

## Diasporic Predicaments and Crisis of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

- Avinuo Kire

**Abstract:** Lahiri, in her collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, explores the vast and enduring topic of Diaspora and the immigrant predicament through her own experiences as a second generation diaspora. With extraordinary insight and without resorting to clichés, the expatriate writer delves into the complexities of the Indo American exchange and the resulting search for identity which plagues diasporas who constantly search for a “home”. The poignant stories reveal how the diasporic predicament is predominantly psychological in nature. “Home” then, is not so much to do with geography or even ancestral history. “Home” is in fact, a state of mind when one feels a sense of belonging and makes a connection or form an attachment with the physical and sociological environment. The stories are concise, lucid, elegant and primarily delves into the humane aspects of human relationships in the world of Diaspora.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Alienation, Identity crisis, Trauma, Rootlessness

Once again, Jhumpa Lahiri draws on the immigrant experience in her collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). This literary collection consists of eight powerful stories and is divided into two parts. The first part of the book contains five independent stories and the remaining three stories in the second part of the book are interrelated but nevertheless, complete stories on their own. All the eight stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* explore the complex relationship between Bengali immigrants to the United States and their American children. Although fictional, Lahiri's stories are essentially autobiographical as she draws richly from her own immigrant experience. She herself is a second generation Bengali diaspora and is married to an American journalist, Alberto Vourvoulias Bush. Lahiri's insightful perspective on interracial marriages as well as the resulting, inevitable chasm between immigrant parents and their first generation diaspora children (Indian Americans in this context), is quite remarkable. Lahiri states:

Some of the culture goes by the wayside, or the link is never made. I was aware of that myself when I had my kids. I really felt a sense that I was the end of a line, and that it was a very short line. I knew my parents had parents and so on, but to me, my universe was my parents and they were the far end and I was the near end. There were certain intensities to the experience of that first generation and their offspring that don't carry over. I'm very aware of my parents' experience, how I grew up, and now how my children are growing up. There is such a stark difference in these two generations. (Lahiri. [www.bookbrowse.com](http://www.bookbrowse.com)).

Second generation diasporas face the distinct predicament of being

caught between two worlds; two cultures and yet belonging to neither. This creates an acute sense of loss of identity. They are born and brought up in the United States and therefore, adopts a typical American lifestyle. This lifestyle grants a lot of independence and freedom which makes it unfeasible for them to accept the conservative rituals and conventions which their first generation diasporic parents cherish. At the same time, they cannot escape their Indian roots which is steeped in tradition and this prevents them from fully embracing the American culture. "While Lahiri's first generation Indian Americans cherish their past and its memories as an indispensable, integral part of their roots and their being, her second generation Indian American reflect both proximity and distancing from it" (Das 16). This gap in cultural mindsets often leads to clashes between immigrant parents and their children. *Unaccustomed Earth* is a literary laurel which showcases Lahiri's growing maturity as a writer as compared to her previous works *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*. The stories are more intense and full of underlying angst. This collection is poignantly introduced with a quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Custom House*:

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 sterile their roots unto unaccustomed earth (quoted in Lahiri p. ix).

The stunning collection begins with the title story "Unaccustomed Earth". Ruma, the main protagonist is a second generation diaspora who is married to Adam, an American. They have a three year old son named Akash who is "the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother" (Lahiri 23). Ruma's mother died in an operation theatre almost three years ago. Her father who is now retired, spends his time travelling all over Europe. Ruma and her father had never been particularly close and the story unfolds with her father coming to visit her for a week before travelling to Prague. Ruma is filled with anxiety at the thought her father's impending visit. She is caught between two cultures; that of India, her ancestral roots and America, her adopted country. The Indian part of her feels guilty over her widowed father living alone and she feels obligated to ask him to move in with her family as is the norm in traditional Indian families. At the same time, she dreads that he may actually accept her offer as she is not sure whether she wants him in her life. Her father had always loved gardening and when he noticed that Ruma had a kitchen garden, he took it upon himself to tend to it. This attention flatters Ruma and she slowly warms up to her father. He also ends up forming a special bond with his grandson, Akash. There is a strong garden metaphor in the story, alluding to its title. The act of gardening and taming the soil in order to suit one's means is a likely metaphor to building a new life in a strange 'unaccustomed' land. He had "toiled in unfriendly soil, coaxing such things from the ground" (16).

