



Redefining Identity through Diasporic Language in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Unaccustomed Earth'

Dr. Priti Lavkesh Patel

Adhyapak Sahayak,
Department of English,
Shri B. P. B. Arts and M. H. G. Commerce College, Unjha

According to M.M. Bakhtin, 'Verbal discourse is a social phenomenon'. The connection between language and society is not a new revelation; even common sense can reveal the inherently interconnected relationship the two have. However, since the significance language plays in the construction and formation of society is so natural, it can often be overlooked. The continually rising studies of diasporas, of how societies are constantly interconnecting and changing, can benefit from a more stylized approach to the role language plays in how newly formed diasporas fare. An author, who consistently emphasizes the considerable role language plays in the formation of Diasporas, is Jhumpa Lahiri. Her narratives, which always intertwine elements of 'Indian' and 'American' identity, abound in the type of verbal discourse that emanates with social implications. The present paper is an attempt to show how Lahiri beautifully used language to redefine diasporic identity in her stories.

Key Words: discourse, inherently, diaspora, redefine

The connection between language and society is not a new revelation; even common sense can unveil the inherently interconnected relationship the two have. It is well said that literature is the mirror of society and this literature is made with the effective use of language. So, there is a direct connection between language and society. However, since the significance language plays in the construction and formation of society is so natural, it can often be overlooked. The continually rising studies of diasporas, of how societies are constantly interconnecting and changing, can benefit from a more stylized approach to the role language plays in how newly formed diasporas fare. The diaspora writers in particular interweave the Indian and the global that marks the emergence of cultural mix at a mass level in the times impacted by globalization and unprecedented growth in the field of technology and communication. Their writings show how the developments in one part of the world have immediate and wider impact in different parts of the world. Their fictional works become more significant for giving expression to cross-cultural encounter from a

different perspective. The writings of Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Kavita Dasvani, M.G. Vassanji, V.S.Naipaul and Hari Kunjru, to name a few, provide an inside view of the problems faced by the displaced people in their adopted homes in a way that questions the traditional understanding of the concepts like home, nation, native, identity and alien. These writers contest essentialist nature of the difference between cultures premised on binary division informing the east and the west. Whereas the earlier writers depicting cross-cultural encounter often created stereotypical forms of life and characters to mark the essential difference between the cultures, Diaspora writers often contest fixed notions of identity and stable norms that govern life at home and abroad. Diaspora fiction highlights an altogether different attitude of the people from the erstwhile colonies in the postcolonial times. Out of number of diasporic writers, one who consistently emphasizes the considerable role language plays in the formation of Diasporas is Jhumpa Lahiri. Her narratives, which always intertwine elements of 'Indian' and 'American' identity, abound in the type of verbal discourse that emanates with social implications.

To understand the present concept of the paper completely, it is required to define the term 'Diaspora'. The term 'diaspora' is itself an example of over-coding, or excess. The term 'diaspora' is of Greek origin. The term has been derived from Greek words 'dia' (through) and 'speiro' which literally means 'scattering' or 'dispersion'. The term 'diaspora' was first used in the context of the experiences and predicament of the Jews who were rendered homeless after the Babylonian Conquests, mainly in the 8th to the 6th centuries B.C. The word 'diaspora' cites a reference to Jewish dispersion from Deuteronomy, 'thou shall be removed into all kingdom of the earth.' It is stated as a curse and is discursively identical with those parts of the Mosaic Law that do have a maledictory edge to them. But the identification of the term with the Jewish experience began to acquire "something like its looser contemporary usage during the late nineteenth century -the period which saw the birth of modern Zionism and of the forms of Black Nationalist thought which share many of the aspirations and some of its rhetoric,"¹ and led to its 'enclosure' within a close semantic set that in turn excluded other diasporas. In recent years, the term is commonly used in a generic sense for communities of migrants living or settled permanently in other countries, aware of its origins and identity and maintaining varying degrees of linkages with the mother country. However, it is now applied as a 'metaphoric designation' for refugees, expatriates, immigrants, exiles and other ethnic minorities. It refers to the work of exile and expatriates and all those who have experienced unsettlement and dislocation at the political, existential or metaphorical levels. According to William Saffron,

