Portrayal of Indian Women in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*

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The novel *Unaccustomed Earth* focuses on the Indian immigrants and the ways in which they shuttle between cultural milieus, developing capabilities to negotiate alien world. Lahiri also deals with the cultural division between American-born Indian children and their Bengali parents in this novel. This is the second collection of eight short stories grouped in two sections.

*Unaccustomed Earth* primarily deals with the generation gap, exposing the oppositional experiences of the first and the second generation immigrants. Ruma’s memories introduce us to her late mother who was an expatriate by nature. She died of heart failure as an anaesthesia triggered the anaphylactic shock during her gallstone surgery. Throughout her stay in America, she clings to her ex-status. She longs for the regular trips to India. Being the propagator of her traditions and nationality, Ruma’s mother sincerely performs her duties as a wife and mother, and tries to extend her culture, ethics, religion and language to her children.

Even in America, she continues to dress in her bright colour saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, and her jewels. She wants her children to learn Bengali. She had been strict so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. Being an outsider and a victim of culture-based marginalization: “She is on the cusp created by the intersection of two cultures, which one identifies as the space of the exile” (Chelva, 205). She continues to occupy this in-between space, quite distant from the present and clogged in the past. Swamped in her old culture she takes shelter in a multi-cultural existence. She manages to keep the Indian habits and lifestyle surviving in America.

She feels outrageous at Ruma’s decision to marry an American which jeopardizes her mother’s Indian identity and values; as a result, she continues to warn Ruma against it: “You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian that is the bottom line” (UE: 26). She witnesses a marginal character who cannot accept her ethnic values. Therefore, Ruma remains an émigré and never becomes an immigrant like Mrs. Bagchi. Mrs. Bagchi marries a boy she loved, but after two years of marriage he gets killed in a scooter accident. At twenty-six, she moves to America to decline her parents’ decision of her remarrying.

Being the victim of gender-based marginalization, she breaks all traditional bounds by adopting American lifestyle and subverts the patriarchal restrictions by deciding to remain single the rest of her life. She lives all alone and teaches at Stony brook University. She wears Western clothing, cardigans and black pull-on slacks and styled her thick dark hair in a bun. Therefore, her immigrant character is contrary to Ruma’s mother’s who yearned for those trips to India and continued to dress in a sari. Mrs. Bagchi has completely assimilated with the American culture by negating the insider-outsider conflict. She enters into a dialogic relation with the native culture and moves away from the periphery towards the centre. For Mrs. Bagchi identity is an invention: “... which is never complete, always in process, and always continued within, not outside, representation.” (Stuart Hall, 222)

Breaking the Indian patriarchal code of a woman being an obedient daughter, a sincere wife and a responsible mother, Mrs. Bagchi lives a life free of any such limitations. Though, she still loves her late husband and denies sharing her home with another man, yet her decision to befriend Ruma’s father in her old age is a drastic step against what Mickelson calls the role of a woman, “designed
by nature to bear, nurture children, act as her husband’s helpmate, help him to fulfil his potential and resign herself to her limitations”. (Anne Z Mickelson, 455) Mrs. Bagchi’s experience of displacement and her dual marginal status do not degenerate her identity but coax her to restructure a new self. Ruma’s mother was equally miserable with life in the suburbs and her husband seems to feel guilty for not having provided her with a happier life. She raised two children in America and spoke to them exclusively in Bengali, made elaborate Indian meals and owned more than two hundred saris. These aspects of her life in America show how she was able to cling to the Indian ways of life.

Jhumpa gives Mrs. Bagchi’s example to indicate that if a Bengali first generation woman joins the work force, she will naturally integrate into society and abandon many of the traditional Indian customs, such as dressing in saris. Mrs. Bagchi is an independent woman who has made a life for herself without the aid of a man, and here too she emerges as the exact opposite of Ruma’s mother, who if were widowed, would have moved in with her daughter instead of living by herself.

Ruma’s father recognizes that Ruma is echoing her mother in making herself overly dependent on her husband, and that she is leading a life as an isolated mother. This makes Ruma’s father concerned that his daughter will become as unhappy as his wife was, and he wishes for a different life for her.

