



Cultural Hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

¹Ms S. Nandhini, M. Phil Research Scholar, SFR College for Women, Sivakasi.

²Dr P. Prasanna Devi, Research Guide, Assistant Professor of English, SFR College for Women, Sivakasi.

ORCID: ¹<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3385-5024>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5203211

Abstract

“Unaccustomed Earth” is short story collection deals with the lives of immigrants by Jhumpa Lahiri. Immigrants are the ones who have taken residence in any other country of the world other than their native. These immigrants find it difficult to mingle with the host country and its culture. Many of them often face the challenges of exile, loneliness, constant search for identity and cultural dilemmas. The first-generation immigrants undergo all those issues and long to return to their homeland. Whereas, second-generation immigrants feel alienated from their own parents (first-generation immigrants) due to their upbringing in the host country. The second-generation immigrants being able to follow the behavioural pattern of the host country develops a hybrid cultural identity by assimilating to the host culture. This paper focuses on the hybrid cultural identity of the second-generation immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's “Unaccustomed Earth”.

Keywords: Immigrants, Assimilation, Culture, Hybridity.

Hybridity is a term coined by Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture*. Hybridity is all about mixer of two different things or notions which leads to the emergence of new one. In his work, *The Location of Culture* Homi K Bhabha says that hybridity is all about the in-betweenness of the other. People of once colonised countries become hybrids which is an outcome of their colonial experience. On the other hand, People who migrate from one country to another also experience such kind hybridization. Immigrant experience is not only about the loss of homeland, alienation and exile but also describes the cultural assimilation of the immigrants for better survival in the host country. Thus diaspora studies “began with the sense of cultural segregation, has matured to a phase of acculturation under the impact of globalization and glocalization” (Mukerjee 15). The concept of amalgamation leads to the in-betweenness or other of the immigrants. It paves the way for the emergence of ‘Third Space’. Homi K Bhabha on “The Third Space” writes that:

All forms of culture are constantly in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom... the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something



different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation (qtd. in Mukerjee 16).

Immigrants leave their native country and moves to another country for various reasons. These immigrants often find themselves in exile, alienated in the host country struggling to adopt the culture of the host country. Some of those immigrants' especially first generation immigrants aspiring to have a better and peaceful life try to adopt the host culture. But they are not able to come out from the cultural roots of the home country. It makes them hybrid being as they could not able to develop an identity in the host country and could not keep their native identity. Unlike the first generation immigrants, their off springs second-generation immigrants are able to build an identity in the host country. They often met with struggles as they torn between the duties and self. Though they are able to create an identity of their own in the host country due to the influence of their parents it becomes hard for them to create an entirely new identity of their one.

In earlier days, people forced to move away from their country to another as slaves without their will. And so, they struggled to settle themselves in the host country. Later people moved from their own country to another for better prospective life. The first generation of immigrants finds themselves not able to mingle with the host culture and had a strong sense of belongingness towards home country. Whereas, the second-generation immigrants wanted to create an identity of their own in the host country through empowerment. They desire to construct an identity by making themselves an empowered being in the host country. Mainly these immigrants try to cope up with the host culture in order to escape marginalization.

Jhumpa Lahiri herself being an immigrant elegantly presents the life of immigrants in all her works. Lahiri is a child of three continent developed complex cultural identity. Lahiri was aware about the critics describing herself and her works. She also wrote about this in an essay:

Take, for instance, the various ways I am described: as an American author, as a British-born author, as an Anglo-Indian author, as an NRI (non-resident Indian) author, as an ABCD lost and found author (ABCD stands for American born confused "desi"- and is an acronym coined by Indian nationals to describe culturally challenged second-generation Indians raised in the US). According to Indian academics, I've written something known as "Diaspora fiction"; in the US, it's "immigrant fiction". (qtd. in Fine 212).

This complex cultural identity can be evidently seen in all the characters of Lahiri. All the works of Lahiri not only brings out the loss of roots but also the assimilation of the immigrants to the host culture. These immigrants adopt the cultural ideas of host culture by empowering them. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, all the characters of Lahiri are empowered in the alien land. *Unaccustomed Earth* is a collection of eight short stories with five independent and three interconnected stories.

All the second-generation immigrants developed hyphenated identity in their process of assimilation to the host culture by empowering them. The process of assimilation begins



from their earlier childhood itself. Many of the second-generation immigrants forgot or gave up their mother tongue which is Bengali. Some of those second-generation immigrants voluntarily gave up their mother tongue and some of those due to their prolonged stay and education in the host country made them eventually slip their language. Accepting the language of the host country can be considered as an important aspect in the process of hybridization. Peter Burke call this acceptance as linguistic hybridity or mixing of the tongues. Thus Linguistic hybridity of all the second-generation immigrants is shown in all the characters of Lahiri.

