



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2019; 5(9): 100-103
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 29-06-2019
Accepted: 30-07-2019

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The confrontation between father-daughter relationship in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the outstanding diasporic writers, tries to explore the inner nuances of characters in her fictional works. She is not an expatriate Indian like Bharati Mukherjee and other diasporic writers. In *The Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri explores the confrontation between father - daughter relationship i.e. Ruma and her father. This short-stories collection shows the first and second generation Indian diaspora from Bengali community. Jhumpa Lahiri, a second generation Diasporic writer, has represented her experiences in these stories. These stories mainly deals with the theme of alienation, isolation, frustration, marginalization, rootlessness, displacement, fragmentation and discontinuity. However, in her fictional works, she does not merely create diasporic characters but also represents the characters, who have adapted the American ways of life. In her works, she does not write only about a specific cultural experience but also about acculturation in an alien country. As an artist, Jhumpa Lahiri describes the lives of the first and second generations of Indian immigrants, who have settled in America. In all of her works, the protagonists belongs to second-generation immigrants. Her characters show amalgamation between two cultures. In this research paper, the researcher is going to analyze the transformed behaviour of Ruma's father and as grandfather of Ruma's children.

Keywords: Alienation, isolation, rootlessness, frustration, displacement, marginalization and fragmentation, confrontation

Introduction

The present age is notable for multifarious development on the all fronts whether it is economic, social, cultural, political, scientific, industrial, technological, and so on. Due to this rapid growth, the boundaries between nations are distorted and the world has been shrunk in to mini place. The transportation from one place to another has become a very simple affair. The distance, which earlier seemed immeasurable, have been bridged and the world has become a global village. In this scenario, migration of people to other countries has become quite common and frequent. People might be drifted to alien lands for reasons as diversified as pursuit of a better and promising career, for seeking jobs, for settlement after marriage or to satisfy their curious urge for exploration of a new culture. In this connection, James Truslow Adams, in his work *The Epic of America* rightly remarks, "...dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (404). Move from homeland to an alien land demands adjustment. However, immigration generally demonstrates hardship and unpalatable experiences of the settlers. The immigrant may face racism, disrespect and undesirable behavioral trends from the natives. They may develop a sense of hopelessness, indignation, and perplexity. This has given rise to transnational writing. In all her works, Jhumpa Lahiri have emphasized on diasporic experiences. In this connection, Nigmanand Das rightly remarks, "Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the mindscape of characters and human predicament in its wider perspective in her works (18). She as a perfect artist portrays the family pictures of Indian immigrants and their lives in America. She has been drawing upon the shades of love that colour the characters as they crawl from childhood to old age, from unreciprocated to accommodated love, from a child's love to parent to parents' love to a child. It is widely perceived that American enjoy high social mobility which plays a vital role in attracting immigrants.

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In this collection, there is story of Ruma, who is a second generation Indian- immigrants. Her inner conflict has been portrayed on the visit of her father, who is a widower. Her father's arrival and stay with Ruma for a week developed a bond between Ruma, her son and her father. The story narrates the inner conflict of an Indian American woman. Ruma represents the second generation of Indian immigrants. Her parents had arrived into America as immigrants. Her father has worked for a Pharmaceutical company and now retired. She offered her whole life in taking care of her children and her husband like a typical Indian woman opposed to American way of life and sticking to the Indian tradition. Ruma is married to an American. She is about to have her second child. When she visits new home in Seattle at the retiree party of her father, she remains in perpetual dilemma and confronting with herself. In this condition, she is able to accustom to her father's needs. Her visit to her father's house put her into uncountable feelings, bringing back old resentments and a deep reflection on her relationship with her past.

