccustomed Earth'

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Abstract

The British colonizers introduced the privileges given by modernization and education in India but ironically had ruined the country and ultimately formed a small middle-class Bengalis in the earliest part of the Indian post-colonial era. So, when they are in search of better jobs and a standard lifestyle of high social rank, they have forcefully migrated to England or America for further education, which India could not promise. After they left India the immigrant experiences of this generation turned out to be the metaphor for all the ideal qualities of a beloved homeland that they missed. We can also capture here the complicated process of identity negotiation among most of the Indian Diasporas in the contemporary globalized world but especially those who find themselves separated from their cultures and countries of origin. This is to be clearly distinguished from the first and second-generation Diasporas that the first generation retained the redeeming quality of nostalgia but their children (second-generation expatriate) did not. Loss, alienation, rootlessness, and dislocation are constantly experienced by every expatriate at some stage or the other. But the second-generation expatriate can witness fewer dilemmas to fit into the adopted culture when the first generation expatriate always becomes in a state of not-belonging, in both the countries. When there is the interaction between two cultures—the traditional Indian culture and the modern-Western –American culture, the second-generation expatriate is far better to understand and replicate the 'sandwich culture' whereas the first generation has confronted the social mores alien to him. Hence, this paper is targeted to focus significantly on the difference of experiences between the first and second generation while facing the hybridity of culture constantly filtered and replicated in the short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Keywords: - colonizers, modernization, rootless-ness, nostalgia, alien, hybridity.

In the short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* Lahiri exposes the readers to have a large gap between two generations. If the pain of alienation and an acute consciousness of it can worship and enrich the human experience on this earth, then Lahiri's quotation from Hawthorne's 'The Custom—House' is an appropriate prologue—" Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it is planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations in the same worn-out soil". Children of the second generation wish to strike their roots into unaccustomed earth, but it became a far cry for them hoping that their fortunes remain within the control of their parents (first-generation expatriates).

In the diasporic experiences of the two generations, they are considered virtual strangers. The first generation migrants became clustered together, sharing their collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland. At times when they left it for the possibility of distinctive life in a tolerant host country, they understand that they are not accepted by their host society and therefore feel insulated from it. From this insecurity they are constantly on the lookout for people belonging to the same community, searching for the epidermis and cultural similarities. This has so happened in the short story "Hell-Heaven" when a newly arrived Bengali from India named Pranab Chakrabarty follows the child narrator's mother Aparna a whole afternoon, assuming her to be a Bengali too. At last, he tapped on her shoulder and asked the obvious question. "The answer to his question was clear, given that my mother was wearing the red and white bangles unique to Bengali married women ..." [Unaccustomed Earth: 61]. It took no time to grow intimate and he was immediately accepted into the family as 'Pranab Kaku' to the child. His marriage to an American was a failure for reasons that ran deep in his psyche; he felt close to 'Aparna boudi' whom he "associated strictly with his mother and sisters and aunts in Calcutta" [ibidem]. But 'boudi' being a sacred relation in India he turned to another Bengali woman. The story is told from the perspective of a second-generation Indian immigrant which focuses on the stresses and trauma of the child's first-generation mother. So the story shows its portrayal of words as an imaginative escape in a narrative form with diasporic conflicts of identity, rejection of the dialogue nature of discourse, and polyphonic descriptions of communicative failure.

The child narrator of 'Hell-Heaven' named Usha is an American-born and bred individual, looking back at the conflicts her Indian-born mother faced in a new country. The American influences on the narrator's voice are always present, down to the description that her "parents were strangers to each other, and their marriage had been arranged." [Unaccustomed Earth: 61] The story is narrated in less diasporic components than several other Lahiri's short stories. Rather than being a voice of cultural multitudes, the narrator prefers the voice of youthful America. This narration only emphasizes the instances where the mother resorts to her Indian nostalgia and eventually creates friction between the two characters. It also reveals an ironic bias the narrator (Usha) has against the mother. Lahiri begins her story by emphasizing the underlying cultural and familial conflict within the story.

The daughter named Usha narrates about her continuous struggle with her mother as she grows up in an alien country. Language manifests itself as a determining factor in their relationship. For instance, Usha greatly admires an American named Deborah, who is like an aunt to her and functions as a foil to Usha's mother. She muses,

Deborah and I spoke freely in English, a language which, by that age, I expressed myself more easily than Bengali, which I required to speak at home. [Unaccustomed Earth: 69]

It is now clear from the words of Usha that it is a language that creates a larger gap between the first and second-generation Indian immigrants. Usha, being a second-generation Indian immigrant obtained her preference for English as she feels closer to Deborah than to her mother.

