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JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'UNACCUSTOMED EARTH': A TALE OF ISOLATED WORLD

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Abstract

Loneliness is a feeling of being alone, without anyone to count on, to rely on, to trust or support; loneliness depicts the experiencing person as aloof, indifferent and uninterested kind of person, which can be easily interpreted as rudeness by others. Loneliness is a recurring theme in the stories published in the said collection of short stories. The paper makes an attempt to evaluate and analyse *Unaccustomed Earth* with its focus on the theme of loneliness.

Keywords: Loneliness, Deserted, World, Society, Responsibilities, Psychology

Introduction

The contemporary times are filled with insecurities, loneliness, alienation, identity crises, personal problems, emotional distress, etc. These are all known as the contemporary problems of the modern society. Here, the individual is troubled by the burdens of their emotional responsibilities. Each one of these issues rise from the ways of the modern societal systems where growth and materialism are given more importance than the personal, emotional and mental happiness and peace.

This paper focuses on the theme of loneliness as experienced by the characters in the short stories published in the book entitled *Unaccustomed Earth* written by Jhumpa Lahiri. It consists of five main stories; namely, *Unaccustomed Earth*, Hell-Heaven, A Choice of Accommodations, Only Goodness and Nobody's Business. All these stories, though

altogether different, are in a way connected through the theme of loneliness.

The word loneliness was introduced in 1580s, meaning with the condition of being solitary. It also means with the state of being away from friends or family; be it the physical distance or the emotional distance, loneliness hurts just the same. According to Collins Dictionary, Loneliness is defined as, "Loneliness is the unhappiness that is felt by someone because they do not have any friends or do not have anyone to talk to."

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, Psychology defines loneliness as, "a distressing experience that occurs when a person's social relationships are perceived by that person to be less in quantity, and especially in quality, than desired. The experience of loneliness is highly subjective; an individual can be alone without feeling lonely and

can feel lonely even in the company of other people."

Research Methodology

This paper attempts an analytical study of *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri. It uses the primary and secondary texts and journals available to make critical evaluation of the material. This type of study is focused on finding out the what, how and why of a particular situation. Here, the short stories of the said collection are critically analyzed in the light of the theme of loneliness.

Literature Review

A few research studies have been conducted on the topic of research study. The present research paper covers last ten years research studies conducted in this context as:

Gediya, Ketan K. (2013), analyses how Jhumpa Lahiri deals with the issues which are at once cultural and universal. These include immigration, cultural assimilation, globalization, family relationships, gender roles, Indian heritage, family obligation, etc.

Samantha, Sugata. (2014) primarily focuses on the stories *Unaccustomed Earth*, *Hell-Heaven* and *Only Goodness*, which are studied in an attempt to explore and examine the anxiety of Dislocation through textual analysis.

Gulati, Varun. (2016) explores the short stories in the light of displacement as experienced by the characters published in *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Stevenson, Sumitha. (2017) makes an attempt to study the sensitivity in the relationships of migrants in the short stories published in the collection *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Vijaykumar, M. & Rajasekaran, W. Christopher. (2018) discussed Lahiri's stories that deal with the lives of Indian American characters and their mixed cultural environment.

Bhaskar, K. Vijya. (2019) examines Jhumpa Lahiri's works in light of physical and emotional displacement, assimilation, isolation, alienation, rootlessness, etc.

Haripriya, R. (2020) attempted to explore immigration perspectives in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. This study infers that *Unaccustomed Earth* is an exemplary work of immigration literature.

Laddha, Ekta (2021), aims to find how diaspora is depicted in literature in context of Indian-American scenario in the light of *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri. It answers the question how immigrants face isolation in terms of identity and conflict in terms of ethnicity.

C, Safna & Manju, A. J. (2022) found the human relationships and culture translation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* along with the intricacies and resentment in family life and studies the way the culture translation shaped the lives of the characters.

Discussion

The story *Unaccustomed Earth* is told through the perspective of Ruma and revolves around her family. She is a lady of Indian decent, born and brought up abroad. Her parents tried their best to give her, and her brother, Romi, an Indian upbringing. Though, since they are all living in America, the cultural influence of that place has made them part Indian and part American.

