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FEMALE DIASPORIC SENSITIVITIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH*

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ABSTRACT

Diasporic literature has gained its own acclaim in literary world. Diasporic literature focuses on alienation, displacement, identity, culture shock and so on. Jhumpa Lahiri's writings revolve around diasporic phenomena. Though the diasporic sensitivities are common for men and women, its impact on women is more. Women struggle to cope with host culture, struggle with family members, and struggle with self. This paper discusses the female sensitivities of diasporic women characters of *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Key words: Jhumpa Lahiri, Diasporic literature, Indian Writing.

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Literature, the creative product of human mind is a document of man's passions and emotions, love and hatred, joy and sorrow, fear and faith which are the essential elements of human nature. It faithfully mirrors all dimensions of life, thus deepens our experience and helps new outlook of life. Indian Literature in English has grown enormously claiming global acclaim and accolade. It continues its journey with ever growing vitality and gravity taking stronger roots in the postcolonial era. The contemporary writers have offered fresh insights into the complex issues of modern life.

Diasporic Literature comfortably deserves to have its autonomous existence given to its potential of both quality and quantity. Diasporic women writers command special mention when it comes to their treatment of sufferings and struggles of women in overcoming the foreign soil related issues. They depict the image of the immigrant women in the climate of alien cultural compulsion.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a renowned name among the contemporary writers of Indian diaspora. She has been on the good pen of the literary commentators for her faithful document of the 'maladies' which have pained the diasporic community in their life of thorns in the land of immigration. The immigrants have been ruptured with the loss of sense of belongingness, neither to their home land nor in the land of immigration. They have been haunted consequently with a number of mounting problems like alienation, displacement, isolation, discrimination, cultural conflicts, nostalgia for the homeland, barrier in communication which are the ingredients of the painful life of the immigrants. These issues dominate in Lahiri's writings *Interpreter of*

Maladies (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013). This paper, with special reference to *Unaccustomed Earth* is a study of how Lahiri responds to the diasporic pangs of the immigrants, being herself an immigrant. The title comes from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* "The Custom-House" in which he writes:

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces and so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (302)

It comprises eight stories which examine the life of expatriate Bengalis and their children in the foreign soil. It takes sincerely the diasporic realities into account, including the increasingly multiethnic character of life in the US and the conflicts and dilemmas first generation children of the immigrants face and their struggles to achieve meaning and happiness in life.

The stories of *Unaccustomed Earth* are confined to the concern of the old and the new generation Bengalis in America. They reflect the sense of displacement felt by the older immigrants and its influence on the American born Indian generation. The new generation's negotiation with their native heritage, cultural identity, socio-cultural challenges in specific diasporic location where they are experiencing divided identity and divided loyalties, has been brought to the surface in the stories. The stories offer significant insights into how the Bengali community negotiates its diasporic existence. It is understood that intensity of the despair and alienation due to displacement is more in the first generation immigrants than in the subsequent generations. In the diasporic situation, the parent-child relationship becomes imperative due to the challenges of living in the diaspora, besides other reasons. The later generation fills their minds interrogating the relevance of the past to the present, of old customs to the new and different environment while the first generation immigrants fear the impending loss of their fondly nurtured original culture and identity. While occupying the dissimilar spaces in the host culture, the parent as well as the children in their own ways feel the pangs of rootlessness wandering between the two worlds.

