American Quandary: A Study of Father-Daughter Relationship in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Unaccustomed Earth

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Abstract:
This paper explores the father-daughter relationship between Ruma and her father in the Unaccustomed Earth, written by Jhumpa Lahiri to highpoint American quandary of the first and second generation Indian diaspora community, especially Bengali. Jhumpa Lahiri, a second generation Diaspora writer has represented her experiences and experiences of immigrants in general of frustration, marginalization, discrimination, rootlessness, displacement, fragmentation and discontinuity alienation, in the cultural discourse. However, she does not merely create “diasporic characters” but also characters who have adapted to the American ways of life. She does not write about ‘a specific cultural experience’ but acculturation in general. As an artist of the family portrait, Jhumpa Lahiri describes the lives of the first and second generations of Indian immigrants who have settled in America, her protagonists being second generation characters. The paper will study Ruma’s confrontation, traits of transformed behavior of her father as a father and a grandfather, the opportunities and challenges Ruma and her father face of belonging to two different cultures, and how continuously negotiate an intermediate position within and between two cultures.

Key words: Quandary, Alienation, Acculturation, Indignation
Introduction:

In the fast-changing post-modern world, immigration to the Western countries especially to the United States of America has become more a necessity than a luxury or an issue of ambition. It is well described in the words of historian James Truslow Adams from The Epic of America (1931) newcomers “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (404). Settling on a new land demands adjustment. However, immigration generally demonstrates hardship and unpalatable experiences for the settlers. They may face racism, disrespect and such undesirable behavioral trends from the Natives as well as may develop a sense of hopelessness, indignation, and perplexity. It may appear challenging to adjust to the socio-ethical norms of the foreign land since a quick return to the country of the origin is not possible. This has given rise to transnational writing. Writers like Lahiri have emphasized on diaspora experiences. However, excessive emphasis on the diaspora aspect of one’s writing may turn the readers’ attention away from the aesthetic and artistic qualities of a work of literature. Lahiri, therefore, focuses on the ‘mindscape of characters’ and ‘human predicament’ (Das 18) in its wider perspectives in her works. As a perfect artist she portrays the family pictures of Indian migrants and their lives in America, drawing upon the shades of love that color the characters as they crawl from childhood to old age: from ephemeral to lifetime love, from unreciprocated to accommodated love, from a child's love for a parent to a parent's for a child.

It is widely perceived that Americans enjoy high social mobility which plays a key role in attracting immigrants. It is also viewed that the United States is a classless society, scholars identify significant differences between the country's social classes, affecting socialization, language, and values. Americans' self-images, social viewpoints, and cultural expectations are associated with their occupations to an unusually close degree. While Americans tend greatly to value socioeconomic achievement, being ordinary or average is generally seen as a positive attribute. Typically, socialization studies examine the effects of parenting on children. However, parents’ role is very much considered in the Indian tradition. The Indian tradition has the rich heritage of a family system where the role of mother is to nurture the child and the father to provide finance to the family. It demands complete commitment on the part of parents so that the child is tied up with strong bonds with the parents till he acquires his final education and financial independency. Dependency of Indian reared children on their parents is in contrast to that of American Parents. Indian kids generally share their parents’ bedroom until they are grown up. American way of life
offers an altered picture where the same strong bond is never found. Often there are broken marriages where single parenting is found. Children do not share their parents’ bedroom after a certain age. They are provided separate rooms. They are independent to take decisions regarding their education, career, marriage etc. Therefore moving to the USA and raising a family is a tough task for most of the first generation Indian immigrants. Lahiri describes the constant comparison between the two lives—the Indian and the American.

**Inner Conflict of Indian American Woman:**

*Unaccustomed Earth* is a story of Ruma, a second generation Indian-immigrant, her inner conflict on the visit of her father who is a widower, her father’s arrival and stay with Ruma for a week and a developed bond between Ruma and her father and her father and her son during his short stay. The story narrates the inner conflict of an Indian American woman. Ruma represents the second generation of Indian immigrants. Her parents had arrived into America as immigrants. Her father has worked for a pharmaceutical company and has been retired. As opposed to the American way of life and sticking to the Indian tradition her mother has offered her whole life taking care of her children and her husband as a typical Indian woman. Ruma, is married to an American and is about to have her second child, when she is visited by her father, a retiree, in her new home in Seattle. Ruma and her husband have shifted to Seattle recently. She has been trying to get accustomed with the unfamiliar place. She is in perpetual dilemma and confronting with herself whether she will be able to accustom to her father’s needs in such condition. Therefore the visit of her father put her into uncountable feelings, bringing back old resentments and a deep reflection on her relationship with her past.