Why Usha resists Bengali culture and consciously chooses American culture over it is just the language aspect that leads to this strong rejection of the Bengali culture. From various observations, one of the reasons that second-generation Indians shed their mother tongue or resist bilingualism is because it represents a piece of their parents' culture that they are trying to escape – most likely prompted by the desire to fit in. Later, Usha may see her mother's lacking English as a reason to respect her less, as when her mother gossips about an Indian friend who has, in her eyes, abandoned his Bengali roots: "He used to be so different. I don't understand how a person can change so suddenly. It's just hell-heaven, the difference, she would say, always saying the English words for her self-concocted, backward metaphor" [Unaccustomed Earth: 68-69].

Usha uses language to enforce the divide between her mother and herself, picking out her errors perhaps to suggest greater character flaws in her mother. In the story of 'Unaccustomed Earth', Ruma's father, a first-generation Indian immigrant widower, seventy falls in love with a Bengali lady – "Being the only two Bengalis in the tour group, naturally they'd struck up a conversation." [ibidem 9]. This is a generation constituted dualistically in a zone of tension between two places – homeland and hostland. "Modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands." [Sheffers: 3] To avoid undesirable conflict with the norms of the host country the Diasporas, especially the men who are compelled to enter the mainstream through their jobs try to camouflage. Consequently, Ruma's father manages to look like an American. "He was wearing a baseball cap that said POMPEII, brown cotton pants and a sky-blue polo shirt, and a pair of white leather sneakers. Ruma was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age." [Unaccustomed Earth: 11] But the women

stubbornly held back. "It was her mother who would have struck out in this wet Northern landscape, in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, and her jewels." [Ibidem] But for the next generation, the adaptation was easier, for being born in their parents' hostland they were far removed from any sentimental attachment to their supposed homeland India. After her mother's death, Ruma distributed the saris among her mother's friends, keeping only three for herself. "And she remembered the many times her mother had predicted this very moment, lamenting the fact that her daughter preferred pants and skirts to the clothing She wore, that there would be no one to whom to pass on her things." (ibidem 17) These lines, apparently speaking of material things signify more. The first generation found no takers among their children, of neither material nor cultural heritage. The chaining process of inheritance through generations ended at this point. The emotional outcome was pain and anxiety on one side and irreverent indifference on the other. The first generation in their dual loyalty lives in with Utopia in contrast to dystopia in which actual life is lived. So they are anxious a lot. "And the parents themselves often continue to dream of returning 'home' and do not want their children to 'lose' their identity or give up their citizenship" (Weiner: 64-65). Alienation is stark and strange for the next generation of Diasporas. Unlike their parents who share through community activities, they are introverts, having no common grounds they cannot open up to their parents.

In 'Unaccustomed Earth' Ruma wants to marry Adam, but her mother believes that Adam would ultimately prefer an American. "She had kept her other involvements with American men a secret from her parents until the day she announced that she was engaged." [Unaccustomed Earth: 26] Her mother suspects that Ruma is ashamed to be an Indian. But is Ruma an American? For the Indians like Ruma's father, or the parents of Sudha and Rahul in 'Only Goodness' the host land is a conceptual 'outside'. But do Ruma, Sudha or Rahul feel themselves 'inside'? For the diaspora the stay maybe multi-generational, but they remain outsiders in the eyes of the indigenous people. For the 'insiders', even if they are attracted towards the members of the Indian diaspora, it is only because they carry an aura of a strange mysterious land.

Megan marries Amit in the story of 'A Choice of Accommodation' because he is an Indian - "were he not an Indian Megan would have probably avoided someone like him" [ibidem 95]. For Paul in 'Nobody's Business,' Sang is someone so different that he compares her with the exotic Penelope. The shadow of liminality grows with generations. Ruma is struck between her parents and her husband Adam. Her parents are distant entities and her son's growing up is not within her control. 'I hate that food,' her son Akash resorted; pointing out to the Indian food Ruma took care to cook for her father's sake. "Despite

her efforts, he was turning into the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother." (ibidem 23) It is also a sign of internal conflict existing between the first and second-generation Indian immigrants.

Generational differences in *Unaccustomed Earth* reveal the idea of post-diaspora as the characters do not oscillate between East and West but they are well settled in the West. Portraying the lives and struggles of first and second-generation immigrants, *Unaccustomed Earth* challenges our notions of belonging, identity, and significance of one's roots. Most of the stories in the collection focus on the lives of second-generation migrants who are supposed to be settled and adapted to the environment their parents have chosen as their new home and should not face any problems with acculturation. However, despite their 'rootedness' in American soil, they too, experience moments of self-doubt and insecurity which they seem to have inherited from their parents. The stories of child characters in the collection are thus never complete without the narratives of their parents, whose cultural legacies still exist and influence their lives. In other words, the lives of children and parents are interlinked without them being aware of it, and problems such as identity crisis, feelings of alienation, isolation, or exclusion are passed down from parents to children as

parts of genetic predisposition. Thus, every story in the collection outlines the tensions of preserving one's cultural background in a foreign environment (in the narrative of the children). At the same time, they articulate the difficult positions of second-generation migrants who do not face displacement directly, physically, but after all, have to struggle with.

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