Many of the second-generation immigrants felt no connection with the country of origin or homeland and so giving up the language is easier for them. This very fact is evidently seen in the story “Unaccustomed Earth”. Ruma, the protagonist of the story “Unaccustomed Earth” is unable to read the letter that her father wrote to Mrs. Baschi in Bengali. Usha in “Hell-Heaven” also forgot her Bengali and communicates in English with others. She says, “Deborah and I spoke freely in English, a language in which by that age, I expressed myself more easily than Bengali, which I was required to speak at home” (69). In “A Choice of Accommodations” Amit was appreciated by his friends for his good English.

Homi K Bhabha says “Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of the self to other” (35). According to Stuart Hall, cultural identities are “never singular but multiply constructed across different- often interesting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions” (qtd. in. Singh and Singhvi 189). These immigrants try to set themselves in a space between the host country and their home country. This paves way for the emergence of Third Space coined by Homi K Bhabha. The concept of Third space can be found in the work of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Immigrants often develop hybrid identity as it is unavoidable in the era of globalization to avoid marginalization in the alien land. Peter Burke in his *Cultural Hybridity* said that “a process of hybridization that assists the economic globalization as well as being assisted by it” (2). The process to develop hybrid identity can be found in the social, economic and political spheres of immigrant lives in the alien land. But of culture it has to be brought under the sense of “attitudes, mentalities and values and their expression, embodiment or symbolization in artefacts, practices and representations” (Burke 7). It can be found in the first and second-generation immigrants of Lahiri in *Unaccustomed Earth*.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, all the lead protagonists of Lahiri vividly presents the hybrid cultural identity through their way of life. The process of hybridization is also known as the loss of traditional roots and assimilation to the host culture. Unlike their immigrant parents who are first generation immigrants, the second-generation immigrants found it easier to assimilate to the host country. Second-generation immigrants consider the host country as their country of origin or homeland. According to them, the place of origin is their homeland and so assimilating to the host culture is much easier for them. Many of the second-generation protagonists of Lahiri are born and brought up in the host country i.e. the USA or England.



The Title story “Unaccustomed Earth” from the collection *Unaccustomed Earth* picturises the life of second-generation immigrant Ruma. Though she is a daughter of Indian immigrants, she always feels herself as an American and leads her life according to her wish. She takes various jobs in the summer despite her parents’ opposition which is not acceptable in the Indian culture and is part of the western culture. It is revealed by her father in the story, that: “Even in high school, in the summers, on working as a busgirl at a local restaurant, the sort of work their relatives in India would have found disgraceful for a girl of her class and education” (40). In Indian culture children are not allowed to work and make their pocket money, they are expected to depend on their parents. Ruma did not follow this culture and lived her life as she wants by doing various jobs and earns for her needs. When it comes to her marriage she decides to get married with Adam, an American. It is a shock to her parents who are not ready to accept the marriage. She knew that this would happen and so she never revealed about her previous relationships with the other American men to her parents. In the Indian culture the pre-marital relationships are not acceptable and this is another example of her hybrid identity.

Stuart Hall in his “Cultural identity and Diaspora” says, “Cultural identity, in the second sense, is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”” (Hall 5). This very fact is exemplified through the first and second-generation immigrants in the *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the first story, “Unaccustomed Earth” Ruma’s father is the first generation immigrant who tries to maintain a balance between the country of origin and the country of his residence. Ruma’s father worked in the pharmaceutical company and is retired after the death of his wife and “began travelling around Europe” (3). When he visits Ruma’s new bought house in Seattle to stay with her and her three-year-old son, Akash until his next tour to Prague. There Ruma finds the Americanization of her father and the relationship between a father and daughter gets better. It is understood by Ruma at the very sight of her father when he reaches her home in Seattle. “He was wearing a baseball cap that said POMPEII, brown cotton pants and a sky-blur polo shirt, and a pair of white leather sneakers. She was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age. With his grey hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere” (11). At his old age he finds himself comfortable with the alien culture.