Jhumpa Lahiri, through the story of Ruma and her father, takes a chance to describe about the 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 move to a foreign land leaving their homeland. It is due to some economic, political or martial reasons. Therefore, 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. Therefore, there remains a constant conflict between the two. However, the second-generation diaspora characters face much pain than the first generation. They believe America is their homeland as it is the land on which they have taken birth. They feel, they are not Indian but their Indian heritage captures their psyche to be a part of Indian traditions. They have been forced to follow the Indian norms inside the house. They follow American norms outside the house. That is why they are torn between two cultures Indian and American. This kind of difference in the condition of first and second-generation diaspora creates a dichotomy in all their relationships. According to Indian tradition, a son cares for the father in his old age. However, it proves opposite according to the tradition. She knows that her visit will take place between two of her father's trips and the next stop of his trip will be the city of Prauge. Ruma's assumptions about her father's loneliness, possible dependency on her, and the Seattle vacation as a possible signal for relocating to her household give insight into her inner conflict as an Indian American woman. When the story begins, the reader is made aware of the ambiguity of Ruma's feelings. On the other hand, she watches the news when he is scheduled to fly, to make sure there have not been any plane crash. At the same time, she still keeps inside a series of motives to support her own attitudes. After the death of her mother, she anticipated the duty of communicating with him every evening. As the time passed away, the phone calls had become a unique weekly conversation, usually on Sunday afternoons. Her mother simply used to tell her the date and timing of her arrival, if she wanted to visit her. This fact proves that she had a unique type of relationships with her mother and father.

Ruma had been engaged in a successful career of a law firm. She mourned for two weeks due to her mother's death in an unsuccessful surgery. She decided to quit her job and stay home for taking care of her child. Unconsciously, Ruma left behind a condition that gave her independence as an individual to devote herself to household. She had been 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. She says, "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. It was Ruma's life now (11). Seeing her father, she became aware of her having left behind the old connections, the contacts she had made with her father all these years. It also revealed Ruma's discomfort before her father's succinct communication, as well as her resentment for his being so emotionally distant from her. She started thinking about certain past, which she had never thought before. Memories of her life with her parents started to appear in her mind. Her mother was so perfect that she had been completely devoted to her household, to the family, her care and affection for her brother and herself. Her loneliness and the childbirth proximity made her remember how much her mother's presence had been important when Akash was born, giving her a feeling of safeness and comfort. Ruma had built a paradoxical relationship with her mother along the years. She recognized in her mother attributes and she herself would never have with her parents. She rejected her submission to tradition. All these fact proves the confrontation between Ruma and her parents. Due to this confrontation, Ruma always remained in dilemma that she had faced all her life. It was difficult for her to understand her real identity and from which country she belonged.

Unaccustomed Earth very appropriately displayed the dichotomous relationship of the immigrant father and daughter. In this story, her father tried his best to get the unaccustomed earth, accustomed to his daughter by renewing the old ties and imitative new ties with her daughter Ruma and her son Akash. The story begins with a retrospective of Ruma's father latest activities, his travelling in Europe, after his retirement from a Pharmaceutical company. It also revealed Ruma's discomfort before her father's brief communication. She expressed her resentment for her father being emotionally distant from her. After retirement and after being a widower, his father had started touring to various places. He had also developed a habit to write post cards to Ruma, while he was going on tour. The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had ever received from her father. In her thirty-eight years, her father never had any reason to write to her. It was a one-sided correspondence, his trip 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 on his end. The card were addressed to Ruma and her father never included Adam's name or name of Akash. He did not acknowledge any personal connection with them. In the end, he rightly remarks, "Be happy, love Baba, he signed them, as if the attainment of happiness were as simple as that" (4).

Ruma and her brother Romi were excessively attracted to American way of life. They did not like the Indian way of living. Although they had never opposed to it. As a result,

when she started dating Adam, an American she kept on hiding from her parents till the date they got officially engaged. Her parents considered her choice as a betrayal from the roots. They told she had opted to refuse her origins. Even before her marriage, it had been difficult to maintain balance between the traditional ways her parents had been imposing on her and liberal way. This turned into a longer break when she moved to Seattle along with Adam. Ruma, as a daughter, had not developed any special relationship with her father when she was young. Even after her marriage, it was her mother, who used to call her. The closeness of her father's visit brings her back to conflict. She feared that her father would revive his past with the end of his trips which had once buried by her. Ruma had a dilemma in her mind from a long time. She Says, "Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to" (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.