The protagonist and other characters in this story are all in the grip of a

strong identity crisis resulting in a sense of loss. They seem to be subconsciously in a quest for self affirmation and realization. Ruma is caught between two worlds. She fits into neither and therefore, suffers silently. She feels alienated from all the people around her including her own husband, son, father and even herself as well. Whenever her son Akash misbehaves, Ruma regards him as “the body she'd nurtured inside of her utterly alien and hostile” (11). It is as though her subconscious is mentally preparing for the alien being that her son will soon transform into. Maybe this is due to her own alienated relationship with her parents over the years. She is also not comfortable with her Bengali roots. “Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult” (12). This particular line is very significant. The fact that Ruma feels like a child when speaking her mother tongue reveals that she still feels like a lost child. These feelings of inadequacy whether for real or imagined, are very common features in a diaspora. Ruma's father is a man who has lived a lifetime without ever truly falling in love with anyone. Unknown to Ruma, he is on the threshold of a love affair with Mrs. Bagchi who is also a widowed diaspora like him. They had met in one of his many travels. Her independence was what drew him to her. Ruma's father felt that “Perhaps, because she expected so little, he was generous with her in a way he'd never been in his marriage” (9). He felt relieved by the knowledge that at the end of the day, they could walk away from each other if they so choose to. Ruma's father unexpectedly develops a particular fondness for his grandson during his visit. He is cynical about this relationship and believes it will not last as Akash will soon turn into a teenager. After his wife's death, he spends his time travelling and touring Europe. His sudden sense of wanderlust and craving for solitude indicates a feeling of instability and rootlessness which is often the result of identity crisis. “Living in exile means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusions” (Mandal 41). “Hell Heaven” is narrated in the first person narrative by a child named Usha. She recounts the memory of a man named Pranab Chakraborty whom she had called Pranab Kaku, a Bengali term meant for addressing a father's younger brother. He was in fact, not a real uncle but someone who had befriended her parents during the early seventies. She recounts the serious infatuation her mother had developed for this man who had called her Boudi, a Bengali term meant for addressing a sister in law. Pranab Kaku ends up marrying an American girl called Deborah, much to the dismay of his parents as well as Usha's mother and the entire Bengali community in America. The marriage ends in a divorce. The manner in which Usha and her mother met Pranab is humorous but filled of pathos at the same time. It reflects the loneliness and alienation experienced by immigrants abroad. They are like lost children, constantly searching for a familiar face amongst the alien crowd:

After Pranab was befriended by my parents, he confessed that on the day we met him, he had followed my mother and me for the better part of the afternoon around the streets of Cambridge, where she and I tended to roam after I got out of school (Lahiri 60) .

Pranab saw that Usha's mother was wearing red and white bangles which is unique to a married Bengali woman. Her attire as well as her typical Bengali features was not enough to convince him and so he tapped her shoulder and inquired politely as to whether she was Bengali. Later, he confessed that he was so new to America that he "took nothing for granted and doubted even the obvious" (61). This reflects the crippling loneliness that plagues immigrants abroad. The fact that Usha calls Pranab Chakraborty, 'Kaku' which means 'Uncle', even though he was just a fellow Bengali and not a real uncle displays the strong bond that immigrants often form simply by reasons of nationality. The strangeness of the environment brings them closer together. Pranab also addresses Usha's father Shyamal as 'Da' which means elder brother in Bengali. As she grew up, Usha recollects clashes with her mother because of their difference of opinions in almost every issue. Her mother would always blame the American lifestyle for this. Usha's mother's disdain for Americans is obsessive and she becomes so paranoid that she warns her daughter against marrying an American when the latter is only the tender age of thirteen years. The issue of marriage was premature and irrelevant then. Young Usha hated going to Calcutta as she did not identify with her ancestral home and often envied Pranab's children as "Because of Deborah, they were exempt from all that and for that reason, I envied them" (75). As is common with diasporas born and brought up in the West, Usha soon becomes more comfortable speaking in English than in her mother tongue, Bengali. She and Deborah becomes quite close and at social events, she would prefer to be with Deborah. "Deborah and I spoke freely in English, a language in which, by that age, I expressed myself more freely than Bengali" (69). Her stressful relationship with her mother heals only much later when they both come to terms to their issues of identity. Although a nice enough girl, Deborah was viewed as the enemy, the corrupting Western influence, by Usha's mother and other Indian Americans. Usha's mother Aparna reveals her jealousy by going on about how different Pranab had become ever since he started dating Deborah. She refers to his behaviour as "Hell Heaven", a self concocted, backward English metaphor. It is only when Usha's heart was broken by a man she had hoped to marry that her mother confided to her about the fateful day many years ago when she had attempted to take her own life after Pranab had married Deborah. Perhaps she shared her terrible secret to prove to her daughter that she understood how it felt to have one's heart broken but how it is still possible to survive and be happy. In the end, both mother and daughter reconciles with each other. Usha is not what her mother expected her to be and the latter finally accepts it. "She had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but also a daughter of America" (82). Strains of identity crisis run throughout this short story. This tale is about lonely souls, lost in Diaspora, trying to attain happiness in what is familiar and constant. "A Choice of Accommodation" is about an interracial couple. Amit and Meghan attends the wedding of Amit's college crush Pam Borden at his old prep school, Langford Academy. The simmering tensions in their marriage is revealed as Amit, in an intoxicated state blurts out to a

