



## The new ways of Looking at Diaspora: Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth"

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**Abstract:** *In today's global world, human beings acquire the status of being widely displaced ones, the travellers on the move. With the advancement in technology and science it is easy for us to transcend distance and find home elsewhere and everywhere. Home is now made available to us everywhere in this world. Many second and third generation diaspora writers have let go off this conventional stereotyping of diaspora and have come up with new ways of looking at it. With the advent of time, the world seems to be shrinking, and the distances are diminishing. This paper explains the new ways of Looking at Diaspora: Jhumpa Lahiri's' "Unaccustomed Earth.*

**Key words:** *Human beings, advancement, immigrant, migration*

### Introduction

The concept of diaspora may have gained recognition only for the last two decades but people have been practicing it since time immemorial. Migration, whether voluntary or involuntary, has always been a common human occurrence. Basically it is the predicament of the immigrant experience suffering from the sense of alienation, identity crisis, eternally existing in the margin, on the other hand migration is considered as the blending of blood and of languages and religions and customs of diverse people, which facilitates borrowing and stimulates creativity. The diaspora discourse that has come up in the latter half of the twentieth century has largely been in the classical notion of exile, of dispersion and about endless mourning. It talks about displacement, a sense of loss, alienation wherein a diasporic subject engages in ritualistic act of longing for his homeland, sticking onto his native identity, culture, language and painfully assimilating himself into the new culture while pining for the old.

### Narration

In today's global world, human beings acquire the status of being widely displaced ones, the travellers on the move. With the advancement in technology and science it is easy for us to transcend distance and find home elsewhere and everywhere. Home is now made available to us everywhere in this world. Many second and third generation diaspora writers have let go off this conventional stereotyping of diaspora and have come up with new ways of looking at it. With the advent of time, the world seems to be shrinking, and the distances are diminishing. Barry Lopez commenting upon a literature of place writes- "I want to talk about geography as a shaping force, not as a subject... A specific and particular setting for human experience and endeavour is, indeed central to the work of many nature writers. I would say a sense of place is also critical to the development of a sense of morality and of human identity(Lopez)

Sudesh Mishra in his essay "From Sugar to Masala: Writing by the Indian Diaspora" distinguishes between the first generation(sugar) and the



second generation (Masala) diaspora movements. He claims that while the old diaspora writers tend to concentrate on the inner experiences, the new diaspora writers focus "on the threshold zone of intercutting subjectivities that define the experience of migrancy." My paper reflects upon the innumerable diaspora journeys whereby the emphasis would be to read diaspora in the light of globalization, transnationalism and notions of hybridity, and arrive at a point where diaspora would become synonymous with a state of revival and replenishment abounding in newer possibilities of change and empowerment.

Jhumpa Lahiri is the second generation immigrant (born in London living in USA) represents the global consciousness. She is one such writer, who through her writing has celebrated the idea of multiculturalism and hybridity. She belongs to the second generation diaspora, and accepts herself as much "American" as she is "Indian". She is at ease with her 'hyphenated' identity. She claims for herself a hyphenated and hybrid identity and through her works engages in negotiating passages between culture, nationality and history, thereby defining a whole new identity for herself and her characters. The focus in this paper is how the different types of hybridity (racial, cultural, and linguistic) is reflected and emphasized in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story titled 'unaccustomed Earth'.

In the globalised world that we live today, cross cultural influences have led to what we term as 'Hybridity'. As a result of colonialism and its aftermath, intermingling of cultures (east/west, colonizer/colonized, suppressed/dominant) and their constant interaction had led to many forms of

hybridity. Hybridity refers in its most fundamental sense to 'a mixture'. Hybridity is cross between two separate races or culture. Hybridity has become another essential feature of diasporic identity. Hybridity is very much prevalent in culture, which incorporates within it, art, music, fusion cuisines and so on. Cultural hybridity is extremely widespread today as one sees a proliferation of fusion cuisine, and fusion of musical forms, fusion dressing so on. Most of the second generation characters in Lahiri's are cultural hybrids.

In *Unaccustomed Earth* Lahiri focuses on the experience of second generation immigrants and their children. She makes an observation about human relationships wherein she explores the tangled relationship between characters and how they struggle and survive in the context of settling into unfamiliar space. The stories are about different facets of human life and relationship in different situations. The parent-child relationship becomes the milieu of stories such as *Unaccustomed Earth*, *Hell Heaven* and, *A Choice of Accommodation* and *Years End*.

