

An Unaccustomed Return: A Critical Study into Diaspora with Special Reference to Jhumpa Lahiri's Two Short Stories *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Hell-Heaven*

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Abstract: The word diaspora originated from the Greek word which originally referred to the Jews and then to American people, has become increasingly a dominating subject in literature and social sciences. More and more critical issues are being attached with it, which makes the term increasingly complex in the present era. In this age of globalization, when national boundaries are becoming thinner, human migration with its cultural and psychological effects are being portrayed more conclusively in the field of literature. Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer winner author and the woman born of Bengali couple, residing in America has very poignantly pointed out the difficulties, cultural innuendos and the ever meaningful gaps that her diaspora characters experience. The present essay aims to show these gaps of culture in diaspora as presented in her two short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Hell-Heaven*.

Keywords: diaspora, globalization, culture, characters, short stories.

- The word '*diaspora*' derives from the Greek word that signifies scattering or dispersion and from that sense there emerges another meaning that is the human migration and movement away from a perceived homeland. The concept of *diaspora* and its related transnationalism has gained a very prominent position as a research area in both literature and social sciences, becoming a window through which to look at the new world of international and intercontinental migration of population with its shifting borders between countries and also the thinning, closing of margins between different communities subsequently. *Diaspora* is often being used to connote religious or ethnic national groups, estranged from their homelands. It should also be necessary to point out to the fact that *diaspora*, despite of its recently originated momentum as a research area in both literature and social sciences, is certainly not a new concept. On the other hand, it is a repeatedly recurring subject though may be relatively new in academic pursuits, researches and debates. The mourning of biblical Ruth living in an alien land, the *pandavas* living in *Virat* out of their *Indraprastha*, Rama's leaving *Aoudhya* for twelve years for living in forest, can also be termed, seen and projected in and with *diasporic* eyes. Thus *diaspora* is an old concept whose formulations and meanings have acquired an academic status lately. It should be also taken into consideration that

originally it referred to historic perception and experience related to particular communities like Jews and Americans because they have that historical momentum related to *diasporic* identity and among them Jews were the most stateless people until recently till the formation of Israel. However, it was only later; the term is extended to the religious minorities of Europe. Around 1970 it gained its new acquired momentum and application in academic arena. The very possibility and probability of the incorporation of migrants into the host communities or countries of their migration becomes one of the chief areas to deal with in the *diaspora* and its associated literature. It signifies that the members of the communities in reality have the lack of the sense of accommodation with the host communities socially, thus always conferring and creating a margin which subsequently creates their identities in the process with relation of that margin. Incorporation would mean the end of *diaspora*, as Professor Vijay Mishra of Murdoch University, points out in this connection, “All *diaspora* are unhappy, but every *diaspora* is unhappy in its own way” (Mishra 1996, 189). William Safran figures out an exemplary and acceptable definition and characteristics of diaspora where the expatriate minority communities share several of following characteristics:-

- They or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral' or foreign regions.
- They retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homelands-its physical location, history and inheritance.
- They believe that they are not, and perhaps cannot totally accommodate themselves in the society of their migration and feel alienated.
- Their regard for their homeland and its associated structures as true and ideal and they believe that they would finally return.
- They have the feeling for the restoration and upholding of these ideals.
- They continue to relate themselves to their homelands in various ways possible and that marked their existence and association in one way or other.

Thus the *diaspora* or expatriate communities' feeling of alienation becomes one of the major themes of *diasporic* literature. The present essay aims to deal with this sense of alienation and unbelongingness, the very structure of difference between hell and heaven present in Jhumpa Lahiri's two short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Hell-Heaven*, selected as a subject for the present essay. Jhumpa Lahiri, born 1967 in London, UK, was of Bengali origin, later migrated and settled in Rhode Island, USA. Her first published collection of short stories won Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the year 2000 and many other awards. For the last few years an increasing number of first and second generation South Asian *diaspora*, especially Indian writers are writing in English language. The style and content of their writing has been greatly influenced by the extent to which they have been able to identify and adopt their new country and tend to write about people and events which are typical of their country of origin and are anxious to put South Asian or Indian local color in their

