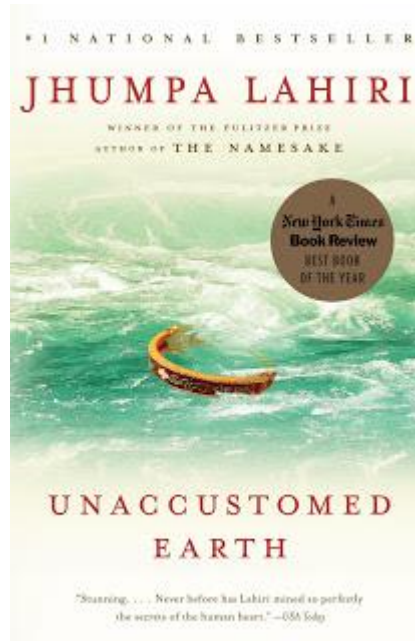


Dichotomy and Dilemma: A Study of Father-Daughter Relationship in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Not Mere Diasporic Characters

Jhumpa Lahiri is a second generation diasporic writer. She experiences and represents the problems of alienation, frustration, marginalization, discrimination, rootlessness, displacement, fragmentation and discontinuity in the cultural discourse. However, excessive emphasis on the diasporic aspect of one's writing may turn the readers' attention away from the aesthetic and artistic qualities of a work of literature. Lahiri, therefore, prefers to steer clear of this neat but facile categorization, and maintains that she creates not mere 'diasporic characters' but 'distinctively individualized characters' and writes not about 'a specific cultural experience' but about 'human beings and the difficulties of existence'. Her focus is the 'mindscape of characters' and 'human predicament' (Das 18) in its wider perspectives. All these aspects also find expression in her delineation of characters in her works, such as *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008).

A Critical Survey on Lahiri's Works

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Till now Lahiri's fiction has been read and discussed in its varied forms and perspectives. To name a few, she has been studied from the points of view of diaspora, family or marital relations, cross-cultural conflicts, identity crisis, generation gap in first and second generation, political, social, and economic problems and so on. From the point of view of Diaspora, studies have been made by many different critics to name a few Jaydeep Chakrabarty, Tejinder Kaur, Mansing J. Kadam, Binda Sah, Indira Nityanandam, Tanushree Singh, Anju Bhatt.

From the point of view of cross-cultural conflicts many critics have studied Jhumpa Lahiri's Works in their respective articles Shubhashree Mukherjee, Aju Mukhopadhyay, Shuchi Agarwal, Indira Nityanandam, Bhagabat Nayak, Sumana Roy, and others. From the point of view of identity crisis she has been studied by these critics, Krushna Chandra Mishra, S. Robert Gnanamony, Meera Bharwani, Indira Nityanandam, and others. Her works have been also studied from their social, political and economic points of view also by critics such as Indira Nityanandam, Aitor Ibarrola Armendariz, D. Nagarani, and others. She has also been studied by some critics, from the point of view of generational gap in first, second, and third generation diaspora, matrimonial relation of different characters and familial relation of immigrant people, by Farha Shariff, Sunita Agarwal, Shahnawaz Begum, Indira Nityanandam, Blasina Cantizano Marquez and Jose R. Ibanez, Himadri Lahiri, and others.

All this critical material is found in the form of articles in journals or in edited critical books. There are a few book length studies on Jhumpa Lahiri. One dissertation is "The Language of Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*" by Brittany Kemper and one more study is a thesis entitled "Womanism and the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri" by Genna Welsh Kasun. Thus she has been studied from diasporic, feminist, psychological, post-colonial points of view but the studies that have been made, are not sufficient enough for the deeper and insightful understanding of Lahiri's fiction.

Literary Background

With the advent of Psychoanalytic theory, human mindscape and human relationships have become the focal points for the modern writers. Human relationships are viewed against modern realities of diasporic experiences. Diasporic writers depict the human predicament in an alien land, away from their home lands/roots, attempting to secure a place for themselves and constantly trying to find meaning in their relationships. Due to globalisation there has

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come a new kind of social order. Family plays its role as a training ground for all social relationship. In the family father plays a significant role in our male-dominated society. Though the word ‘father’ connotes duty, affection, and selfless devotion yet with the advent of the ‘Feminist’ theory, father is supposed to be a carrier of the prevalent patriarchal system. A daughter’s relationship with his father is usually her first male-female relationship. Daughter looks at this relationship as a shadow of her relationship with her husband in future. Thus a daughter’s psyche is very significantly affected through this relationship. The present paper is an attempt to explore this complicated, dichotomous relationship existing between father and daughter in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth”.

