



Indian American Women Personae in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

Dr. Madhavi Moharil

Assistant Professor

Rajkumar Kewalramani Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur

pimplemadhavi@yahoo.com

Abstract

In the challenging and evolving world of globalization migrations are inevitable. It is pertinent to study the literature of migrants which comes under the gamut of Diaspora Literature. Many talented Indian writers have contributed to this major genre of literature with their firsthand experiences and observations. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the remarkable names in this regard. Her seminal works present galaxy of characters who demonstrate the pangs of displacement and fractured identities emerging from world of expatriates. The paper attempts to explore diaspora consciousness as projected by Jhumpa Lahiri through various Indian American women characters in her fictional work *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Keywords: Diaspora, identity, migration, consciousness, displacement

Globalization resulting into mobilization of masses on the international platform is the chief characteristic of the current era. Diasporic Literature is the expressions of the expatriates who suffer the paroxysms of displacement. It has become a prime genre of contemporary literature which mirrors the life of an immigrant who attempts to breath at the new land with new culture. Many Indian writers have significantly contributed to this genre through their experiences and observations at host land. Indian Diasporic Literature focuses on the consequences of international migrations and the impact of the same on Indian family life and structure. After India became independent, this kind of migration was recorded very often. For the first generation, it means strong bond with the country of their origin. It was tough to them to embrace the new land. For the second generation this migration was gradually acknowledged. The adaptability associated with the term 'migration' was quite known and accepted. However, a rattle between the

culture of the adopted country and migrant's ethnic identity was still there. Migrant feelings are exhibited by Sharma with the words,

A group of immigrants from a particular country are not a monolithic block and are impacted both by the cultural variations among themselves and by the culture of the adopted country. Certain elements constitute makers of identity- food, clothes, language retention, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs individual community, rites of passage and others. These are retained, discarded or adopted differently at different times and places but a feeling of oneness a tug of the roots persists even after several years and sometimes centuries (Sharma xi).

In India, women expressions in Diaspora Literature came into focus when adaptations with the new culture and search for the roots were

prominently realized together. The working male force was engaged with their occupation and so flexibility with the new place was comparatively easy to them. In case of the women, who came to the foreign land with their husband's priority to work, it was harder to get familiar with the new land and its customs. The stories of experiences of the housewives were bounded by seclusion, aloneness and nostalgia to their homeland memories. Their struggle to exist at a new place with different language, changed lifestyle and novel culture has introduced a new shade of feminism in diaspora literature. Celebrated writer Jhumpa Lahiri's seminal works like *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, *Namesake* and *The Lowland* exhibit the feelings and experiences of the migrants specially women.

Indian Diasporic expressions of Jhumpa Lahiri are applauded on the international platform. Her gratitude to this welcome can be seen through the words, 'I salute the city of Chicago for promoting and celebrating the act of reading and the importance of literature on such a grand, civic scale. In a world where so many senseless and destructive events are constantly taking place, it is specially consoling and commendable' (Lahiri). She is known for carving a niche as a fiction writer in United States of America. She is also noted for her specific depiction of migration and Indian-American life. She is a well acknowledged Diaspora writer who carries with her genuine Indian sensibilities and receptively expresses the same in her fiction. Features like identity crisis, dislocation, marriage troubles and other facets of migration have made her writings life like to the immigrants. Many of the expressions come from her experiences because she herself is the child of immigration.

Since she herself is the child of immigration and multiculturalism, she could portray the characters both in the light of native and alien culture. Deeply felt by the importance of family relationship and attachment with the relatives in the home country, Jhumpa Lahiri has experienced the trauma of failing to find her identity in the new land where

she could never have a sense of belonging (Shodhganga 39).

Unaccustomed Earth of Lahiri presents the women characters in two shades. On one hand second generation Indian American Women welcome the new culture at the host land and willingly accept and enjoy American social distinctiveness. On the other hand, some of the characters are presented as ambassadors of Indian social uniqueness at the new land retaining lifestyle endorsed by their native culture. Surrounding socio-cultural set up in materially developed country, America fails to tempt them to change themselves. The women characters stick to their roots and follow the culture of their mother land. In major cases cultural ethics and values are preserved by women contributors but sometimes they seem to be fractured identities at the foreign lands.

