

# Generational Differences: Migrant Women in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth, Hell-Heaven and Only Goodness*

**Jayashree. M**  
**Ph.D. Research Scholar**

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## Abstract

This paper will discuss the women of different generations who are entrapped in-between cultures and the conflicted subject positions which they occupy, with reference to the short stories *Unaccustomed Earth, Hell-Heaven, and Only Goodness* in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. The paradigm has been shifting in the literary theory since the inception of diaspora literature as it constructs a new form of identity which negotiates borders and boundaries. The relocation process often necessitates the renegotiation and repositioning of family and gender positions as migrants come across challenging and opposing standards and exigencies. Women in such unstable situations often worsen the circumstances of women as they, by and large, become the community's symbols. *Unaccustomed Earth* symbolizes the new earth and soil in which the descendants of immigrants as well as their parents submerge their roots and culture. The titles convey a dual meaning. First, it is suggestive of the world of the first generation immigrants who are now not accustomed to the world of their children. Secondly, a different kind of world is occupied by the children of immigrants who often look up to the associative life which they share with their parents but can no longer connect emotionally and psychologically with them. Lately, we have detected abrupt shifts in discernment of the women writers on the nations of subjective, national and cultural identities. They are more concerned with the innumerable problems which originate from the interactions and amalgamations of varied cultures which perplex their ethnic identities and their impact on the women.

**Keywords:** Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth, Hell-Heaven, and Only Goodness*, Generation, culture, paradigms, negotiates, migrants, gender, community, emotionally and psychologically, amalgamations.

## Introduction

"Women in diaspora are considered as the other's other". According to Sunil Bhatia there are three ways in which otherness is constructed "generic otherness, marked otherness, and disruptive otherness". Generic otherness refers to a general identifying mark about a person's identity which creates an environment of otherness". The marked otherness focuses on "specific identifying markers, such as accent, language, and mannerisms that mark a person as different". The disruptive otherness generates "deep feelings of alienation and marginality" to migrants

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(2007:113). Lahiri exposes two generation of women; she generally writes about the relationship between mother and daughter.

Stephen Lawler points out the relationship between mother and daughter “are usually seen as having a closer social, psychic or emotional identification” as many daughters are also mothers, many of them mother of daughters” (2000:3). The daughter has identified with her mother while growing up. Again, the girl is bewildered when she is exposed to two opposing ideologies. She travels through the poignant impasse of whether to carry on with the old tradition which she has observed while growing up or to embrace the liberated life infused into her by the modernized American society which is free from traditional morality.

### **Discussion and Interpretation**

The abrupt superimposition of western values disorients the lives of first generation women as it demands an urgent need to restructure their identities to translate themselves into the western way of living to reconcile both cultures which in turn bring about mental visions of loneliness and cultural conflicts. Jasbir Jain avers that there are two ways in which the relationship of women to the dislocation can be seen first: “the women in a subordinate role, who as a wife follows her husband to a foreign land, just as she would to her in laws’ family and the other is the shift from one to the other and the re-positioning of loyalties” which will follow a similar track (2002:134). The other breeds of women are those who were born and brought up in the American culture and for them “home” and “belonging” exist neither in fragmentary nor in partial memories.

The second generation women have different perspectives on tradition and customs. They resist and subvert the subject positioning which their mothers uphold. *Unaccustomed Earth* unfolds the story of how Ruma, a daughter of an immigrants’ mother, identified mother’s life through a voyage to the memories and nostalgia after her death and how it influences the life which she is leading now. The women in the first generation diaspora arrive in the host countries through arranged marriages which their parents have organized for them and come to the West as embellishment. They faithfully and submissively go after their husbands like any pigeonholed Indian women in the host land far from the protective life of Indian ménage and always stick to the conventional values absorbed into them by their families in India. T. Satyanayarana and S. Katyayani state that “the first generation women find it difficult to forget the culture and values system of the old world, and to get assimilated to the new world while the second and the third generation women are found partially successful in this. The reason for their success may be traced to proximity in time and place to modernity and the distance to tradition.” (2006:282)

Yasim Hussain observes that the south Asians “may be connected by a common race ,a national origin” and a shared history but the subsequent generation, who are brought up in “a

country that is culturally, socially and religiously different from the ethnic culture maintained within the home environment,” will have a different perception on “the individual’s conception of self” (2005:25-26). But for the succeeding generations such ethnic consciousness imprisons them in the culture which they no longer desire to associate with.