Mrs. Bagchi stands for the opposite choice in life from Ruma and all the other female characters in Unaccustomed Earth. She immigrates to the USA by herself, completed a doctorate in Statistics and has been a lecturer at an American university for close to thirty years. Gayatri Gopinath has studied how the heterosexual Indian married woman is the norm within the Indian Diaspora, and how anyone who does not conform to this ideal is suspicious. Amongst these outsiders, she counts single women who “negotiate their function both as threat to home/family/nation and as perennially outside the confines of these entities”. (Gayatri Gopinath 261)

In Only Goodness Sudha double-majors in college, works hard and honours her parents by eating their food and helping around the house. However, she later chooses to live in London and to marry the white Englishman, Roger. In her choices she is able to reconcile the two sets of values, and seems to successfully negotiate her Indian American identity. When Sudha gives birth to a son, she names him Neel giving him a name that will allow him to appear both Indian and British or American.

Hell-Heaven seems to be a saga of broken hearts. The important woman characters: the narrator, her mother and Deborah are presented in such circumstances where they feel alienated in relation to their men. Aparna finds a source to get rid of her tedious and monotonous domestic life in Pranab, and their intimacy grows to such an extent that they might have been taken for husband wife. However, the entry of Deborah, an American, in the life of Pranab fetches a jealously bitter touch in Pranab’s relation where the latter denounces his family, the family which has cherished a lot of expectation from him. Significantly, she conflicts the Indian social values with the new and changing values that she dwells amid and suffers excruciatingly. Her daughter, the narrator, with her biological growth, adjusts with her American social milieu contrary to her advice. Aparna turns so isolated and at times frustrated that she appears to be grudging or complaining soul.

Usha is a perfect example of the victim of the fragmented pattern of diasporic relation and existence. Deborah, like Aparna, also suffers the pang of alienation caused by her inability to understand her husband despite their long conjugal life. Aparna has always feared the fact that someday Deborah will go out of Pranab’s life in preference of an American man, which is common conception among the most Indian about the Americans. However, it is Pranab who divorces Deborah despite their two children, and marries a Bengali woman, leaving Deborah in the lurch to look after the kids.

As discussed in the beginning, a woman is considered to be a metaphor or sign for her nationality and tradition. Therefore, Shibani realizes her liability to propagate her ethnicity and culture to her children. Hence, she continues to weave the fragments of her past into the texture of her American life, so as to relive her Indian experiences and have a multicultural existence. Parul, on the other hand, lived an immigrant’s life. Hema, being a second generation immigrant, develops a bond with Parul. Their attempts at assimilation act as an adhesive that strengthens this bond between them. Like second generation immigrants Parul wants to step out of her “double consciousness”. (Paul Gilroy, 1)

When at the first time Hema meets Parul, Parul is wearing slacks and a tunic, a silk scarf knotted at her neck. Parul breaks the Indian patriarchal code of conduct by wearing Western clothes, smoking and drinking every evening to be relished by the Choudhuris. Thus, we see that Parul adopts Americanization as a shelter against her cultural as well as gendered marginalization.

The second story of Part-II, Year’s End, is narrated by Kaushik. The story begins with Kaushik’s father Mr. Choudhuri, finding refuge in a second marriage after he loses his first wife, Parul, to cancer. Mr. Choudhuri marries Chitra who lost her spouse two years back to encephalitis, and is a school teacher in Kolkata. Chitra is thirty five years old, nearly twenty years younger than Mr. Choudhuri. She has two daughters–her elder daughter, Rupa, is ten years old and the younger one, Piu is seven years old. The main
focus in this story is on these three displaced female characters, who on account of the matrimonial alliance, have to leave Kolkata and move to Massachusetts. These characters pass through multicultural or assimilatory phases during their identity crisis.