country of migration. These include a group of writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Gautam Malkhani, M.G. Vassanji etc. It seems that Lahiri herself suffered and known the identity crisis of the expatriate communities that makes her write about them so vividly. A vast number of her characters suffer from the loneliness, sense of alienation and longing for the return to the world which they had lost as she did also. Asha Choubey says in this context- "The personal life of Jhumpa Lahiri is the very prototype of diasporic literature. Having spent more than thirty years in the United States she still feels, 'a bit of outsider'. Though she has confessed that her days in India are, 'a sort of parentheses in her life, the fact that she is at heart an Indian cannot be denied.'" Rushdie also points out in this connection, "Exiles or immigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillar of salt" (Rushdie 1992, 9). The point of identity is a very significant factor in post colonial diasporic literature. Lahiri stated in an interview that the question of identity is always difficult one, but especially so far for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously as in the case for their children. She also added that the older she get, the more aware she is that she has somehow inherited a sense of exile from her parents, even though in many ways she is more American than they are. For immigrants the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing for their children. The feeling that there was no single place where she fully belongs bothered her growing up. Jhumpa Lahiri's second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* points out an eloquent picture of life in the Indian American diaspora. For the present study, two short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Hell-Heaven* are taken from the collection. She characteristically takes some lines of Hawthorne's *The Custom House* as the epigraph of her collection of short stories which goes like this:

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 their birthplaces, and so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Lahiri, 5)

These lines speak of accommodating and accustoming an unaccustomed earth. Lahiri's two stories are tales of the process of this making of accommodation and accustoming. But even then is it a true accustoming? Or rather it tells of their choice of how to accustom. The first story *Unaccustomed Earth* tells the tale of Ruma, a second generation Bengali immigrant girl, rather a woman in her family, married with Adam, a native American as the name clearly suggests and their son Akash in Seattle. After her mother's death only, her father begins to travel throughout Europe 'a continent he'd never seen' (Lahiri 8). The story opens with her father's first visit to them in Seattle. The story tells of

Adam's business trips, Ruma's expecting again, her father's living in the condominium, selling of the house after Ruma's mother's death etc. in the third person narrative technique, very proper for creating a gradual detachment in the form of narration. However soon as the plot unveils, we could see the very dilemma and identity crisis common in diasporic literature. Ruma feels that after her mother's death, in India there would have been no question of his (father) not moving in with her and at once also feels that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own, herself and Adam and Akash. This actually brings home the very basic differences between a traditional Indian mentality and the American one, the one she is born with and another she is cohabiting and habituated with. The narrator also reminds us that their trips to India were 'always epic' and "Those returns to India had been a fact of life for him, and for all their Indian friends in America" (Lahiri 11). At this ripe old age, especially after his wife's death, Mrs. Bagchi, the newly met companion of his tour would seem to him an almost return to India, his native land, which he could not adhere and confess consciously and of course not publicly. Mrs. Bagchi has moved to America after her husband's death in a scooter accident after only two years of marriage to ward off the possibility of remarriage and living and working in America since then, unmarried. To Ruma's father, Ruma's world is another unaccustomed earth in his own unaccustomed earth. Noteworthy is that the author reminds us that though Ruma's father used to address Mrs. Bagchi by her first name Meenakshi but "in his thoughts he continued to think of her Mrs. Bagchi" (Lahiri 11). On his arrival, he was wearing a baseball cap that said POMPEII, brown cotton cap with blue polo shirt, and a pair of white leather sneakers and she was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age. Akash had forgotten the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when he was little. After he started speaking in full sentences English had taken over, and she lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali and thus the mother tongue is a lost world for the boy. She had herself slipping in her Bengali in reality. When an aunt or uncle called from Calcutta she stripped over words, mangled tenses. With all the alien atmosphere in Ruma's household, Ruma's father devoted all his time of a week's stay in the garden. This is a household where Ruma becomes 'Rum' for Adam. At the end of the story he prefers to live in his own than to stay at Ruma's americanised house, because Mrs. Bagchi seems to him more preferable option in a sense of the term as perhaps she is less americanised than his own daughter as she still carried a picture of him (her dead husband) with her. Ruma's father didn't mind. In a way he preferred knowing that her heart still belonged to another man because of it clear identification of traditional India that he altogether missed in America. So, he can say emphatically, "It is a good place, Ruma. But this is your home, not mine" (Lahiri 40). This is

further indicated when at the time of leaving, he asks:

“Adam will be here tonight?”