The second generation like Ruma desires to avoid the path which her mother had gone through. She believes that “moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household has served as a warning, a path to avoid” (11).

They share the same experiences although they are different. They are “living in between” different nations, feeling neither here nor there, unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place” (2010:213-214). Ruma’s father noticed that “like his wife, Ruma was not alone in this new place, overwhelmed, without friends, carrying for a young child” (40). Her life was following the identical prototype of uncertainty and ambiguity like her -- “the roots did not go deep” (35) as she appeared to be obsessed and burdened with a sense of vague and hybrid mix of her root.

The Hell-Heaven is a story of Aparna who lived a life of solitariness and silence. The apathetic attitude of her husband deepened the ordeals of being a woman in the liminal zone. Her marriage was ‘an assumed consequence of the life she had been raised to lead’” (67). Usha pitied her mother. As she got older, she perceived “What a desolate life she led. She had never worked and during the day she watched soap operas to pass the time” (76). Her only job was to clean and cook for the family. The older generations can only reassert their female subjectivities through silent resistance and conciliation whereas the children are quite vocal about their personal preferences. It is to be noted that the differences that exist between these two generations “arise from exposure to the integrating services of the majority society from birth. Experience of education system and the employment sphere influences their attitudes and relationships. The child is confronted with both cultures at the same time and beings to absorb totally different values of family life and society” (Hussain2005:26).

Only Goodness is a story about the consequence of unbearable parental expectations. Zhou and Lee observe that Asian-American children are subjected to “the unduly familial obligation to obey their elders and repay parental sacrifices”. The parents put enormous amount of pressure to excel in everything. But to the children “their parents appear too rigid and “abnormal” that is, unacculturated, old-fashioned, and traditional disciplinarians” (2004:15-16). The constant comparisons to other Bengali children made both Sudha and Rahual quite stressful and taxing. Their parents thought that they have “now successfully raised two children in America” (129), but the reality is that they have been pressing their children with excessive demands which becomes a reason for their detachment from their parents. The theme of movement and migration persists in

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this story. Sudha gives the details of her mother's traumatic and painful journey from one country to another. The dislocation, relocation and again (re)location from India to London and from London to America was a cultural shock for her mother who was handicapped linguistically and geographically. She somehow may perhaps understand her parents 'sense of dislocation and estrangement which is like "aliment that ebbed and flower, like a cancer "' (138). Mandal observes, the zone of marriage and family has altered a lot in its internal structure resulting in varied interracial and intercultural social- sexual relations... (2007:46).

The clash between cultures is quite noticeable when the migrant offspring determine to relinquish their own community in order to marry a white man instead of choosing the man from the same cult. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma's mother was against her daughter getting married to Adam, a non-Indian. She rebuked her daughter by saying "you are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian that is the bottom line" (26). At the end, the women in the first generation finally acquiesce themselves in their children who do not bear any resemblance to them in features, language, manner, customs and clothing. Ruma's mother accepted Adam as her son in law. Aparna, on the other hand, could not stop her daughter from acquiring the cultures in which she was born and brought up. The inter-caste marriage, if not openly accepted, is acknowledged by the parents. The conflicts between the earlier generation and the subsequent generation will persist as it involves a complex discourse on cultural representation, nation, ethnicity and home.

## Conclusion

However, with the passage of time they learn to become independent and a majority of them refashion themselves by dismantling the stereotypical portraiture of women. This can be considered as one positive sign in the endeavour of those women who are constantly on the look-out for some change and transformation.

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