In *Year’s End*, we encounter Dr. Chaudhuri’s second wife, Chitra, who has a hard time adjusting to suburban life in America. She is scared of being alone in the house, and does not know or care for American traditions. When Kaushik suggests her to learn driving, she answers, “Oh, no, “I would not like to learn, not as if she were incapable, but as if driving were beneath hers”. (UE: 270)

In her novels, Jhumpa Lahiri represented Indian women in manifold and conflicted position. She shows a considerable degree of cross-cultural sensitivity and a kind of ironic modernity, because of which she serves to separate the traditional from the westernized characters in her fiction. Her women characters are especially caught in immigrant situations. She has portrayed some of the problems engendered by the experience of migration and diaspora such as displacement, fragmentation, discrimination, marginalization and crisis of identity. While the first generation female immigrant feels proud of their cultural past, the second generation expresses its aberrations and deviations. In the process of self actualization the former do not like to violate the cultural dignity of their past while the latter neither demand it nor demonstrate it, living as they do in the American plenitude of cultural availability. Time also plays an important role, as gender issues involving first generation female immigrants might be rather different from those which the second generation female immigrants face. This difference may be related to the fact that first generation immigrants often have stronger connections and memories of their homeland than those of second generation.

*Unaccustomed Earth* focuses on immigrant’s adulthood and mixed marriages. Ruma and Adam, Pranab and Deborah, Amit and Megan, Sudha and Roger, Sudha’s brother Rahul and Elena married according to their choices with interracial partners rather than Bengali. Ruma, in the title story, marries an American and her relationship with her widowed father is fragile. Amit in *A Choice of Accommodations* marries an American woman and his life in America is in no way related to his homeland and parents. Pranab’s failed marriage with an American woman, Deborah, after twenty-three years and his union with a Bengali woman in *Hell-Heaven* convey the conventional reality of life that one’s root culture can never be forgotten but can be hidden for some time. Sudha, in *Only Goodness*, marries an Englishman, Roger. Her scrambled relationship with her brother, Rahul, and the eventual reunion mars her own marital life. Sangeeta’s relationship with an Egyptian Farouk in *Nobody’s Business* ends in disappointment. Usha in *Hell-Heaven* and Hema in *Going Ashore* sleep with many a man but setting a family of their own with any of their American boyfriends is still a question of sustenance. All these culturally-exiled characters struggle initially to accept either the native or the adopted culture but later they decide to move on with the culture of the settled country as they have had enough of humiliating experiences in every phase of their lives.

Jhumpa Lahiri sketches her characters in a very realistic manner. They are accounting for much of their suffering. Ashima and Aparna show how strong the cultural bonds to the homeland are for the ones who, in adulthood, move to a new country with a cultural tradition that is very different from their own. They both struggle to maintain the Indian culture at home, doing their best to perpetuate the traditions through their children, and dutifully performing the gender roles they were taught in India. Aparna, unlike Ashima, seems unhappy as she is married to an absent husband who has married her only to placate his parents’ complaints. Although she seems unhappy with her marriage and appears to be in love with another man, she does not end the relationship, even if she lives in a country where it would be perfectly acceptable. Besides, she dutifully performs the roles assigned to her, as a wife and mother. Apart from her unhappiness as a wife, she continues to follow the traditions the same way Ashima does, since she tries to teach her daughter all the Indian customs and warns her that she will not be allowed to behave like any other American girl. She cooks only Indian food at home, wears saris, and surrounds herself only of Bengali friends. The only change which can be noticed is that, also like Ashima, she seems to accept her daughter’s boyfriends and relationships when she becomes an adult. Ashima’s and Aparna’s attachment to the Indian culture is very similar and it seems to follow a pattern.

Both Aparna and Ashima are able to remain attached to the Indian culture, instead of the culture that surrounds them, because they still keep strong connections to their homeland. Because they befriend mostly Bengali friends, they are constantly reassured of their attitudes, no matter how different these attitudes are from the ones surrounding them in the public space. Lahiri has portrayed efficiently and effectively the problems of immigrants in the migrated country, even after having found a place to settle in. She projects the difficulties faced by an Indian wife in a foreign culture. Living in the foreign land, Lahiri’s female characters preserve their selves and try to establish their own identities as an Indian woman.

Works Consulted: