



Jhumpa Lahiri's "unaccustomed earth": A study of the second generation Indian American diaspora experience.

Jonali Chowdhury Bora

Department of English, K.R.B. Girls' College, Guwahati, India

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's story titled "Unaccustomed Earth", dwells on the life of a second generation diaspora character Ruma. Ruma along with her husband Adam and son Akash, live in Seattle, Washington, USA. This paper is an attempt to study and to analyse as to how this Indian American diaspora character Ruma, lives the life of a second generation diaspora in America. This paper seeks to argue that though she is born in America and follows American traditions and culture, yet she does not completely cease to follow Indian customs, the Indian values, Indian culture and consume Indian food. She, in fact, charts a new course in her life and emerges with a new identity as she tries to negotiate her life in America.

Keywords: Second generation diaspora, Education, Food, Culture, Marriage, Language, Dress, Traditions

1. Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" is the first story in her collection titled *Unaccustomed Earth*, published in the year 2008. This collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, primarily revolves around the lives of the children of the immigrants from India. These first generation Indian immigrants come to America to pursue higher studies, to look for a better job, for better wages and many a times in the pursuit of a better lifestyle. In the words of Madhulika S. Khandelwal "Well-paying jobs were the basic motivation for the post 1965 Indian immigration. At first largely from middle class, well-educated backgrounds, Indians migrated to the United States to further improve their standard of living" (2004 91). These immigrants have young children who were either born or raised in America. Moreover, many of these immigrants had young children who grew up in America. As such it becomes interesting to note as to how these children adopt and adapt to the American way of life as they negotiate their day to-day existence in America where they were raised and spent their lives. Hence, this paper makes an attempt to undertake such a study of the second generation diaspora subjects through the

character of Ruma as delineated by Jhumpa Lahiri in her story "Unaccustomed Earth".

2. Methodology

This paper we note, seeks to explore the second generation diaspora experience in three sections. The first section makes an attempt to know as to what constitutes the lives of the second generation diaspora subjects. The second section seeks to look at the way Jhumpa Lahiri delineates her second generation diaspora protagonist, Ruma in her story "Unaccustomed Earth". The third and final section arrives at an understanding as to how far the second generation diaspora character follows the culture and traditions of her parents' homeland while she steers her life in America.

3. Discussion

3.1

This first section seeks to underline as to what defines the life of a second generation diaspora in America. According to Richard Alba and Mary C. Waters, "The term *second generation* is often taken in a broader sense to encompass the children who grow

up in immigrant homes, whether they are born in the receiving society or enter it at a young age” (2011 1). The term second generation thus refers to those children who have been born in America or who have accompanied their parents to America, the host or receiving society at a very tender age.

Education, it is seen, appears to be a crucial factor in the lives of the second generation diaspora. Poonam Bala points out that: “In almost all Asian Indian homes, education is considered to be of utmost significance” (2015 110). The second generation diaspora is sent to good neighbourhood schools where they can get quality education and find peers who come from decent backgrounds. As for higher studies, they are given the choice to pursue the courses they want to study and later on build a career for themselves.

Relationship of the second generation diaspora with their parents or the first generation immigrants form a significant part of their lives. The younger generation, we note, often appears to be in loggerheads with their parents. Padma Rangaswamy describes the relationship of the second generation with the first generation in the following way: “Indian “values” were constantly cited as the sacred mantra, they were asked to accept them unquestioningly, and to defer to parental authority... They wanted to decide things for themselves... The youth could not identify with India or feel the same sense of belonging and closeness to the old country as their parents did” (2000 190). Such differences in views and opinions at times, lead to strained relations between the two generations. However, the second generation also realises that their parents are hardworking and willing to make sacrifices for their children.

Peer pressure appears to be another important influence in the life of the second generation diaspora. Pravin Seth informs us about such a development in the lives of the second generation in the following words: “As time rolls by, the growing youth increasingly moves in the socializing grooves of school neighbourhood and finally the college, where he/she gets familiar generally with white peers ...” (2001 54). As such they are exposed to a new way of life and culture much alien to their home environment which many a times, we note, seems to be steeped in the traditional Indian way of life. Such an exposure to their peers and compatriots definitely moulds their minds and very often these second generation diaspora subjects appear to be in conflict with their parents who are immigrants to America. Hence, according to Padma Rangaswamy “The acronym ABCDs (American Born

Confused Desis-”desi” meaning belonging to the native land or “India”) has gained wide currency in the Indian community throughout America and India because it encapsulates the dilemma of the Indian teenager growing up in the United States” (2000 169).

