

Diasporic Traits in the Two Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri: "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Hell Heaven"

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Abstract: This paper probes into two short-stories from Jhumpa Lahiri's collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, namely the title story itself and "Hell-Heaven" from the existential point of view. This research work delves deep into the psychology of human beings who by culture and society have come far away in search of a desirable life of dreams where they find the reality exactly the opposite in terms of relations, and at the level of existentiality. They in search for a stable and balanced life has become inauthentic and diasporic.

Keywords: existence, authenticity, entity, being, dasé-in.

The title *Unaccustomed Earth*, has been taken from Nathaniel hawthorne's "The Custom House." In this introductory chapter to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne describes how he on a customary day found a letter in the heap of dingy papers. The passage that Lahiri quotes is as follows, "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, ion 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(Hawthorne 10)."

The point that Hawthorne makes is that one flourishes, as a plant does more vigorously on an unaccustomed earth. This goes against the ordinary view that one grows better on the same ground. American settlement ironically is one instance of this reclamation.

In *Unaccustomed Earth* Lahiri presents the malady that exist in the relationship of a daughter and a father. In these two stories, mentioned above, Lahiri has focussed mostly on first- generation Indian American immigrants and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. Lahiri describes their effort to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and traditions. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the writer mostly deals with the lives of Indians or, to be precise, Bengalis in exile. The characters of Jhumpa's short-stories are always navigating between the strict traditions they have inherited and the baffling new world they must encounter everyday. Ruma lived in seattle with her husband Adam and their son Akash. She is a second generation Indian American woman who is married to an American. She is expecting another child when she comes to know that her father was coming to live with her for a week. She is not a traditional Indian daughter who cares for her parents. And In Ruma's case we can see that she is afraid of the prospective visit of her father. Ruma fears that her father would be an added responsibility on her when he will arrive. She presents that she is very happy to see her father but she also feels that her father's visit would mean an end to the family she had created on her own: she herself, Adam, Akash and the second child that would come after sometime. It is the irony of the settlement that the Puritans who came to America though they would create a better world. But instead they created the worst by their strict laws of

puritanical purity at the cost of humanness. That is what the story of Hester Prynne is about.

In America or western world even an individual is a family. So one can not expect himself a responsibility on other person. Ruma's father has also learned to live on his own. He in his old age wholly resembles an American by his outfit and his gray hair and fair skin. For the next generation the adaptation was easier for being born in their parents' hostland. They are far removed from any sentimental attachment to their supposed homeland India. Her father not only lives in his own world, as his daughter does, but also cares for this world. His concerns are practical as well as personal and yet, if he gets involved in the life of Mrs. Bagchi. What America has given that in their diasporic experience is the creation of nuclear family. Hawthorne with his tongue in cheeks suggests that in America or western world even an Individual is a family.

Difference between cultures is a problem everywhere. Hawthorne suggests that transplanting people into new soil makes them flourish better. Before going to Europe, to visit places, among other Prague, he wishes to see his daughter. He is an old man now at 70 but he seemed the same to Ruma, for her own reasons. He had not mentioned about his relation with Mrs. Bagchi. Before her mother's death it was her mother who used to do most of the household work. It was the death of her mother that changed the life of Ruma and her father. But the change was not the same in both. Her father was begun to take his life serious after his wife's death, but Ruma was not as much serious in her life as she was when her mother was alive. So, these are actually the human conditions which makes life existential. It can be thought of as the call of care which is ontologically possible because the very basis of Dasein's being is care of her family.

When Adam was talking to Ruma on the phone she wanted to tell him that she didn't feel tortured any longer but she has changed her mind. She did not tell him because she thinks that inspite of living with her father all her life she had not known certain things about him. At the end of the story she felt guilty because of her earlier thoughts about her father. Infact, she felt guilt not for her father but for herself. Her father had always done the dishes after the family had eaten. "She had not known how self-sufficient he could be, how helpful, to the point where she had not had to wash dishes since he'd arrived. At dinner he was flexible, appreciating to grilled fish and chicken she began preparing after the Indian food ran out, . . . (UE 47)."

Thus the father becomes a useable thing, no longer her father but a thing in her environment—a person not present at hand but available or ready at hand. Jhumpa Lahiri raises the central question of the literature of Jhumpa Lahiri "what does it mean to be?" What is to be. Jhumpa Lahiri seems to say that it is easier to say what a being is not. A daughter is not a daughter. A father is not a father, because the relationship has changed from being a loving daughter and a loving father too. A relationship of user and used of things ready to hand. Now the father is welcome to stay because he started working in the kitchen, cooking, washing, brushing.