"Today 'diaspora' and more specifically 'diasporic community' seen increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people-expatriates expellers, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities tout court."²

Thus, 'diaspora' refers not only to physical displacements but it also refers to a sensibility in which nostalgia, alienation and sometimes cynical celebration are deeply engrossed. It is this sensibility through which a diasporic writer comes to terms with a new space for imagination. In this context, Satendra Nandan writes: "Diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and differences."³

The term diaspora has, therefore, become a handy, if ambiguous, catch phrase in several academic fields as well as in popular media. Critic Ruediger Heinze explains that such limiting of diasporas as a unifying 'explanatory framework' actually neglect "the manifold, relational, and potentially conflicting dimensions of difference in cultural groups, as well as intercultural and transcultural differences and processes of differentiation."⁴ Therefore, it is my intention to use diasporic studies as a tool of cultural analysis in a compilation of short fiction by an Indian-American author, with a constant awareness and allocation for the inherent changes constantly taking place in the real-life diasporic movement of people and their sense of identity. This analysis of Lahiri's short fiction collection *Unaccustomed Earth* will be accomplished by analyzing the presentation of diaspora in a set of specific multicultural narratives, and discussing how the depicted diasporas have individual and societal effects. Regardless of the ambiguity of the term, diaspora may continue to be a useful tool to analyze the ever-changing concept of culture, as long as it is allowed to change and grow with culture as it changes.

Born in London to Bengali parents, raised in Rhode Island, and author of several Indian-American based publications, Jhumpa Lahiri is an obvious candidate for the study of diaspora. Judith Caesar commends Lahiri's ability "to construct images, metaphors, themes, and ideas [that] run both with and counter to the American grain."⁵ She circumvents creating characters that fill cliché archetypes such as the dominating, rich white man and the traditional Indian who won't accept the ways of his new country by creating characters who transcend typical cultural roles. Many of her characters struggle with identity within a diasporic community, but the struggles are all unique to their individual experiences. Her narratives extend beyond the American versus Indian struggle of identity, as evidenced by her inclusion of such short stories as 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar' and 'A Real Durwan' in her collection *The Interpreter of Maladies*, which do not include any overt evidence of American society. Stories such as these evidence the fact that Lahiri delves into the experiences of the oppressed and excluded, and not just in cultural, but societal terms. Since Lahiri's debut collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* has been analyzed via its multicultural themes; I prefer to look at her lesser-known collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, in hopes to reveal that a study of its diasporic content connects thematically and developmentally with her earlier work.

Unaccustomed Earth is a short story collection by Jhumpa Lahiri. It is the 2008 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award winning volume of eight short stories, published in 2008. The stories, divided into two parts; reflect the experience of 'Diaspora'. The first part of the book contains five distinct short-stories, beginning with the near-novella length title story that is certainly the collection's finest. The second part of the book contains three intertwined stories involving two characters,

one female (Hema) and one male (Kaushik), at different stages of their lives. Just like of her other books, *Unaccustomed Earth* is also a reflection of life with two separate cultures, and how people cope with one and the other. It also explores the cultural issues and differences between the American born second generation Indians and their parents, who immigrated to the U.S. in the 70's-80's.

'Unaccustomed Earth' is the title story of the book. It is about three generations, and the relationship between the three, the father, his daughter, Ruma, and her son, Akash. The story explores some of the difficult gender roles in America, such as Ruma's decision to leave her successful legal career to raise children, and her husband's hard work to support the family. It also explores the family issues associated with Ruma's Indian heritage, including her sense of obligation to care for her father and have him live with her and her immediate family. Her father is depicted as someone who was somewhat unhappy with his once traditional lifestyle. He is enjoying his newly found independence in his travels and a relationship with a female friend he recently met. What makes the story most compelling is the limited communication between the father and daughter, both afraid in some way to acknowledge that they have moved away from their culture of origin and have embraced aspects of the new culture. Akash, the grandson, who is the third generation of immigrants, and completely immersed in the new culture, develops a strong fascination with his grandfather's habits that are foreign to him, including a foreign language. This interesting twist to the story shows the generational conflicts of a child and a grandparent.