On Defining Dichotomy and Dilemma

Before exploring this topic, it would be appropriate to deliberate upon the terms, ‘dichotomy’ and its uses in literature. The term dichotomy has many connotations and meanings. It is one of the most common terms used by diasporic writers. In *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* dichotomy is described as “the separation that exists between two groups or things that are completely opposite to and different from each other” (421). Dilemma is “a situation which makes problems, often one in which you have to make a very difficult choice between things of equal importance” (Oxford ALD 425). In *Collins World English Dictionary* it is described as “a situation necessitating a choice between two equal, especially equally undesirable alternatives or a problem that seems incapable of a solution”.

Inner Conflict of Indian American Woman

“Unaccustomed Earth”, contains the narrative of the inner conflict of an Indian-American woman, Ruma, who is married and is about to have her second child, when she is visited by her father, an Indian retiree, in her new home in Seattle. The visit brings about a myriad of feelings, bringing back old resentments and a deep reflection on her relationship with her past. As in her previous books, Jhumpa Lahiri’s characters are immigrants from India and their American-reared children. As far as first generation diasporic people are concerned they feel like fully grown trees that get uprooted; they are born and brought up in India, and moved to an alien land leaving their homeland, because of some economic, political or marital reasons. So there is always a dilemma between their longing for homeland and belonging to the newly adopted land. At the same time they want to belong to both the lands. So there remains a constant conflict between the two. But as in the case of second generation

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diaspora characters, they are no way Indian but their Indian heritage captures their psyche to be a part of Indian traditions. They are born and brought up in America, but they have to follow the Indian norms inside the house and American norms outside the house. So they are torn between the two. This kind of difference in the condition of first and second generation diaspora people creates a dichotomy in all their relationships.

Father and Daughter Relations - *Unaccustomed Earth*

Lahiri adeptly scrutinises the minute details of all types of relationships such as father-daughter, grandfather-grandson, sister-brother, husband- wife. The title of the story “Unaccustomed Earth” very aptly displays the dichotomous relationship of the immigrant father and daughter. In this story the father tries his best to get the unaccustomed earth, accustomed to his daughter, by renewing the old ties and forging new ties with her and her son Akash; the son’s name means ‘infinite’, it is very symbolic of his multicultural and borderless identity.

The story begins with a retrospective reflection of Ruma’s father’s latest activities - his travelling in Europe, after his retirement from a pharmaceutical company. It also reveals Ruma’s discomfort before her father’s succinct comments, as well as her resentment for his being so emotionally distant from her. Lahiri depicts this lack of communication between father and daughter in these words:

The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had ever received from her father. In her thirty-eight years he’d never had any reason to write to her. It was a one-sided correspondence; his trips were brief enough so that there was no time for Ruma to write back, and besides, he was not in a position to receive mail at his end... The cards were addressed to Ruma; her father never included Adam’s name, or mentioned Akash. It was only in his closing that he acknowledged any personal connection with them. “Be happy, love Baba”, he signed them, as if the attainment of happiness were as simple as that. (UE 4)

As a young girl, Ruma had found it extremely difficult to live according to the Indian mores. To her parents’ displeasure, she and her brother Romi, were excessively attracted to American ways of life. When Ruma and Adam, later her husband, started to date, she kept it a secret until the day the engagement was officially announced. Her parents interpreted her

choice as shameful betrayal of her own roots, as a refusal of her origins. Even before her marriage, her relationship with her parents had been difficult and later it resulted in a cold distant tie, turned into a longer break when she moved to Seattle.

According to Indian tradition, it is the daughter who cares for the father in his old age, but Ruma does not feel prepared for that. From the beginning it is clear for the reader the conflict in Ruma's mind. We can see at the same time, she watches the news when he is scheduled to fly, to make sure there have not been any plane crashes; it shows her concern for her father. On the other hand she "feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to" (UE 7).

Unconsciously, Ruma left behind a situation that granted her the independence as an individual, and then went on to devote herself to her household, repeating her mother's social role. There were mornings she wished she could simply get dressed and walk out the door, like Adam. She didn't understand how her mother had done it. "Growing up, her mother's example, moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household, had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now" (UE 11). She herself had tried to keep one foot in the past, teaching Akash a few words in Bengali, but when her son became a bit older, she did not have enough discipline to teach him. In fact, her world was divided into two languages: Bengali, in childhood, and English, in her adult life. Thus Ruma had also transferred her dilemma to her son.