Through Ruma, the protagonist of the title story *Unaccustomed Earth*, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays an Indian American woman who always chases the memories of her mother bonded by traditions at home. Ruma finds herself in a discrepant position or a 'liminal position where there is continuous confrontation between the native culture and the host country culture.' (Priyadarshini 54). Ruma's feminine inclination towards native culture is seen in her ardent desire to connect her son, Akash with Indian Bengali cultural values in the presence of her father. The character presents diaspora woman's inherent desire to be with the traditions of a homeland. Ruma's latent satisfaction can be seen in her son's cultural nourishment in tune with her father. She embodies Indian American talented women who desire to preserve Indian essence at foreign land.

Diaspora feminism seeks the native cultural roots at the host land. Ruma's naming her son as 'Akash' in Hindi language means 'the sky', letting her son in the company of her father, desiring him to be well-acquainted with Bengali language etc. display her strong bonding for her motherland. Her father finds similarity between Ruma's mother and Ruma. Ruma portrays impression and imitation of the older generation by the younger one in response to family

values. Ruma unwittingly imitates her mother. 'She didn't understand how her mother had done it. Growing up, her mother's example moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household – had served as a warning a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now.' (Unaccustomed Earth 6) Many times Ruma becomes nostalgic and remembers her mother's habits, beliefs and receptivity to the situation. In India, in shaping up of the personality of a woman, one can trace the impression and impact of her mother. Lahiri's Ruma is the best example of the same. Placed in two separate conditions as wives, Lahiri exhibits an ideal Indian wife and mother through Ruma's mother on one hand and Ruma on the other. Ruma as a talented wife and mother from diaspora background seeks her identity by following her mother at the foreign land.

The protagonist in *Hell and Heaven*, Aparna lives in a space away from her motherland and is boxed within the traditional maternal role that the native land's patriarchy has chalked out for women. She fails to get any opportunity to cross the societal limits. In words of Dibyadyuti Roy, Aparna, 'foregrounds the importance of matricentric feminism in challenging the essentialized masculinist legacy of domestic spaces as well as the bodies that inhabit them.' (Roy 2) Aparna is an economically dependent wife and mother in diaspora. In the beginning of the story she is portrayed as an Indian immigrant mother and housewife living in Boston. She represents the era of 70s. Her existence is precariously dangling due to strain with her scientist husband. Aparna, follows Indian institution of marriage by accepting arranged marriage set by her parents. Her limited sharing of common interest with her husband emerges a kind of indifference to him. Her compacted and lonely life in Massachusetts reveal the newly placed Indian American diaspora women. Her sudden encounter with enchanting Indian American boy Pranab Chakraborty and fine tuning with him makes her embroil in different world of sensitivity and involvement. Her diaspora feminism is carved through the angle of woman as a mother. In words of Roy, 'Aparna thus far crafted as a docile immigrant woman who is unable to come to terms with both her identity and coerce

motherhood, undergoes an almost immediate transformation with Pranab's arrival' (Roy 10).

Aparna's care for her family by force and her voluntary caring for Pranab shows the facets of woman psyche which finds dissatisfaction with husband and emotional fulfilment in the company of lover. Patriarchal social Indian taboos bind Aparna and make her accept that she can not tear the garb of a married woman. Her economic dependency and mother image of an adult daughter do not allow her to accept the attraction towards Pranab openly. In the beginning of her married life Aparna is a compromise to Shyamlal in exchange with his parental consent to study abroad. Aparna is a subordinate counterpart of the Indian family at the foreign land. Shyamlal does not believe in Aparna's capacities apart from cooking and looking after the home and says, 'if you are so unhappy, go back to Calcutta.' (76). Financial independence in the third phase of Feminism made a woman an independent entity but Lahiri's Aparna is away from this liberty and individuality as well. Aparna's family is the picture of male dominated patriarchal society on the contrast background of American individualism. Aparna is 'in fact a perfect example of the victim of the muddled structure of diasporic relations and subsistence' (Pushkala 792).