Lahiri's other four stories in the first section have similar themes. In 'Hell-Heaven', a young woman recalls her childhood when a fellow Bengali became a family friend and part of her (mother's) life. This is a story that explores simple human emotions such as loneliness, love, jealousy and also describes how people change drastically over time. The title is drawn from this paragraph from the story: "He used to be so different. I don't understand how a person can change so suddenly. It's just hell-heaven, the difference"⁶, she would say, always using the English words for her self-concocted, backward metaphor.

Pranab Chakraborty, a graduate student at MIT, Boston is contemplating returning to Calcutta due to homesickness. On the streets of Boston he sees Usha, a little girl and her traditional Bengali mother Aparna. He follows them and ends up befriending them. Aparna, herself homesick and lonely, can empathize with Pranab and she is happy to feed him. Pranab Kaku (uncle) now becomes a regular visitor at Usha's house. He calls Aparna as Boudi (Boudi means elder brother's wife). Over time Aparna looks forward eagerly to Pranab's visits and develops a unique kind of love towards him. Adding to the situation is her husband's (Shyamal da) aloof and detached attitude towards her. Aparna's love for Pranab turns into jealousy when Pranab brings home an American woman, Deborah, whom he eventually marries. Aparna keeps blaming and criticizing Deborah and keeps reiterating that it is just a matter of time before Deborah leaves Pranab. After twenty-three years Deborah and Pranab finally divorced. The reasons behind the divorce are revealed. The story also recounts the unique mother-daughter relationship that develops between Aparna and

Usha, after much struggles and squabbles where the mother placates her daughter by relating her own experiences about a foolish decision that she would have made.

The story, 'A Choice of Accommodation' is about a middle-aged, mixed marriage couple, Amit and Megan rediscover themselves and a bit of their previously unstated history during a friend's wedding held at Amit's old boarding school. In the story, the central character is Amit. Amit had been the 'only Indian student' at the school, "...he was crippled with homesickness, missing his parents to the point where tears often filled his eyes, in those first months, without warning."⁷ His own marriage with Megan is stale. The wedding is that of a girl he once had a crush on. This is a beautiful story about the unspoken expectations of a relationship, of marriage, and by placing Amit in a setting that so rooted in "a piece of his past that had nothing to do with the life he and Megan shared,"⁸ Lahiri explores the maze and intricacies of marriage, themes of companionship and aloneness, habits, and unspoken expectations.

In 'Only Goodness', we meet Sudha, a model Bengali daughter. Perhaps the strongest piece in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection Only Goodness is the story of an American Bengali family and their alcoholic son Rahul. By the time he is dismissed from college several years later, he is an alcoholic who has devastated his parents and destroyed their high expectations for him. He is also the pampered baby, the only boy, the greatest pain and puzzlement of his immigrant parents' lives:

"'Depression' was a foreign word to them, an American thing. In their opinion their children were immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India, as if the inoculations the pediatrician had given Sudha and Rahul when they were babies guaranteed them an existence free of suffering."⁹

'Only Goodness' is a sensitive, insightful portrait of a family coping with addiction. The same fear, anger, disappointment, and bewilderment can be found in any family facing this illness, but here they are illuminated through the cultural norms and familial expectations of an immigrant couple raising their children in the U.S. The relationship between Sudha and Rahul is at the heart of the story that traces her early indulgence of him and the tenuous hope she maintains throughout years of disappointment, finally broken by his drunken disregard of their baby while under his care. This story would be useful in any class examining addictions and family relationships.

'Nobody's Business' is the story of one such girl, the unmarried Sang, a beautiful college dropout, now 30 years old, fielding telephone calls from Indian suitors who have acquired her number from the vast Cambridge Bengali network. Narrated through the eyes of her American housemate, the besotted Paul, the glamorous Sang is quickly rendered pathetic by her love for a selfish man. As in all her stories, Lahiri refuses to tie Nobody's Business up in a happy ending. Her eye is fixed on the multiplicity of reality: family life and love have moments of joy and contentment. They are also painful, difficult, and often unresolved.