Jhumpa lahiri is a stern phenomenologist who excavates and elucidates the hidden aspect of human existence. Thus the relationship between father and a daughter is that of mutual exploitation. Man is, for all his alienation from other, is a communal being. But his communal is inauthentic. His involvement is not genuine.

The same inauthentic relation exists in the next story of *Unaccustomed Earth*, namely "Hell–Heaven": in "Hell-Heaven" Lahiri points out the cause of malady in multiple

relationships, in love and marriage. Usha the narrator, belongs to the second generation Bengali immigrants in America, interpret various maladies of the various characters including herself in their intercultural relationships. In “Hell-Heaven” Pranab Chakraborty, a newly arrived Bengali from India follows Usha’s mother Aparna assuming her to be a Bengali too. It took no time to grow intimacy and he was immediately accepted into the family as ‘Pranab Kaku’ to the child. In this story we find that all relationships, when not chosen with the whole of being are tenuous, because in such relationships partners hardly pay attention to each other. In reality they become familiarized but hardly known to each other. This happens with Usha’s parents. For example, Usha’s parents had an arrange marriage in India occurred out of respect for his parents, not for love. In America her mother feels isolated and lonely. Feeling alienated Usha’s mother feels in love with a young man Pranab, with whom she shares everything. They had in common all the things that she and her husband did not: A love of music, film, leftist politics, poetry. She always felt free with Pranab.

However, the entry of Deborah, an American, in the life of Pranab fetches a jealousy bitter tough in Pranab-Aparna episode which enhances to such an extent that Aparna feels a sea of change in Pranab brought out by Deborah. She thinks that I don’t understand how a person can change so suddenly. Pranab, on the other hand, married her against his parents. But in the last it was Pranab who had betrayed Deborah by falling in love with Bengali married woman. The reason for his malady is that in any case one can not live completely isolated from his origin, his homeland and his own people for the whole of his life. Usha’s mother has declared that the marriage with Deborah would not last long. The declaration About Deborah was a sign of her prejudice towards America. Aparna

attempted suicide. The suicide was the outcome of disappointment in love. She compares the life with Pranab as “Heaven” and the change in his behaviour with “Hell”. Lahiri thinks the human malady, as relationship is heavenly but when it stops working the human is thrown in Hell–fire.

Lahiri’s stories do not present any intrigue, mystery or formal denouement in the traditional sense. Her stories are the statements of human despair, felt particularly within the institution of marriage. Rooted in the time and local when the old settled way of life is being radically challenged and refashioned. Her characters often display shattered minds and pray nerves, beneath which the nervous whisper of morbid passions clearly audible. The idea of alienation continues to run throughout Lahiri’s “Hell-Heaven” which seems to be a saga of broken hearts. The important women characters: the narrator, her mother and Deborah are presented in such circumstances where they feel alienated in relation to their men. Her mother had confessed her relationship with Pranab to Usha after Usha’s own heart was broken by a man she had hoped to marry.

Deborah, like Aparna, also suffers the pangs of alienation caused by her inability to understand her husband despite their long conjugal life. Pranab is a typical global materialistic man who denounces his parents to procure the youthful love of Deborah and when she loses her youthful luster he denounces her too in order to get another woman of his community. In this story, we witness a lack of committed relation as in “Unaccustomed Earth”. Pranab is, by nature, flirtiest in his relation, however, those who come in his contact are sober and committed. Both Aparna and Deborah are connected in the same game of destiny which leaves him to suffer the pangs of alienation throughout their lives. Alienation in diasporic realities is mostly the artifact of conflicting

personalities. Jhumpa Lahiri diagnosis the ailment in human, concern for using anything as an end such as Aparna. It is only after remarrying the malady surfaces. This happens in our everyday experience.

Human life and the working of the world everything that happened in the story, is dependent, happening simply by chance. In Sartre's terms, man is not defined by his essence, which means that the most important consideration for the individual is an independently acting and responsible conscious being—rather than what categorise the individual essences. Lahiri's conception of human behaviour is that the existential man is not only absolutely alone when it comes to choosing for himself. So Jhumpa Lahiri lays emphasis on the relationship not of causal involvement, or participation but that one has to choose relationship with the whole of one's being. Short of which, he remains inauthentic, exploited and exploiting in turn.

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