The first generation is more impelled to adhere to the Bengali cultural fibre that is less open to sensuality or alcoholism; protective about children. In 'Hell-Heaven', Usha's mother records her protest against Pranab's public gesture of affection to Deborah as it dishonours the Bengali culture. She throws her sentiments of Bengali root to the other Bengali women "I don't understand how a person can change so suddenly. It's just Hell-Heaven, the difference" (69). In the story 'Only Goodness', Sudha's parents are "prudish about alcohol to the point of seeming Puritancial frowning upon the members of their Bengali circle...who liked to sip whiskey at gatherings" (129). The behavioural results of the children's upbringing in the host western social climate like the individual assertion, distancing the elders, their westernised lifestyle and their live-in relationship throw the Bengali parents imbalanced. Lahiri has proved her pragmatic understanding of immigrant behaviour by stating that all members of the older generation are not of the same beat, "all diasporas are not identical...and as such deserve individual attention" (George 186). In 'A Choice of Accommodation', the father's decision of returning to his native land to serve as a doctor in a Delhi hospital has shocked Amit as his parents have always been "dismissive, even critical of India, never home sick or sentimental" and "his mother had short hair and wore trousers... His father kept a liquor cabinet and like a gin and tonic before his meals" (95-96). Conservative community of older generation Bengalis in America finds it indigestible to see a child sleeping without parent beside. The narrator of 'Once in a Lifetime' says "my mother considered the idea of a child sleeping alone a cruel American practice" (229). It is an unquestionable fact that it is not possible for the diasporics to get along with their home culture in the host social and cultural climate. But the first generation Bengalis take efforts to set the smell and beat of the homeland in the foreign soil. In contrast, the immigrant Bengali children try to faint their native identity to make themselves comfortable to enjoy the freedom of American society. They are conscious to acculturate to adapt to American customs. Shadowing the native impressions Lahiri herself felt the burden of her own exclusion being a Bengali child in America. She used to thickly feel "the need to just deny that we were different in anyway, that our names were different, that we looked different, that our parents ate different stuff...[we] just want to

be accepted by the people who are surrounding us...(Interview: Jhumpa Lahiri Fi/miho/ic 5th March 2007). The same anguish is reflected in the character of Usha in 'Hell-Heaven' when she strongly objects to her mother's insisting her robing in Shalwar Kameez on the occasion of Thanks Giving party at an American house: "I knew they [the American] assumed, from my clothing, that had more in common with the other Bengalis than with them" (78). It is evident that the immigrant children in America are desirous of befriending the dominant culture. Born and brought up in America, they cannot afford to share the emotional world and cultural nostalgia of their parents, though Impossible to escape. Straddling between two cultures is exemplified in the character of Ruma in the title story when her individualistic American self is in conflict with her native obligation of taking her widowed father to her care in her home which "would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own" (7). Homi K. Bhabha describes in *The Location of Culture*:

They live in the Third Space, characterized by inbetweenness. No purist view of identity applies to them because entering another culture they are "neither the One...nor the other but something else besides which contests the terms and terrorists of both. (41)

Thus the feeling of dislocation and insecurity characterised the immigrants experience and their existential struggle in that solitary land.

Though Immigrant parents in Lahiri's stories are pleased to raise their children in foreign soil (America), they are burdened with the fear of their children getting influenced by the alien culture. They feel always guilty of distancing themselves and their children from their native culture, despite the academic and economic success in the foreign land.

The issue of loyalty and betrayal of their own culture is impressed in the Bengali diasporic experience. In the title story of *Unaccustomed Earth*, a Bengali is quite conscious that he "had turned his back on his parents by settling in America" (51). Ruma's mother understands her daughter's interest in marrying an American as she is "ashamed" (20) of her origin of Bengali. In 'Hell-Heaven', Pranab's tradition venerating father and his mother are very much disturbed by the thought of their own only son marrying a foreigner, a "betrayal" (72).

The narration in retrospect in 'Hell-Heaven' ruminates Aparna's pains to get accultured to Boston. Her daughter Usha brought up in alien social climate reflects on the intense cultural and emotional alienation that has smothered her young mother and has thrown her to an unrequited passion for a Bengali graduate student Pranab in Cambridge. Later, on his leaving to marry his American beloved, Aparna has been heartbroken to attempt an unsuccessful suicide.

Lahiri exposes the conflict between cultures at Pranab's wedding with American Deborah. The author exhibits the traditional role of home makers of the older generation of Bengali women. Bengali housewives like Aparna in 'Hell-Heaven' and Chitra in 'Year's End' are seen confined creatures, lonely, disempowered and burdened with notions of resignation and unquestioning suffering. It is evident in Kaushik's observation in 'Year's End' that his new stepmother "hovered over my father and me and the girls, eating privately after we were done" (268). Thus the Bengali women act to the home land script of the patriarchal order for married women in Bengali culture, the legacy of passive stoicism as prescribed through generations.

Thus propelled by the zest for survival, Lahiri's Bengali American women in *Unaccustomed Earth*, despite the sense of insecurity and uncertainty develop an ability to get into negotiation between the native culture and host-culture to strike roots in the unaccustomed earth.

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