Ruma the protagonist of *Unaccustomed Earth* has moved to Seattle from Brooklyn, a transplantation which has brought her both pain and pleasure. Ruma is married to Adam, an American with English background, who is a typical workaholic. Ruma's father a first generation immigrant had moved to New Jersey to pursue his PhD in biochemistry and spent entire life in America. After his wife's death the father has taken to travelling. Essentially a cultural hybrid the father has now acquired the status of being a nowhere man, acclimatizing himself to any given situation, he is at peace with his life. Ruma's son Akash



belongs to the third generation. A racial Hybrid, Akash is a merger of two genetic streams, American and Indian.

In almost all the stories that deal with the theme of marriage and love, Lahiri deliberately makes a union of one American and the other non-American. Ruma in 'Unaccustomed Earth' Sudha in 'Only Goodness' get married to men with American and English background respectively. In 'A Choice of Accommodation' a Bengali (Amit Sarkar) is married to a much more older surgeon, Megan who is an American. Linguistic hybridity is seen in the second generation immigrants, no longer do they have the ability to speak and express in their native tongue, even their mother tongue get mangled.

Jhumpa Lahiri's celebrating hybridity and asserting multicultural identity and the new way of looking at diaspora employs an analytical approach to understand the formation of hybridized, multicultural, and the transnational identities adopted by Lahiri's second generation women immigrants, emphasizing on the notion of positive nostalgia and issues of hybridity and transnationalism perceived as a positive aspect in diaspora when viewed from the point of globalization.

In *Unaccustomed Earth* Lahiri, focuses on the experience of second generation immigrants and their children. Thematically interrelated, the stories trace the lives of Bengalis who have, now for a long time lived in the United States. The thrust is the assimilation of younger generations into western culture which provide global perspectives; Lahiri weaves eight interconnected stories that take place across the globe—Cambridge, Seattle, Italy, London, Calcutta and

Thailand. Intermingling immigrant experience with individual lives, Lahiri renders the most complicated issues of sensitivity and intellect. Lily Tuck in her articles "Exiles on Main Street" is more of the opinion that "The eight stories in this collection revolves less around the dislocation Lahiri's earlier Bengali characters encountered in America and more around the assimilation experienced by their children who, while conscious of and self-conscious about their parents old-world habits, vigorously reject them in favour of American lifestyles and partners.

Lahiri's characters not only pursue actual journeys, but also journeys of the mind, trying in all possible ways to accommodate and assimilate. In Lahiri's stories, characters gain knowledge about the worthlessness of restricting themselves with the restraints of culture and tradition. They are wanderers navigating imperceptible borders, when the story configuration of family culture and tradition crumble under the weight of immigration. Her characters, Ruma, Usha, Sudha and Hema find other places to be home and are capable of establishing kinship with strangers. Moving from one place to another, they evolve and mature gaining experience and developing global consciousness.

Lahiri's women Ruma, Sudha, Usha and Hema are all in the process of accelerating their process of Americanization. The methods taken up by them include speaking fluent and unaccented English, befriending and marrying whites, identifying oneself as American, embracing consumerism and capitalism, not questioning laws, adhering to key institutional expectations. This exemplifies that those



who have left their homeland, now assume the status of citizen of the world, for whom whole world is a home. The woman characters emerge out to be cosmopolitan and hybrid accepting their dual identities. It sees Lahiri's own position as a writer and her diasporic position which she has come to terms with.

Lahiri portrays diaspora in a positive light especially the notion of hybridity and multiculturalism. At the core of the concept of diaspora lies the image of a journey, of movement of incessant travels. Specific to the stories here, diasporic journeys are all about striking roots in unfamiliar soil, of settling down elsewhere, of creating home on the move. Stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* reveal the human yearning for movement and change, as well as the need for an acknowledgement of the past. Edward Said says, "Homes are always provisional, borders crossed and identities are formed, on the move. Quite contrary to her earlier works, Lahiri's characters in this collection undertake journeys across the world, mostly moving through the vast expanse of Europe. The women here are all 'transnational' beings—which implies movement of diasporic subjects across one or more nations)

### **Conclusion**

The above characters strike roots in the unaccustomed earth in order to flourish and gain experience of the world. They are survivors. They make home wherever they are. They are universal. Lahiri's "unaccustomed Earth" thus reveals the human desire for movement and change, as well as the need for an acknowledgement of the past.

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