Aparna's involvement in Pranab is brought out by the adult narrator Usha. Her observations in behavioural change in her mother's personality after meeting a family friend Mr. Pranab is remarkable. She understands her mother's inclination towards a talented Indian graduate from MIT and accepts his presence in his life as Pranab Kaku (uncle). Her admitting 'Pranab's significance in their family as occupying (every night) the forth chair at our square formica kitchen table and becoming a part of our family in practice as well as in name' (63). Usha sharply manages to find out the reasons behind her mother's feelings for Pranab. Usha assesses her father as 'he was wedded to his work, his research and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate' (65) Her observations of the common likings of Aparna and Pranab like poetry, music, politics bring out adult diaspora girl's finding similar grounds of two people at foreign land.

Her remark, 'I don't think even my birth made her as happy as Pranab' (63) speaks volumes. She feels the loose threads between her parents and finds out common threads between Aparna and Pranab objectively. In comparison with Aparna, her personality is groomed with American social set up. As an individual Indian American adult, she experiences boyfriends company and enjoys alcoholic addictions too. Usha, an Indian American girl is far more liberal as impacted by American cultural set up. In the presence of Pranab Kaku, she recognises her mother in different form and zeal. Through the projection of Aparna, Lahiri brings out the Indian American woman diaspora in a unique shade and through Usha she justifies the gradual changing attitude and aptitude of the Indian American woman after 70s.

Lahiri's *Only Goodness* exhibits both the predicaments and empowerments of women living as a second generation of diaspora feminism. Sudha is a scholar, educated, employable young woman is presented chiefly as a sister of Rahul. Lahiri delineates Sudha as a teen aged girl constructs friendly bond with her brother. She is an obedient daughter of her parents who comprises her social life limited to other demure girls in her class to fulfil the expectations of her parents. Her life seems to crush under the weight of the same. It is obvious with this presentation,

Our job is done', her father declared at the end of party posing for picture with Rahul and Sudha at either side. For years they had been compared to other Bengali children told about gold medals brought back from science fairs colleges that offered full scholarship. Sometimes Sudha's father would clip news-paper articles about unusually gifted adolescents, the boy who finished a Ph.D. at twenty a girl who went to Stanford at twenty and tape them to the refrigerator' (Unaccustomed Earth 130).

The children are expected to be grown up as ideal Bengali American children. Sudha envies her brother and adores him too. She feels him as more attractive of two of them and more intelligent than

her. This is also the impact of patriarchy where son is considered to be more important than a daughter.

Imposing parental attitude is seen revolted through Sudha's desire to liberate from this burden by enjoying alcohol with her partners and surprisingly with her brother. American individualism works on her to get an independent identity as a young girl. Her revolt reminds 'radical feminism' proposed by Kate Millett who states, 'It is often assumed that patriarchy is endemic in human social life, explicable or even inevitable on the grounds of human psychology' (Millett 1969). The father as an instrument of patriarchy works on Sudha. She loses her balance between ideal daughter of her parents and independent girl in the modern country is realistically presented by Lahiri. Her losing as an ideal daughter is seen through her offering and sharing alcohol to his brother since his childhood. Victimization of talented diaspora women can be observed in Sudha's response to 'cultural hybridity'. 'Sudha in *Only Goodness* succeeded in foreign, healthy, integrated hybrid cultural and familial identities in their happy home of family' (Subba Rao 537).

Sudha represents liberal feminism which stresses on women's potential to maintain equal opportunity in the society with their action and selections. Sudha's choice to live boldly and independently showcases her feminist reactions to the set patriarchy, her father imposes on her at home. Unfortunately, this boldness leads to the addictions of her brother spoiling his life. Sudha is vocal the burden of expectations on second generation women diaspora by the traditional first and second generation Indian American diaspora.