Ruma had built a paradoxical relationship with her father. Before her father comes and stays with her, she is reluctant about the idea of her father living with her in the same house. She was torn between her duty as a Bengali daughter and her duty as an American wife. But when her father comes to Seattle and stays with her, the relationship between father and daughter undergoes a transformation. She notices the helping and caring attitude of her father. Her father notices the changes in Ruma after her having become a mother. Through his eyes, the change in Ruma becomes more intense. The young rebel from the past has been turning into a woman who resembles her mother:

When he was finished he poked his head into Akash's room and found both the boy and Ruma asleep. For several minutes he stood in the doorway. Something about his daughter's appearance had changed; she now resembled her mother so strongly that he couldn't bear to look at her directly. (UE 28)

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After his wife's death, his friends had suggested to him to follow the custom and go to live with his daughter, but he knew that was impossible. Once, he had left his parents in India and parted. Not even his father's death made him go back. He had made his choice and now it was Ruma's time to make hers. After seeing her father's involvement with her son Akash, Ruma's behaviour undergoes a change and she wants her father to continue staying with them. She says, "You can have the whole downstairs. You can still go on your trips whenever you like. We will not stand in your way" (UE 52). Lahiri depicts that while staying in an alien culture the modes of thinking of diasporas have intermingled with the dominant American culture and undergone drastic modifications. While staying in America, the Indians are shown to have an inclination towards Americanisation. The individualistic thinking of Ruma's father and his sense of independence is obvious from his statement, "But this is your home not mine" (UE 52). The immigrant feeling of being marginalised penetrates the familial lives and the father doesn't wish to continue living in his daughter's house.

Lahiri presents the attempts made by her father to make a garden in his daughter's home. He purchases the plants, seeds and manure - little steps that he takes to add his own contribution to beautify the home, even if he was quite sure that his daughter or son-in-law would never give any attention to the grooming of the garden. He wants to teach them the value of tending plants on an unaccustomed earth. Here plants are the symbol for uprooted diasporic people. They can get their roots fixed in an unaccustomed earth just by their whole hearted efforts to get themselves assimilated in the host-land. Garden here is used as a metaphor. It is only through the metaphor of the garden, Lahiri gets the inner out of her characters. It is only through the gardening of her father we find a close heart to heart relationship between her father and mother. It is shown that Ruma's father has cultivated in his garden the things that are the favourites of his wife. By gardening, he not only renews his old ties with his wife, with Bengali foods, with everything that reminds him of his golden past, but also forges new ones. In the words of Jauhari and Agarwal:

Untill *Unaccustomed Earth* Jhumpa Lahiri's concerns were confined for the most part of the Indian immigrant parents to America and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. She wrote about how the parents struggled to keep their children close to them even after they have grown up in Indian Tradition of joint family. In this story she steps forward to scrutinise the fate of the second generation and their children. (qtd. in Sarangi 191)

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It is not surprising that while Ruma's father sees how much she resembled her mother these days, she herself realizes that he has become more Americanised than she had thought possible. The dilemma faced by a daughter, who wants her father to stay with her while at the same time, is also afraid of what her husband would think, whether it will disturb the harmony of their home is well portrayed. The father also wants to stay with them because he likes the place very much but knows that it is their home and not his. Lahiri writes, "He knew that it was not for his sake that his daughter was asking him to live here. It was for hers... he didn't want to be a part of another family... he didn't want to live in the margins of his daughter's life, in the shadow of her marriage" (UE 53).

Thus as representative of the Indian Patriarchy he wants to possess the central place for himself not stay at the margins. It also reflects his struggle for assimilation in the host country and his wish to consider himself as not living on the border lines. In the same way he inspires his daughter to be independent and self dependent; individual liberty is something he thinks necessary for himself as well as for others. At the same time he is very much clinging to his past, to the Bengali language, old food habits, people from Bengal (Meenakshi Bagchi), while at the same time, he wants an individual place for himself.

Thus on the surface their relationship seems to be dichotomous but it is also complementary to each other. Both of them feel the same kind of dilemmatic situation while adjusting themselves in an alien land. In the course of the story the father-daughter relationship undergoes a drastic transformation from stranger to very close to each other, and yet again they are depicted as strangers.

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