stranger at a wedding party that his marriage had fallen apart after the birth of his two daughters. Amit is the son of wealthy Bengali parents and he had a privileged education in the elite boarding school, Langford Academy in America. However, in spite of such privileged background, he possesses no confidence and is nervous and extremely insecure about himself. He feels a profound sense of abandonment by his parents for putting him in a boarding school. He feels no nostalgia towards his alma mater and does not keep in touch with any of his old classmates. His trauma is revealed in these next few lines “He couldn't imagine sending his daughters to Langford- couldn't imagine letting go of them as his parents had let go of them” (86). Amit would often run imagined scenarios in his psyche where he saw himself taking his girls out to different places. In all these imagined scenarios, he would inevitably do something stupid and careless or negligent which would result in the girls perishing under his care. He would be the only survivor and his scenarios always ended with Meghan divorcing him as she blames him for what happened to their girls. In the end he would lose it all, his wife and family. This is a very disturbing activity which Amit indulges in. Clearly, he is an alienated soul suffering from a crisis of identity. He has no confidence, does not realise or value his worth and therefore feels that he is unworthy of being loved. Despite his loving family, he seems to be always on edge, almost as if he is preparing himself for them to abandon him one day. This may have to do with the sense of abandonment he experienced through his parents' act of putting him in a boarding school without his consent during his early youth. He lives his life on the edge, always waiting for the sky to fall down on him. “A brief glance in the wrong direction, he knew, could toss him over the edge” (91).

Our paranoid protagonist possesses a highly sensitive personality and therefore feels things intensely. His elite parents' decision to place him in a boarding school without him having any say in the matter had alienated them forever from him. As a young child, he was suddenly thrust into a whole new environment which he was not mentally prepared to face. No untoward thing happened but the trauma of a new environment affected his fragile and emotional state of mind immensely. When adult Amit visits Langford with his wife, he recalls that his hair had already started greying in the sixth form:

He'd read it was possible, after a traumatic experience, for a person's hair to turn grey in youth. But there had been no sudden death he could point to, no accident. No profound life change, apart from his parents sending him to Langford (93).

Trauma, alienation and loneliness occurs when there is a sudden change in environment and surrounding. In the case of Amit, the trauma had affected him to the extent of it showing physically in the form of premature grey hair while still in school. Perhaps this is because unlike a lot of diasporas or immigrants setting foot in new shores, he had certain disadvantages. He was unprepared mentally for the change in surrounding as his parents had arbitrarily made the decision for him. “Human beings are not akin to a piece of baggage. A change of place is bound to affect their whole physical being” (Parameswaran 1). He did

not speak of his utter desolation to anyone, not even his parents when they called from Delhi on the weekends:

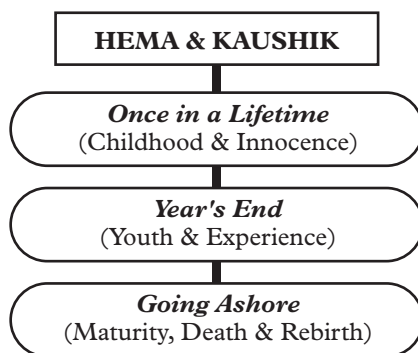
He was crippled with homesickness, missing his parents to the point of tears often filling his eyes, in those first few months, without warning. He sought traces of his parents' faces and voices among the people who surrounded and cared for him but there was absolutely nothing, no one, at Langford to remind him of them (Lahiri 97).