She nodded and he answers:

“Good. Things will return normal then” (Lahiri 42).

The second story of the collection *Hell-Heaven* is also a symbolically structured story like the first one delineating with the crisis of identification in the diasporic communities. Unlike the first story, this story gets told in first person narrative technique. It is the story of one Pranab Chakraborty who had been washed up on the barren shores of the narrator, Usha and her parents' social life. He was from a wealthy family in Calcutta and had never had to do so much as to pour himself a glass of water before moving to America, to study engineering at MIT and soon he gets befriended with Usha's family and her parents actually welcomed him to their meals and opened up the apartment to him for anytime. The narrator says, “He appeared without warning, never phoning beforehand but simply knocking on the door the way people did in Calcutta and calling out 'boudi!' as he waited for mother to let him in” (Lahiri 48). Aparna, Usha's mother feels attached to Pranab as they had many things in common which she cannot share with her husband and the narrator goes on describing: “my mother ...talked fondly about the winter picnics of her youth, grand expeditions with fifty of her relatives, all taking the train into the west Bengal countryside. Pranab kaku listened to these stories with interest, absorbing the vanishing details of the past” (Lahiri 50). But with the coming of Deborah in his life things changed. Even against the willed anticipation of Usha's mother, they become more and more involved with each other. Pranab taught Deborah to say *khub bhalo* that is very good and *aacha* that is okay and to pick up certain foods with her fingers instead of with fork and kissed each other publically which irked Aparna so that she lamented that he used to be so different before and she cannot understand how a person can change so suddenly and commented that, “It's just hell-heaven, the difference” (Lahiri 51). The Bengali circle also conferred and “it was universally agreed that she had stripped Pranab kaku not only of his origins but of his independence. She was the enemy, he was her prey and their example was invoked as a warning and as a vindication that mixed marriages were a doomed enterprise” (Lahiri 55). We cannot escape our attention from the little ironical authorial comments: “Their two identical little girls who barely looked Bengali and spoke only English and were being raised so differently from me and most of the other children. They were not taken to Calcutta every summer, they did not have parents who were clinging to another way of life and exhorting their children to do the same” (Lahiri 55). Usha's mother tried to maintain Usha in her own Bengali life style and warned her repeatedly against making the same mistake as Pranab kaku but the narrator Usha ponders that she began keeping other secrets from her, evading her. She told her that she was sleeping over at a friend's when really she went to parties,

drinking beer and allowing boys to kiss her and fondle her breasts. At the thanks giving ceremony she was persuaded to wear *salwaar kameez* to remain Indian as her mother wishes her to be. Finally Pranab and Deborah got divorced after twenty three years of marriage and because of his falling in love with a married a Bengali woman. Thus both these two stories are symbolical and good specimens of diasporic literature, the unbelongingness that runs through the vein of expatriate communities have become eloquent here with the characters that Lahiri shows us in her characteristic style. The most noteworthy point of Lahiri's style is that it escapes abrupt theorizing and explanations, but rather she touches us with subtle flush of deep truths of life, deep and inescapable, however unaccustomed it may be. In the first story, Ruma's unnamed father had shunned his daughter's proposal because he feels she becomes alienated from her culture and root while Mrs. Bagchi with her traditional Bengali woman's attachment to her dead husband, which she keeps intact even in a foreign land, has a silent appeal for him, to whom he longs to return. In the second story, Pranab ultimately returns to one Bengali woman, making Usha's mother's apprehension of the difference between hell and heaven comes true. The unaccustomed earth is always hell which escaped from heaven where its denizens longs to return in their own unaccustomed way.

Benedict Anderson has discussed the problematic position of Bengalis in India after independence in 1947 and described how a Bengali who was privileged in his education and subsequent career becomes, as much a stranger in his own native land as the European residents in the country. Lahiri's stories present the sequel of Bengali living outside India, stranger in native people's eyes and becoming stranger in their own eyes also, as the unaccustomed earth knows only hell and heaven and perhaps nothing in between.

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