‘Hema and Kaushik’, a trio of linked stories – ‘Once in a lifetime’, ‘Year’s End’, and ‘Going Ashore’, are linked, Hema narrating the first, speaking to Kaushik, the second by Kaushik, responding to Hema, Going Ashore bringing them together. In the Stories, a luminous, intensely compelling elegy of life, death, love, and fate – we follow the lives of a girl (Hema) and boy (Kaushik) who, one winter, share a house in Massachusetts. They travel from innocence to experience on separate, sometimes painful paths, until destiny brings them together again years later in Rome. ‘Hema and Kaushik’ could evoke any American’s 70s childhood, any American’s bittersweet acceptance of the compromises of adulthood. The generational conflicts Lahiri depicts cut across national lines; the waves of admiration, competition and criticism that flow between the two families could occur between Smiths and Taylors in any suburban town; and the fight for connection and control between Hema and Kaushik - as children and as adults - replays the tussle that has gone on ever since men and women lived in caves.

Lahiri changes her writing style for the first story, much of which is written in a first person address. The story revolves around two people who, despite being childhood acquaintances and their families being old friends, lead drastically different lives. Two decades after Kaushik’s family stays with Hema’s as houseguests, they meet again by chance, just days before they are to enter into completely different phases of their lives, and they discover a strong connection with one another. The entire story of Hema and Kaushik is divided into following three parts:

‘Once in a Lifetime’ deals mostly with their childhood and is written in a first person address from Hema to Kaushik. It tells the story of two families who were close to each other because of shared culture and the common experience of adapting to a new culture, but who are beginning to drift apart due to reasons which become evident as the story progresses.

‘Year’s End’ is from Kaushik’s point of view and tells about his life after his mother’s death as he deals with unwanted change and navigates complicated relationships with his recently remarried father, stepmother, and two young stepsisters - a situation that will ultimately influence Kaushik to lead the life of a wanderer.

The last part ‘Going Ashore’ is related by an omniscient narrator as Hema and Kaushik meet by chance in Italy after two long decades. Hema, now a college professor, is tormented about her previous affair with a married man and plans to settle down by marrying someone she barely knows. Kaushik, a world traveling, successful photojournalist, is preparing to accept a desk job in Hong Kong. In spite of all that, they find their deep connection irresistible and must reckon it with the lives they have chosen to lead.

Thus, in *Unaccustomed Earth*, we can find that in each story a character or family is caught between cultures, and often between generations. The result is an active and ongoing questioning as to who each person is. What is more, a change in one person, or even in one person’s understanding of another, changes the other characters here. This can be seen in *Unaccustomed Earth*. All the stories trace the

lives of Bengalis who have moved to the United States. They experience a disconnection in their new lives. The children, often born in the United States, are more connected to the States. Parents consider India as 'home', while 'home' for the children is where they now live, a home with a new set of mores, language, dress, and relationships. They serve as 'cultural translators' for their parents in this new land. Lahiri's stories show the diasporic struggle to keep hold of culture as characters create new lives in foreign cultures. Relationships, language, rituals, and religion all help these characters to maintain their culture in new surroundings even as they build a 'hybrid realization' as Asian Americans. Thus, here we can find a definite identity conflict in the sense of diasporic sensibilities.

Indeed, Jhumpa Lahiri has paid a special attention to the condition of Indian diaspora in America. She is an excellent writer deals with the major theme of problems of immigrants which she felt in her own life. Reviewing her excellent works, we can say that all her works provide diasporic feelings artistically. As her short fiction proves, Jhumpa Lahiri is an author entering into the current issues of diaspora with a contemporary perspective of immigrants and their status in a new land. For Lahiri, the role of diaspora in the construction of identity and expression of self revolve around dichotomous issues of the private/public, Indianness/Americanness, rigidity/spontaneity, and the said/unsaid. However, the ability to construct self revolves around the ability to transcend these oppositions as either-or scenarios and accept them as elements of life that must be navigated, not chosen between.

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