Jhumpa Lahiri, through the story of Ruma and her father, takes a chance to describe about the immigrants from India and their American-reared children. As far as first generation diasporic people are concerned they feel like fully grown trees that get uprooted. They are born and brought up in India, and moved to a foreign land leaving their homeland, because of some economic, political or marital reasons. So there is always a dilemma between their longing for homeland and belonging to the newly adopted land. At the same time they want to belong to both the lands. So there remains a constant conflict between the two. But the second generation diaspora characters face much pain than the first generation. They believe America as their home land as it is the lane on which they have taken birth. They feel, they are no way Indian but their Indian heritage captures their psyche to be a part of Indian traditions. They have been forced to follow the Indian norms inside the house. They follow American norms outside the house. So they are torn between the
two. This kind of difference in the condition of first and second generation diaspora people creates a dichotomy in all their relationships. However, the works written by immigrants’ children tend to focus on the complexity of relationships between the generation who lived the diaspora and their children, born in foreign lands, who, differently from their parents, had neither a native land to remember, nor traditions to be kept alive.

According to Indian tradition, it is the daughter who cares for the father in his old age, but Ruma does not feel prepared for that. She knows that the visit will take place between two of her father’s trips and that the next stop will be the city of Prague. Ruma’s assumptions about her father, his loneliness, his possible dependency on her, and the Seattle vacation as a possible signal for relocating to her household give insight into her inner conflict as an Indian American woman.

When the story begins, the reader is made aware of the ambiguity of Ruma’s feelings. On the contrary, at the same time she watches the news when he is scheduled to fly, to make sure there have not been any plane crash, she still keeps inside a series of motives to support her own attitudes. After her mother’s death, she anticipated the duty of communicating with him every evening. As the time passed by, the phone calls had become a unique weekly conversation, usually on Sundays afternoons. Her mother used to simply tell her the date and timing of her arrival, if she had wanted to visit her, her father phoned asking her to. This fact makes clear how different was the relationship she had with them.

Ruma had been engaged in a successful career in a law firm, but after the two weeks for mourning due to her mother’s death in an unsuccessful surgery she decided to quit her job and stay home, taking care of her child. In fact, her renounce started even earlier, when she asked for a part-time schedule after Akash was born. Unconsciously, Ruma left behind a condition that gave her independence as an individual to devote herself to household, repeating her mother’s social role. There were mornings she wished she could simply get dressed and walk out the door, like Adam. 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 p.11)

Seeing her father, she becomes aware of her having left behind the old connections, the contacts she had made with her father all these years. It also reveals Ruma’s discomfort before her father’s succinct communication, as well as her resentment for his being so emotionally distant from her. It also happens that she started thinking about certain past which she has never thought before. Memories of her life with her parents start to appear in her mind: the perfectibility of her mother
running her household; the excellence of her ability as a cook, which had never been praised by
her father, her mother’s devotedness to the family, her care and affection for her brother and
herself. Her loneliness and the childbirth proximity make her remember how much her mother’s
presence had been important when Akash was born, giving her a feeling of safeness and comfort.
Her mother, in all her traditionalism, her linkage to roots, was her true homeland. It is but a fact
that Ruma had built a paradoxical relationship with her mother along the years. At the same time
she recognized in her mother attributes she herself would never have, she rejected submission to
tradition. The essence of that relationship was the conflict Ruma had faced all her life: her
difficulty to understand who she actually was and to what world she belonged.

