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ROOTLESS SURVIVAL IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH*

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ABSTRACT

Though born in London, Jhumpa Lahiri, the daughter of Indian immigrants, moved to Rhode Island when she was three. She studied English Literature at Barnard College, and subsequently earned masters degrees in English, Comparative Literature, and Creative Writing, as well as a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies, from Boston University. Lahiri taught creative writing at both Boston University and The Rhode Island School of Design. The title story *Unaccustomed Earth* takes its theme from a brief quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House." "My children will have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth." The section in which this quote appears clearly demonstrates this theme of loss. *Unaccustomed Earth* is referring to the new soil in which children of immigrants sink their roots, and it very much describes the struggles of Lahiri's second generation American characters. The present paper shows Lahiri's themes of family, love, and loss, as well as the alienation inherent in the Indian-American immigrant experience in the novel *Unaccustomed Earth*.

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Man is accustomed to his land and culture. Man tends to migrate for variety of reasons. And migration makes man's life unsafe and unhappy as he or she is unaccustomed to that part of earth. Such pitiable situation is depicted in Jhumpa Lahiri's diaspora short story "Unaccustomed Earth".

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* is another example of diaspora writing. Her first book of short stories "Interpreter of Maladies" (1999) earned her many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for the fiction in 2000 and she won Frank O' Connor award for her short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Her first novel "The Namesake" is also an immigrant tale which has won the appreciation of readers as well as creative critics.

The world has turned into a global village and we all, irrespective of our roots, global citizens. There is lot of upheaval that calls for a fair amount of adjustment at all levels—be it social, cultural, emotional or individual. In the story, the author has analyzed the reasons behind the disharmony in relations. It requires the person to come out of his protective shell and adapt himself fully with changes in and around as the new land demands compromises and adjustments.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* is about wandering people who are exposed to unaccustomed human situations and attitudes. A middle aged man realizes that the death of his wife has opened up his unexpected ways. In the story, Ruma, a Bengali-American lawyer, lives in Seattle

with her American husband Adam and her child Akash. As she bears her second child, her father from Pennsylvania visits her, to spend a week, after her mother's death, in between his tours of foreign lands that he frequents every now and then. Ruma's husband had allowed her to leave her job as she prefers to stay at home to take care of her child, something exactly what her mother did. Adam was doing everything to make Ruma happy. But there is vacuum in her life which has gradually crept in. Ruma's parents had initially objected to her marriage with an American but after a period of time they relented.

The death of her mother makes Ruma's father a solitary bird, which struggles to find a protective nest. Her father retired from the pharmaceutical company where he had worked for many decades and so her father becomes a tourist in Europe. He proposed to visit Ruma's house in Brooklyn(USA). She is obsessed with a thought of having to look after her aging father. Adam feels her father would help her in house during her pregnancy. But Ruma disagrees because she feels that her father might become a responsibility and an added demand. She wishes that her mother would be better for care taking.

Despite all this, Ruma receives her father at the airport. She remembers her dead mother while moving with her father. He brings some gifts for his grandson Akash. She realizes her father is moving with another woman named Mrs. Bagchi. Akash has never seen his grandfather. Her father becomes nuisance in the house and so she does not treat him properly. Her father plays with Akash and meanwhile grows a garden in her house and builds fragrant relationship with flowering plants. Unable to leave in his daughter's house, he is ready to leave her house and plants for a departing lunch at hotel with Ruma's family. He would go to Pennsylvania to meet Mrs. Bagchi. Ruma bids farewell to her father like a mother because she considers him a child now. He kisses to her cheek and expects a new garden and a baby. Her father once again becomes a lone wanderer to find some solace, wifely care and motherly affection. The feelings of wandering migrants and their helpless situation in which they are forced to re-adjust themselves in the new

culture are mentioned in Jasbir Jain's Introduction to "Writers of Indian Diaspora" "The expatriate as he moves from one culture to another may need to locate himself/herself afresh in relation to the centre"(p.16)

Ruma's father ensures that he is not taken as a burden by his daughter. Ruma wants him to stay back with them as she knows that her father is not a liability, rather an asset. But her father knows why she is interested in asking him to move in permanently. He does not want to sacrifice his freedom at this stage.: "He did not want to be part of another family, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it. He did not want to live in the margins of his daughter's life, in the shadow of her marriage."

American culture, unlike Indian culture, rests heavily on individualism. Individual freedom is the uppermost thing. Ruma's parents had found it hard to accept initially but later it set in: "He remembered his children coming home from college, impatient with him and his wife, enamored of their newfound independence, always wanting to leave. It had tormented his wife and though he never admitted it, had painted him as well. He could not help thinking, on those occasions, how young they had once been, how helpless in his nervous arms, needing him for their very survival, knowing no one else. He and his wife were their whole world. But eventually that need dissipated, dwindled to something tenuous, something that threatened at times to snap."(p.54)

Ruma accidentally discovers her father's inclination towards an Indian woman Mrs. Bagchi, through an undelivered postcard and gets to understand the secret behind his father's agility and love for life, his passion for the foreign tours, his reluctance to stay back with his daughter. She connects all pieces together. Finally, she affixes a stamp on the postcard for the mailman to take away as she accepts the relationship status of her father who exercised his freedom of choosing, just like her, to live his life in an exuberant manner unlike the majority of old people who give up their zest for life simply to be at the mercy of their children.

The title suggests various connotations. It may be presumed that Ruma is unaccustomed to

immigrant life style and so, she can't provide shelter to her widowed father. Ruma's father is unadjusted to his mother land where he lost his wife and other places on earth like Europe and USA where he lost hope of finding solace. He is unaccustomed to the unexpected events in life. The essence of the story lies in Lahiri's description of the little boy Akash's agony. The grandfather's sudden disappearance shakes the innocent world of Akash. The boy is greatly disappointed and suffers in silence. He is unprepared to meet the unexpected shocks and surprises in human relationships. But, his question as to why human beings get separated is an unanswered question. The following dialogue between Ruma and Akash undoubtedly touches the unnamed emotions in human heart:

"Where's Dadu?" Akash asked as she was finishing her tea.

"He went home today."

"Why?"

"Because that's where he lives."

"Why?" in her son's small face she saw the disappointment

She also felt.....Akash went to the kitchen door and tried the knob. Looking through the glass at the yard.

"I want Dadu."(p.57)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* consists of eight stories which are replete with insecurities that envelope the Bengali immigrants in a foreign land, in their quest to stay afloat and prove their mettle. They miss their roots when they see their children going the American way. The adoption of a foreign culture can never possibly be in totality. Their emotional and psychological planes are corded by the cultural displacement, leaving them insecure and alienated. There is a parallel fragmenting and evolving of identity. The isolation shows a disturbing trend in the lives of characters who try hard to keep their pecker up, against all odds as they strive hard to survive on foreign shores.

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