Mrs. Bagchi is also a Bengali immigrant from India; she is a widower with just two years of married life. Mrs. Bagchi married a boy with whom she was in love with, but her husband died in a motorbike accident. She becomes a widow with just two years of married life. She ran away from home and came to USA as she fears that her parents would urge her to marry again. Mrs. Bagchi has become self-reliant with her “doctorate in statistics and taught since the seventies at Stony Brook University” (8). It was in their package tour Ruma’s father and Mrs. Bagchi met each other. “Being only two Bengalis in the tour group, naturally they’d struck up a conversation. They started eating together, sitting next to one another on the bus. Because of their common appearance and language, people mistook them for husband and wife” (9). It is the country of their origin and nostalgia that brought them closer to each other and they fall for each other. Though they love each other company, they are not



ready to get married especially, Mrs. Bagchi: “She is adamant about not marrying, about never sharing her home with another man, conditions which made the prospect of her companionship all the more appealing” (9). Mrs. Bagchi represents Indian culture when she decides to live with the memory of her husband and not get married again. But Mrs. Bagchi’s decision to share a room with Ruma’s father in Prague represents her amalgamation to the host culture. They do not want to marry and do not want to make their relationship public. Thus, Ruma’s father and Mrs. Bagchi are the perfect example of the ‘other’ and it reveals their contradictory nature and complex identity.

Homi K Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* says, “...we find ourselves in the movement of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside inclusion and exclusion etc”(1). This is applicable to Ruma’s father in the story “Unaccustomed Earth”. Unlike Mrs Bagchi, Ruma’s father is not ready to assimilate himself to the host culture in his initial days. After the death of his wife he feels a vacuum in his life and feels that he leads his life not for himself but for others. Now he wanted to lead his life for himself and decides accept the American culture. Though he and Mrs. Bagchi assimilate themselves to the host culture, their respect for the country of their origin has not been changed.

Ruma is deeply affected by the death and memory of her mother, and so when she conceives again she decides to become a stay at home mother. In spite of her assimilated American identity, she wants to give her career and replace her mother’s role by taking care of her children. Ruma’s decision is not appreciated by her father and he keeps insisting Ruma to go to work. Ruma’s appearance and decision remind him of his early marriage says. Mukerjee opines that, “He feels that though his daughter is a creature of the American soil, yet, her identity has not been affected by the global coordination. Rather she is led by the internal indices of her will, which makes her stand on the same ground with her India-raised mother” (24). It shows Ruma’s inbetweenness or complex cultural identity.

Despite her upbringing in the host country, Ruma reflects the Indian culture. Ruma finds about her father’s relationship with other woman through the letter that her father written to Mrs. Bagchi. She couldn’t read the letter as it is written in Bengali but she assumes what it could be. “The woman in the video, the reason for his good spirits, the reason he did not want to live at Seattle. The reason he ‘d wanted a stamp that morning. Here, in a handful of sentences she could not even read, was the explanation, the evidence that it was not just with Akash her father had fallen in love” (58). Ruma attached the stamp on the letter and sends it to its destination. Thus her decision to send the letter shows that she accepted other woman in the life of her father, which shows her hyphenated identity.

Lahiri in “Hell-Heaven” also portrayed the life of Usha the protagonist of the story. Usha is a second-generation immigrant who find herself existed in the Third space and contented to live as ‘other’. This story portrayed the life of Usha as well as her mother Aparna, who finds it difficult to accept her “Americanization”. Aparna accompanied her husband to America, after they get married. Aparna couldn’t assimilate to the western culture unlike her husband, Shyamal Da. So, she spends her life in solitude and finds solace from her



daughter Usha. When she meets Pranab, a Bengali immigrant she becomes lively and happy. She falls in love with him, but Pranab married Deborah whom he met in the college. Aparna hated Deborah as she becomes jealous of her and she predicted that Deborah would divorce him. Though it becomes true it's not Deborah who broke their marriage but Pranab. This incident created an impact on Aparna and her view about the American culture. Growing old, Shayamal Da becomes fonder of his wife Aparna and she even goes to college to obtain a degree. Finally, Aparna learns to accommodate herself in the host country thereby accepting her life in the Third space.

Usha, daughter of Aparna being born in the host country she couldn't follow the culture of the roots of her origin. When her mother forced her to follow the dress code and food habit of India, she finds it difficult and starts to develop hatred for her mother. She has been very close to her mother since her birth, but as grows up she drifts apart from her leaving her mother Aparna alone. And so, Usha hides her American side to her mother like going to parties and her relationship with American boys. But when Aparna accepts the Americanization of her daughter, their relationship becomes straightened and their bond becomes closure. Thus, the second and first generation immigrants initially struggle to accept their identity but slowly begin to live in the Third Space.