Romi lives his own life, nor being bothered by familial matters. After the death of their mother, the emotional connection between Romi and his family has taken a big hit. Their father tries his best to cope with the situation but is unable to form emotional connections with his children other than helping them out when needed. Loss and memories of the mother is visible in all the interactions between the family. Ruma married an American named Adam and settled in Seattle with their child named Akash.

The story starts when Ruma's father decides to visit her for a week in Seattle. The story revolves back and forth between the memories of her parents when her mother was alive and the current situation. Sometimes the contrast of the two seems alarming and sometimes it shows the adaptive nature of human which here, can be defined as survival instinct.

Unaccustomed Earth depicts the loneliness of Ruma and her father. Mrs Bagchi, a friend of Ruma's Father, is another character whose loneliness is heartfelt and with whom Ruma's Father connects due to the similarity of their situation. Ruma's father and Mrs Bagchi, both have lost their life partners and live a nomadic life where they travel for months and come back home only for a little while. They try to cope with their loneliness through new friendships and travel.

Ruma on the other hand misses her mother, thus, she is not filled with loneliness but rather have her moments where she feels lonely due to all the warm memories of her mother. She finds it difficult to imagine that her father is managing everything on his own. For a while, she feels lonely for her father.

Ruma and her father share the past, they share the loss of Ruma's mother, but are unable to connect on the basis of that loss. The week shown in the story is the first time Ruma's Father is staying with Ruma after her mother passed. This proves to be an eye opener for Ruma about how her father has changed in process to cope and survive. The loneliest of the characters seem to be Ruma's father and Mrs Bagchi, who have lost their partners and yet are destined to live more. Ruma is also lonely sometimes, but she still has her family to count on, and Ruma's brother, Romi, has been distant. Though, much isn't discussed about him in the text, it can be assumed that their mother's death is one of the reasons of his distance.

Hell-Heaven is an interesting short story that covers a time frame of more than twenty-five years of the life of its characters. This story shows the most impactful moments of their lives that depict their emotional state. Usha is the only daughter of Shyamal and Aparna, a simple Bengali couple from India living in Cambridge. Here, they meet Pranab Chakraborty, another Bengali who just came to Cambridge; unlike Shyamal and Aparna, who have spent past few years abroad.

The story depicts the complexity of relationships between these people who belong to the same land and have met each other far away from home. Their connection is based on the longing they feel for their country and their desire to be in

Cambridge which helps their aim for a better life. Pranab ends up marrying an American named Deborah. This union makes Pranab distant from his family in India, who disown him after knowing that he married an American, and from his pseudo-family Shymal Da, Aparna Boudi and Usha. Usha also had her moments of loneliness and distance from each of her relationships.

The relationships all grow, develop and change with time. Usha is a witness to the drastic behavioural change in Pranab and her mother, Amrita. Being a young girl, she does not understand the severity of the situation but after growing older and learning to be friends with her mother, she later realised how lonely her mother must have felt in those days.

Usha's father, Shyamal, also changes, develop and improve with time. The relationship between Shyamal and Aparna goes through a lot of changes. After being together for decades, they grow to understand each other better. They seem to be distant and lonely during the initial days of marriage and grow old to be dependent and loving, filling the gap of loneliness in their lives. Whereas Pranab and Deborah seems to be dependent and loving in the initial days of marriage, ends up getting distant and divorced.

The most interesting relationship change occur between Aparna and Deborah. Aparna, at the initial stage of their meeting, had feelings for Pranab. After Pranab married Deborah, her unsaid affections took a backseat. She connected with Deborah after the divorce on the basis of loneliness she had felt when Pranab married Deborah. Deborah had a similar vacuum in her life as that of Aparna.