Nobody's Business again pens out a Bengali girl Sangeeta Bishwas. Sangeeta as Sang is an Indian American girl assimilating with American social life. She falls in love with Farouk, and Egyptian historian, a teacher at Harvard. Sang lives with her two mates Heather and Paul. Sang's adaptability with the American social set is seen with her accommodation with a girl and a boy which is not acceptable in Indian scenario. Sang is seen as a suitable dream bride to many of the Bengalis as she is pretty, smart, of thirty

and still single. Sangeeta's insistence to be called Sang presents disorientation from her native roots. Her reluctance to be governed by anyone obviously brings out her adoration for American individualism. Lahiri depicts third generation Indian American women through Sang who leaves behind their cultural roots and openly accepts the changing norms of globalization resulting due to diaspora. Her rejection to fit in the frame of educated, beautiful Indian wife exposes her liberated bent of mind which is celebrated in America and not acceptable in India.

Sang represents young, dynamic diaspora girl who annoys with continuous phone calls but with complete control over herself. She bears the insult to her adulthood and violation of her privacy. She adores true love and knows very well that youngsters who are chasing her and interested in a 'mythical creature created by an intricate chain of gossip, a web of wishful Indian community thinking in which she was an aging, overlooked poster child for years of bharatnatyam' (Unaccustomed Earth 176)

Hema and Kaushik is a wonderful fusion of two cultures par excellence since the author addresses the protagonist's alienation by constructing a text that indicates the impossibility of clinging to a center. In the story *Hema and Kaushik*, the protagonist Hema is under a great impact of family upbringing, her homeland Calcutta, temperament of her parents specially her mother, homeland traditions and lifestyle. As Lilia or Ruma, Hema too as second generation Indian-American Woman diaspora seeks rootedness through her mother. Her mother's bonding with other Indian family in America brings out search of woman for common cultural roots. As Lahiri's style of immigrant projection goes Sayyad says, 'while Lahiri's first generation immigrant are often haunted by the loss of their Mother-India their American born offsprings are haunted by the loss of their Mother Diaspora'. Hema and Kaushik's strong family ties bring out sharing and search of similar homeland identities at foreign land. As in childhood days Hema's connect with Kaushik in young age searches Indianess in American scenario. After a long gap she

meets him surprisingly but feels more keen than Navin. It is due to shared childhood bonding and memories work at the young age.

To conclude, on the vast canvass of Indian American Diaspora literature, contribution of Jhumpa Lahiri is remarkable. Myriad shades of Indian American diaspora women characters are spread through her fictions. Mainly her women characters weave a thread between Calcutta and Massachusetts or Boston. Almost all the women characters can be studied in two categories: the first generation Indian American Diaspora Women who accept the new land culture as the strong supporter of their male counterparts. Without compromising with their native land values and life style, they construct Indian Home on American land. The second generation Indian American Diaspora Women are connected with India with their parents. They are flexible to cope up with the American socio-cultural set up but somewhere connected to Indian culture as they are born and brought up with Indian values. Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* depicts the real-life expressions and feelings of Indian-American women.

Works Cited

- Doppalapudi Subba Rao, Pravin Joshi. "A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Women from Feminist Perspective." *Journal of Gujrat Research Society* Vol 2, Issue 16, Dec. 2019.
- I Pushkala. "Alienation and Displacement in JhumpaLahiri's Hell-Heaven and Unaccustomed Earth." *Infokara Research* Vol. 8, Issue 10, 2019.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *An Unaccustomed Earth*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009
- Millett Kate, "Sexual Politics." Chapter 2, *Theory of Sexual Politics*, Granada Publishing, 1969. marxist.org/subject/women/author/millett-kate/theory.htm
- Roy, Dibyadyuti. "Illicit Motherhood Recrafting Post-Colonial Feminist Resistance." *Humanities* February 14, 2019.
- Sharma, Kavita & Adesh Pal. *Theorizing and Critiquing Indian Diaspora*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2004.
- Shodhganga. "A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Novels." Shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/74650/8108_chapter%20ii.pdf.