Amit's traumatic experience of crippling loneliness and nostalgia is symbolic of the feelings of alienation which a diaspora experience in a strange land. In the end, he learns to live without his parents and gradually adapts to a new life in Langford but not without psychological damage. He is scarred emotionally and even though he learns to occasionally enjoy life at Langford, "Still, he refused to forgive them (his parents)" (Ibidem). Memories of trauma are always present even as an adult and Amit vows never to send his children to a boarding school because of what he had experienced. "Nobody's Business" is a tale not only about Diasporas, but people in general. Lahiri discloses how diasporas are not the only people suffering from loss of identity. The two main characters in this story are Sang, a Bengali Diaspora and her roommate Paul, an American. Sang is a pretty girl, in love with a man called Farouk, from Cairo, Egypt. Farouk ends up cheating on Sang in a bizarre manner and literally drives her away to London with a broken heart. Paul, a student at Harvard pursuing his Ph.D. in English Literature becomes obsessed with Sang and dissects her every move like a neurotic person. Paul appears to suffer from a serious personality disorder. Identity crisis is an inevitable diasporic predicament and particularly so with second generation Indian American youth. There are two ways identity crisis can lead a person. In the short story "Only Goodness", Lahiri presents this theory through Indian American siblings, Sudha, the elder sister and younger brother, Rahul. Identity crisis, no matter how traumatising, if used in a positive manner, can drive a person to succeed in life. This is what Lahiri herself did. As a child, she has admitted to always feeling lost and not belonging anywhere. However we now admire her for channelling her fears into her writings. "What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough or mature enough to allow in life" (Lahiri. [www.chipublib.org](http://www.chipublib.org)). Her marvellous books could not have been written, had she not experienced identity crisis.

In the short story, Sudha the elder sister is very self depreciating and overly critical of herself. She envied her younger brother Rahul who was better looking and also the intelligent one as well. Rahul, according to Sudha, effortlessly does well in studies, whereas she always had to slog in order to do well. She doted on her younger brother since the day he was born. Sudha tried to ensure that her brother grew up reading all the popular American children's books like *Peter Rabbit* and others. She also tries to make sure that Rahul played with the 'appropriate' toys. By ensuring he had a typical American childhood, Sudha hoped Rahul would fit in better in America unlike herself. However, Rahul grows up

becoming spoilt, self centred and flounders in college. He is unappreciative of his parents' sacrifices, estranges himself from his family and ends up wasting his life by becoming a drunkard. Sudha, on the other hand becomes a successful woman who makes her parents proud and also makes a good marriage to a kind and successful American man named Roger. In spite of everything, Sudha still grapples with her inner demons. She carries a lot of guilt especially where Rahul's drinking is concerned as she was the one who had introduced him to his first drink. Her guilt withholds her from confiding in her husband and she ends up hurting her own marriage. This story shows us how identity crisis can mould lives in different ways as in the case of Rahul and Sudha. This tale also reveals that no matter how successful, identity crisis once experienced, always lingers.

The second part of *Unaccustomed Earth* consists of three short stories which are interrelated. The three stories here are "Once in a lifetime", "Year's End" and "Going Ashore". These tales revolve around the lives of two diasporas, Hema and Kaushik. The diagram below indicates how this trilogy of stories are interrelated and the issues that each story deals with.



"Once in a Lifetime" is narrated in a letter like confession by a thirteen year old Hema who is writing to sixteen year old Kaushik. The story reads like a glimpse of someone's intimate memory. Hema goes on to recall how Kaushik's family decides to immigrate back to the United States after returning to India in 1974. When Hema's parents first got word about Kaushik's family immigrating back to the States a second time, they were excited at the thought of meeting their old friends after many years while at the same time, debated over the reason for their coming back:

Whatever the reason you were coming, I gathered from my parents' talk that it was regarded as a wavering, a weakness. "They should have known it's impossible to go back", they said to their friends, condemning your parents for having failed at both ends. We had stuck it out as immigrants while you had fled; had we been the ones to go back to India, my parents seemed to suggest, we would have stuck it out there as well (Lahiri 228).