**Father- Daughter relationship:**

With the advent of Psychoanalytic theory, modern writers have centered on human mindscape and
human relationships for their writings. Writers have also concentrated on human relationships
keeping in mind modern realities of diasporic experiences. Diasporic writers portray the human
predicament in a foreign land, away from their home lands or roots, attempting to secure a place
for themselves and constantly trying to find meaning in their relationships. Globalization has given
a new kind of social order. Family plays its role as a training ground for all social relationship. In
the family father plays a significant role in our male-dominated society. Though the word ‘father’
indicates duty, affection, and selfless devotion yet with the advent of the ‘Feminist’ theory, father
is supposed to be a carrier of the prevailing or customary patriarchal system. A daughter’s
relationship with his father is usually her first male-female relationship. Daughter looks at this
relationship as a shadow of her relationship with her husband in future. Thus a daughter’s psyche
is very significantly affected through this relationship. Ruma’s relationship with her father has
been given a special touch to explore this complicated relationship by Jhumpa Lahiri in
*Unaccustomed Earth*. Thus *Unaccustomed Earth* very appropriately displays the dichotomous
relationship of the immigrant father and daughter. In this story the father tries his best to get the
unaccustomed earth, accustomed to his daughter, by renewing the old ties and imitating new ties
with her daughter Ruma and her son Akash. The story begins with a retrospective of Ruma’s
father’s latest activities: his travelling in Europe, after his retirement from a pharmaceutical
company. It also reveals Ruma’s discomfort before her father’s brief communication. She
expresses her resentment for her father being emotionally distant from her. After retirement and
after being a widower, his father has started touring to various places. He has also developed a
habit to write post cards to Ruma, while on tour. The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma
had ever received from her father. In her thirty-eight years he had never had any reason to write to her. It was a one-sided correspondence; his trips were brief enough so that there was no time for Ruma to write back, and besides, he was not in a position to receive mail on his end (…) The cards were addressed to Ruma; her father never included Adam’s name, or mentioned Akash. It was only in his closing that he acknowledged any personal connection with them. “Be happy, love Baba”, he signed them, as if the attainment of happiness were as simple as that. (Unaccustomed Earth, p. 4). As young children Ruma and her brother Romi were excessively attracted to American way of life. They did not like the Indian way of living. Although they had never opposed to it. As a result, when she started dating to Adam, an American she kept on hiding from her parents till the date they got officially engaged. Her parents considered her choice as a betrayal from the roots. They told she had opted to refuse her origins. Even before her marriage, it had been difficult to maintain balance between the traditional ways her parents had been imposing and the attraction of the American way of life which resulted in a cold, distant tie. This turned into a longer break when she moved to Seattle along with Adam and her son Aakash.

Ruma has not developed any special relationship with her father as daughter when she was young. Even after her marriage, it was her mother who used to call her.

The proximity of her father’s visit brings her back to conflict. Personally, she fears that, with the end of his trips, he might come to her home to stay, making her recall old habits she is no more used to, and reviving the past she had once buried. On the other hand she “feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to” (Unaccustomed Earth, p.7).

Unconsciously, Ruma left behind a situation that granted her the independence as an individual, and then went on to devote herself to her household, repeating her mother’s social role. There were mornings she wished she could simply get dressed and walk out the door, like Adam. 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, p.11). She herself had tried to keep one foot in the past, teaching Akash a few words in Bengali, but when her son became a bit older, she did not have enough discipline to teach him. In fact, her world was divided into two languages: Bengali, in childhood, and English, in her adult life. Thus Ruma had also transferred her dilemma to her son.
Before Ruma’s father comes and stays with her, Ruma is reluctant about the idea of her father living with her in the same house. She was torn between her duty as a Bengali daughter and her duty as an American wife. But when her father comes to Seattle and stays with her, the relationship between father and daughter undergoes a transformation. She notices the helping and caring attitude of her father. The father is no more dependent. He prepares breakfast for himself and offers his help to Ruma. He is not choosy for dishes at lunches and dinners. Having married to an American husband, Ruma has forgotten to prepare Indian food, speak in Bengali (Indian Language) and follow certain traditions. All these have caused dilemma before her father’s arrival. Her father notices the changes in Ruma after her having become a mother. Through his eyes, the change in Ruma becomes more intense. The young rebel from the past has been turning into a woman who resembles her mother. One more chance Ruma gets to know her father when he tells her about her career. It leads her to think about her father in a new mode. The man who tells her to go back to work, not to live for other people, as her mother had done, is almost an unknown man: a father who never told her how demanding her mother had been, her unwillingness to appreciate the life he had worked hard to provide; a father who was afraid that she would repeat her mother’s frustration, becoming equally unhappy; a father who gave Akash the attention he had never given to his own children. Lahiri presents the attempts made by her father to make a garden in his daughter’s home.