Pranab Chakraborty is also a cultural hybrid in the story "Hell-Heaven". Pranab came to US for his studies and befriends Usha's mother Aparna whom he met at the park. He becomes close to Usha's family to get rid of homesickness. Initially, Pranab do not want to mingle with the American culture as he feels alienated and finds solace in the house of Aparna. Oneday, he announced everyone that he is going to marry Deborah an American much to the shock of the family. His decision to marry an American can be considered as his decision to accept the American culture. After twenty-three years of his married life, they got divorced. Pranab is the one who initiated divorce idea. In Indian tradition, marriage is sacred bond which is unbreakable. Thus, he becomes cultural hybrid by breaking the marriage with Deborah.

"A Choice of Accommodations" is the story of the protagonist, Amit Sarkar. Like all the other protagonists in the *Unaccustomed Earth*, Amit Sarkar is also the son of Bengali immigrant parents. But Amit is not forced to follow the culture by his parents and even they criticized their own country of origin. So he has no pressure to follow the Bengali culture and becomes the perfect example for amalgamation with hybrid identity.

When Amit's parents move to Delhi, he was put up in a boarding school at Longford. Among all the students at Longford Amit is the only Indian. The process of Americanization of Amit begins from his school life at Longford. Eventually, his married life to Megan, an American and becomes a father of two daughters. "A Choice of Accommodations" as the title suggests Amit made a choice of assimilating to the host culture to live in the 'present' and not of the 'past'. Thus Amit is the perfect example of Hybridity.

"Only Goodness" is the fourth story in the collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the story, Lahiri presents the inner psyche of immigrants' children who demand the liberal American upbringing from their parents. Sudha and Rahul is the protagonist of this story.



Sudha is an elder sister of Rahul who cares for her brothers' life. Sudha shines academically; goes to penn for graduation and later gets an M.A in International relations, followed by a Second M.A from the London School of Economics. According to Sudha, London is her home where she was born and has childhood memories and not India. It shows that the idea of homeland differs for the second-generation immigrants from their parents. According to them the place where they born is their homeland. Sudha marries Roger, an English man and leads a happy life with him. Sudha gives importance to her personal identity than her familial duties "[...] when the familial identity pose a potential threat to the self" (Fine 217).

The second part of the collection deals with the three interconnected stories, which tells the story of Hema and Kaushik. The first story tells about the Americanization Kaushik's parents and Kaushik's inability to accommodate himself in the alien land. But Hema's parents followed Indian culture while living in the foreign land. Hema admired Kaushik's parents and their lavish life style. She wanted her parents to mingle with the mainstream American culture. Throughout the story Hema compares the lives of two immigrant Indian-Bengali families in America.

The second story of the second part "Year's End" explains the life of Kaushik, who mourns over the death of his deceased mother. It describes the 'in-betweenness' of the second-generation immigrant, Kaushik. The story begins with the second marriage of Kaushik's father to a much younger widow Chitra. Despite his American way of living Kaushik finds it difficult to accommodate with the new found family, especially, Chitra who is a replacement for his dead mother. After fighting with his step-sister, he ran away from the house with all the pictures' of his mother. He buried the box which is filled with the pictures of his mother. "I was only had a stick and a sharp-edged rock to work with the hole was not impressive, but it was deep enough to conceal the box" (291). Kaushik's decision to bury the pictures of his mother shows his desire to move forward in his life by accepting his new founded family, which is an outcome of his hybridity. Thus, the second-generation immigrants of Lahiri struggle initially due to their emotional displacement. They were born and brought up in the alien land but were expected to follow the culture of homeland by their parents which leads to their emotional displacement. But at last they learn to balance their duties and self and learn to adjust in third space which makes them as hybrid beings.

References

- [1] Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.1994.
- [2] Burke, Peter. *Cultural Hybridity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.
- [3] Fine, Laura. "Space and Hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth and Only Goodness" *South Asian Review* 32.2 (Nov 2011): 209-222.
- [4] Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 220-37.
- [5] Kalaichelvi, P. "Emergent Emigrant in Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth." *Voice of*



- the Displaced: Indian Immigrant Writers in America*. Madurai: Department of English, The Madura College 2011. 194-199.
- [6] Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Unaccustomed Earth*. London: Random House, 2008.
- [7] Mukerjee, Nibedita. “Trauma of Human Displacement to Hybridization: A Study of Immigrant Life in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*.” *Dynamics of Diasporic Identity in Commonwealth Literature*. New Delhi: Authorpress, 2013. 15-23.
- [8] Mukerjee, Subashree. “Cross-cultural Differences and Cross-border Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*.” *On the Alien Shore: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukerjee*. Ed. Jayadeep Sarangi. Delhi: GNOSIS, 2010. 56-66.

Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.