This mindset is what often traps diasporas abroad. "They experience alienation in the host country; they have a desire for eventual return...there is always a tension between living here and desiring or remembering another place" (Verma 105). Immigrants often come to the USA, the land of opportunities with big dreams and high aspirations. However, reality is harsh and they become stuck in between once they find themselves unable to cope with the ways of the new world. They are unable to go back as they are ashamed of being branded a failure. Thus, life as a diaspora becomes a struggle as they fit into neither worlds. "Year's End" is also narrated in the first person narrative, this time, by Kaushik who is now in college. He and his father had undergone a painful and emotional journey after his mother's demise. They are now struggling to pick up the pieces of their lives. The story begins with him talking about his father's remarriage to a young Indian woman called Chitra. This woman is a widow herself and has two small daughters. She is also twenty years younger than Kaushik's father, Dr. Choudary. As is expected, Kaushik is upset by this sudden turn of events as he is still mourning his mother's untimely death. Three years have passed since her demise but Kaushik's grief is still fresh. He feels betrayed by his father but tries hard not to show it.

"Going Ashore", the final story in this trilogy narrates how destiny brings Hema and Kaushik together in Rome after many years. Hema has allowed herself to become engaged to Navin, a man whom she does not love but whom her parents approve of. She is bitter after a failed love affair with a married man called Julian. Being a professor at Wellesley, Hema makes an excuse about needing to be in Italy for work related reasons. Kaushik, on the other hand is a wandering photo journalist, having been on the war zones of Israel, Guatemala, Mexico, Africa and various other countries torn by war. He has never been able to settle in a particular place for long as he "never fully trusted the places he'd lived, never turned to them for refuge" (Lahiri 309). Kaushik who had once shared a close relationship with his father now maintains distant ties. Hema and Kaushik meets by chance at a mutual friend's place in Italy and they become intimate soon after. As attached as they are, the two lovers bitterly part ways with Hema returning to India to get married while Kaushik leaves for a job assignment in Hong Kong. He stops at a little island in Thailand before going to Hong Kong. Hema is unable to forget Kaushik and searches for information about him in his website. Then, on television she sees images of the Tsunami and how Thailand had been badly hit. In February, she learns of Kaushik's death through an obituary in the newspaper and mourns for him privately. She is now married and pregnant, physically "burning with new life" (333) and at the same time, mourning Kaushik's death. This is symbolic of the cycle of life: creation, life and death. This story is one of intense love between two lost souls, Hema and Kaushik. They both strive to attain a modicum of happiness in their lives and for a brief period, find solace and a sense of belonging in each other. The issue of identity crisis is a very strong focal point here. Although an intelligent and successful woman, Hema cannot seem to take charge of her own destiny. She lets herself be talked into a

marriage of convenience even though it upset her enough to escape to Rome. She is offered a chance of happiness with Kaushik but she is too scared to take it up without the security of marriage. Hema is terrified at the thought of being alone as stability is very important to her. She also tries to please everyone, be it her parents, Navin or Kaushik. It is ironic that the only time she stands up to Kaushik was perhaps the one time she shouldn't have. This was when she refused Kaushik's proposal to break off the engagement and follow him to Hong Kong. Kaushik is an alienated soul, suffering from an identity crisis. He cannot feel a sense of belonging to any place or maintain an emotional connection with anyone. The untimely demise of his mother when he was very young affects him all throughout his adult life. He is still like a lost child searching for his mother's approval. His deep attachment to his mother had caused him a lot of grief after she passed away. Perhaps this is the reason for his fear of commitment as he is wary of attachments. He meets Hema after many years and discovers she is the one person he could feel a genuine connection to. In spite of loving each other deeply, they are both too emotionally damaged and have too many scars. Lahiri is a master of psychological accuracy and these stories showcase her emotional wisdom. Through this trilogy of stories, Lahiri captures the agony of two wanderers trying to survive in a world where they have lost all familial and cultural relationships. This is due to circumstances in migrant experience.

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