Ruma’s father starts his old hobby of gardening at her new home at Seattle. He purchases the plants, seeds and fertilizer. His intense care has been seen in such little steps that he takes to add his own contribution to beautify the home. While doing so he was quite sure that his daughter or son-in-law would never give any attention to the grooming of the garden. He wants to teach them the value of tending plants on an unaccustomed earth. Here plants symbolizes the uprooted diaspora people. The diaspora people can get their roots fixed in an unaccustomed earth only if they get themselves assimilated in the host-land with whole hearted efforts.

After seeing her father’s involvement with her son Akash, Ruma’s behavior undergoes a change and she wants her father to continue staying with them. She says, “You can have the whole downstairs. You can still go on your trips whenever you like. We will not stand in your way” (Unaccustomed Earth, p.52). Lahiri depicts that while living in an unknown culture the modes of thinking of diasporas are mingled with the dominant American culture and undergo drastic modifications. Indians prefer to be Americanized while staying in America. The individualistic thinking of Ruma’s father and his sense of independence is obvious from his statement, “But this
is your home not mine” (Unaccustomed Earth, p.52). The immigrant feeling of being marginalized pierces the familial lives. The father doesn’t wish to continue living in his daughter’s house. His whole heartedness in planting shows his efforts to add his own contribution to beautify the home. Through a detailed picture of gardening, involvement of Aakash in the whole process, his attachment to his Dadu and change in Ruma’s thinking for her father, Lahiri gets the inner out of her characters. It is only through the gardening of her father at their old house that Ruma’s father had cultivated favorite plants of his wife (Ruma’s mother). It shows that her father was thus close to her mother. By gardening, he not only renews his old ties with his wife, with Bengali foods, with everything that reminds him of his golden past, but also forges new ones.

After seeing her father’s involvement with her son Akash, Ruma’s behavior undergoes a change and she wants her father to continue staying with them. It is not surprising that while Ruma’s father sees how much she resembled her mother these days, she herself realizes that he has become more Americanized than she had thought possible. The dilemma faced by a daughter, who wants her father to stay with her while at the same time, is also afraid of what her husband would think, whether it will disturb the harmony of their home is well portrayed. The father also wants to stay with them because he likes the place very much but knows that it is their home and not his. Lahiri writes, “He knew that it was not for his sake that his daughter was asking him to live here. It was for hers… he didn’t want to be a part of another family… he didn’t want to live in the margins of his daughter’s life, in the shadow of her marriage” (Unaccustomed Earth, p.53).

**Conclusion:**

Both Ruma and her father face some kind of dilemma while adjusting on the same land. The father-daughter relationship undergoes a very drastic change in the story. In the beginning, they feel like strangers. The father’s helping attitude plays a significant role in changing the daughter’s perception that she is not burdened with an added responsibility of taking care of a man of seventy but she feels relieved in many ways that her responsibilities are shared. It is found that when Americans are asked to rate the roles different adults play in the lives of children, fathers came in a poor third--behind mothers and grandparents. In “Unaccustomed Earth” Lahiri does not propose Americanization as a desired identity which could satisfy her character. Ruma’s father advocates resuming the career path. In this way he suggests adapting the American culture. He believes in work, self-reliance and such American values. But he does not push Ruma to complete acculturation. The story suggests that it is not possible to discard the original roots on a foreign land. The second generation diaspora are required to preserve the consciousness of their
original roots and accept their living in the new land. This message is conveyed best by the example of Ruma’s father’s influence on his grandson, Akash. Since Akash is the third generation, he is “an American child” even more than Ruma was. The older he grows, the more unwilling he is to learn and practice origins of Indian culture that Ruma wants to pass on to him. Ruma gives up her efforts but her father does not agree to this situation. During his short visit he tries to acquaint Akash with at least basic elements of Bengali culture, teaching him simple things: colors and numbers in Bengali. He also teaches him some aspects of Indian tradition such as eating with fingers or taking off shoes when entering the house. In the story Lahiri encourages a celebration of hybridity but with a view to differences between generations of immigrants. The process of acculturation and growing roots into the host country becomes a homeland for next generations. At the same time it is undeniable and important that one must be aware of one’s origin. The message is reinforced by the image of planting a garden, organizing a fragment of landscape near Ruma’s new house. The *Unaccustomed Earth*, thus discusses a new model of American identity. It is Indian American identity. It is performed on the edges of cultures or in border situations. The hybridity of the characters from the story directs attention to the idea of multiculturalism. It is celebration of cultural diversity and preservation of one’s ethnic roots.
References


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