Ruma herself had tried to keep one foot in the past. She had been 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 divided into two languages: Bengali, in childhood, and English, in her adult life. Thus, Ruma had also transferred her dilemma to her son. Before Ruma's father arrival and stay with her, she was reluctant about the idea of her father living with them 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 came to Seattle and stayed with her, the relationship between father and daughter underwent a transformation. She noticed the helping and caring attitude of her father. The father was no more dependent. He prepared breakfast for himself and offered his help to Ruma. He was not choosy for dishes at lunches and dinners. Ruma's husband was an American this was the main reason that she had forgotten to prepare Indian food, speak in Bengali and follow certain traditions. All these had caused dilemma before her father's arrival. Her father noticed the changes in Ruma after her becoming a mother. With the passage of times, the changes in Ruma became more intense. The young rebel from the past had been turning into a woman who resembled her mother. Another turning point came in Ruma's life when her father told her about his career. It lead her to think about her father in a new mode.

Ruma's father started his old habit of gardening at her new home at Seattle. He purchased the plants, seeds and fertilizer. His intense care had been in such little steps that he took to add his own contribution to beautify the home. While doing so, he was quite sure that his daughter or son-in-law would never give any attention to the grooming of the garden. He wanted to teach them the value of tending the plants on an unaccustomed earth.

Here plants symbolizes the uprooted diasporic people. The diasporic people can get their roots fixed in an unaccustomed earth only if they get themselves assimilated in the host- land with wholehearted efforts. After seeing her father's involvement with her son Akash, Ruma's behavior underwent a change and she wanted 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" (52). Lahiri depicts that while living in an unknown culture the modes of thinking of diasporic were mingled with the dominant American culture and underwent drastic modifications. Indians prefer to be Americanized while staying in America. The individualistic thinking of Ruma's father and his sense of independence can be seen in the following lines: "but this is your home not mine" (52). Her father did not wish to continue living in his daughter's house. His whole heartedness in planting shows his efforts to add his own contribution to beautify the home. Through a detailed picture of gardening, involvement of Akash in the whole process, his attachment to his Dadu and change in Ruma's thinking for her father, through all this Lahiri gets the inner out of her characters.

It was only through the gardening of her father at their old house that Ruma's father had cultivated favourite plants of his wife. It showed that her father thus close to her mother. 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 *Unaccustomed Earth*, the dilemma faced by a daughter (Ruma), who wanted her father to stay with her while at the same time, was also afraid of what her husband would think, whether it will disturb the harmony of their home is well portrayed. The father also wanted to stay with them because he liked the place very much but at the same time he thought that it was their home (Ruma and Adam) not his. She remarks, "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" (5).

It can be summed up that through *Unaccustomed Earth* Jhumpa Lahiri shows the confrontation between father and daughter relationship. This short stories collection shows how both Ruma and her father face some kind of dilemma while adjusting on the same land. The father- daughter relationship undergoes a very drastic change in this short-stories collection. In the beginning, they feel like strangers. Her father's helping attitude plays a significant role in changing the daughter's perception that she is not burdened with an added responsibilities of taking care of a man of seventy but she feels relieved in many ways that her responsibilities are shared. It is found that when Americans are asked to rate the roles different adults play in the lives of children, fathers came at third position after mothers and grandparents. In this collection, Lahiri does not propose Americanization as a desired identity, which could satisfy her character. Ruma's father resumes his career. In this way, he suggests adapting the American culture. He believes in work, self-reliance and such American values. But, he does not push Ruma to complete acculturation. The story suggests that it is not possible to discard the original roots and accept their living in the new land. This message is conveyed best by the example of Ruma's father's influence on his grandson, Akash. Since Akash is the third generation, he is an American child even more than Ruma was. The older he grows, the more unwilling he is to learn and practice origins of Indian culture that Ruma wants to pass on to him. Lahiri encourages a celebration of hybridity but with a view to differences between generations of immigrants. The process of acculturation and growing roots into the host country

becomes homeland for next generations. It is undeniable and important that one must be aware of one's origin. The message is reinforced by the image of planting a garden, organizing a fragment of landscape near Ruma's new house. *Unaccustomed Earth*, thus, discusses a new model of American identity. It is Indian American identity. It is performed on the edges of cultures or in border situations. The hybridity of the characters from the story directs attention to the idea of multiculturalism. It is celebration of cultural diversity and preservation of one's ethnic roots.

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