A Choice of Accommodations is a simple yet impactful story of how a couple searches for a spark in their relationship which has grown stagnant with time. In this story a two-day incident is depicted, where the lead couple, Amit and Megan go out to one of Amit's old friend's wedding. The two days that they spent in the quite simple hotel are filled with emotional turmoil and shows how distant they have become. But the story is also filled with anecdotes

and memories that show that the love in their relationship is still strong and thriving.

Amit and Megan's relationship is strained, stagnant and somewhat lethargic for both of them. There is a hint of loneliness in their lives where they both feel as if they are on their own. Initially, there seems to be a lack of dependency on each other. But, as the story develops, the relationship is shown to be way stronger. The story shows, how two people who are so in love with each other can drift apart, but even then, a little effort and adjustment can bring out their love and affections.

The story *Only Goodness* is a story of changing and complex relationships. Sudha and Rahul are siblings who starts off in a close and accommodating relationship, but with time, they drift apart and become distant. The relationship they have with their parents also change. The expectations their parents have with them is different than the ones they have from themselves. Though, Sudha tries her best to be an obedient child and follow the rules set by their parents, Rahul becomes a rebel and tries to find a life of his own.

The theme of loneliness becomes prominent in the story when Rahul starts suffering from alcoholism. Even though he was a top student since a young age, he leaves his studies behind, stays at home all the time and leaves only to get more alcohol for himself. He starts to come out of his alcoholism when he falls in love with a women named Elena, who also has a baby girl, named, Crystal. Instead of becoming a graduate and getting a job, he starts to train as a chef after meeting Elena. This job, to his parents, is a joke compared to what they had expected from him.

Sudha, on the other hand, completed her studies, got a job, found a partner, Roger, and with the blessings of her parents, married him. After a few years of marriage, she even bore a son named Neel. Even though she looks like she lives a perfect life, she has her own guilt to deal with. Rahul is lonely because of his alcoholism and Sudha is lonely because she feels as if she is the one who got Rahul into alcoholism. This is a secret she never dared to share with anyone, even Roger. In the end, this secret is the reason Roger claims that he cannot

trust her anymore, taking her to the epitome of loneliness.

Nobody's Business is a story about two unlikely friends. Sang and Paul. Paul is a recluse, living with two housemates, Heather and Sang. Heather has an outgoing and generally happy personality, so she spends most of her days in her job and with friends. Paul stays home and studies for his PhD final interview. When Sang joins to live with them, Paul and Sang become acquaintances.

They normally live their own life and don't bother each other much, but somehow, Paul gets information about the love triangle that Sang is stuck in. She has a boyfriend named Farouk who happens to have another girlfriend named Deirdre. Paul's loneliness is derived from his academic problems that he is trying to overcome, Deirdre's loneliness roots from her complicated relationship with Farouk, but Sang's, even after being cheated and feeling alone most of the time, is not lonely. She is happy with herself. Though, the way her relationship with Farouk ended, she does fell cut off from the world for a while and even moves to London to live with her sister to overcome her feelings for Farouk; never at any point in the story, does she seems to be lonely.

The story ends on a note where Paul receives his Doctorate and happens to bump into Farouk. He is astonished to see him enjoying his time with Deirdre whereas Sang still lives in London and have not yet returned. Paul is shown as an empathetic character, who wanted to genuinely help Sang and in a way Deirdre to get away from the toxic relationship they are stuck in. But he is left only with the emptiness he feels from losing his friend Sang.

Concluding Remarks

All the selected stories depict loneliness in one way or another. Be it Ruma's Fathher and Mrs Bagchi in *Unaccustomed Earth* who try their best to distract themselves from their pain through travel; the mother-daughter duo, Aparna and Usha from *Hell-Heaven*, who learn to accept the pain with time; married couple Amit and Megan from *A Choice of Accommodations*, who lived in loneliness even when they had their life partner with them; a brother and

sister Sudha and Rahul from *Only Goodness*, who drown themselves in their loneliness; or the young doctorate aspirant Paul from *Nobody's Business*, who learn to revel in his loneliness; the characters all comes from different strata of life where they learn to survive from loneliness in their own way and time. Again, it is evident that the stories are all different but are connected through the constant presence of theme of loneliness.

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