Dress forms an important part of the second generation diaspora lives. The second generation want to be comfortable in the clothes that they wear. They prefer to wear western clothing because they have grown up wearing such clothes. Many a time, dress defines a person’s identity. Hence, sometimes wearing traditional dresses leads to the second generation diaspora being treated differently. A second generation diaspora once commented: “One cannot wear an Indian dress in an office like mine. If you do so, your colleagues will admire you or even give you compliments, but as a result they consider you an outsider who will never be treated equally” (Khandelwal 2000 45).

Food and food habits form a significant part of the lives of the second generation diaspora subjects. The immigrant parents expect that their children maintain the food habits which they have cultivated while growing up at home. Pravin Sheth brings to the fore a fact that: “Many Indian mothers usually cook *roti-sabzi* or rice-dal-papad, which their children insist not to eat. Therefore, the mother gives cheese-macaroni, burrito, or spaghetti-sauce or veg-hamburger to the children” (2001 55). The second generation diaspora we notice no longer likes or appreciates home – cooked Indian food but prefers to eat western food, which in our opinion “augurs and cements a feeling of belonging” to America (Mannur 2010 177).

Language is another important feature in the life of the second generation diaspora in America. Madhulika S. Khandelwal informs us that: “The Indian tradition of maintaining one’s native languages at home despite migration continues in the United States” (2004 48). The second generation diaspora is expected to use the native language at home and use English outside the home. Jhumpa Lahiri lucidly describes this situation as she states: “I have always lived under the pressure to be bilingual, bicultural ... The first words I learned to utter and understand were in my parents’ native tongue, Bengali ... my ability to speak the language made me feel less foreign during visits to Calcutta every few years. It also made me feel less foreign in the expatriate Bengali community my parents socialize with me in the United States and ... in my own home” (2002 23).

Marriage is another issue that the second generation diaspora deals with in their lives in the United

States of America. Most of the first generation immigrants want their children to have an 'arranged marriage'. According to Madhulika Khandelwal "Marriage continued to be pivotal for Indian immigrants in the United States. Indeed, in an alien culture and society, arranged marriage for the first generation was an efficacious way to maintain continuity and stability" (2004 151). However, for the younger generation, marriage concerned their own lives and hence they wanted it to be their own personal choice and desire. In the views of Madhulika Khandelwal, "They found themselves caught between American values, which stereotyped and derided arranged marriage as a restrictive social practice, and the values of their own parents, for whom arranged marriage, including in most cases their own, was the central mechanism for maintaining stable family life" (2004 152).

Home for the second generation constitutes a place which gives them a sense of security, love, care and a sense of belonging. Jhumpa Lahiri, a second generation diaspora informs us that: "It's hard to have parents who consider another place "home"- even after living abroad for thirty years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here" (Bala 2002 24). Thus, we can say that as a second generation diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri had strong ties with the country of her origin. Hence, she is torn between the country of origin and the country America, where she grew up. As a second generation diaspora, it becomes hard for her to ascertain where exactly her home is. Suman Bala very explicitly informs us that: "As a second generation immigrant in the United States, which is 'home' to her, she still feels 'a bit of an outsider too'" (2002 23).

The second generation consciously tries to follow some of the customs and traditions of the land of their origin. Some of these customs which they follow are taking off shoes before entering their homes, touching the feet of elders, greeting people with hands joined together and saying 'Namaste', taking music and dance classes at home to keep themselves abreast of the Indian cultural traditions and eating food with their hands. These customs are followed by the second generation diaspora in America when they meet people from India.

3.2

The second section is an endeavour to unearth how the writer Jhumpa Lahiri depicts the second generation diaspora character Ruma in her story "Unaccustomed Earth". The first thing that strikes us about Ruma as we read the story is that she was born

in New Jersey, America when her father was pursuing his PhD in biochemistry. Her parents were living in a small apartment in New Jersey and had a very minimalistic kind of an existence. Lahiri makes this amply clear when she points out that Ruma's parents: "... converted a walk-in closet into a nursery when Romi and Ruma were born. He had worried for his family's safety in that apartment complex ... still working on his PhD in biochemistry, it was the best he could afford. .. They lived on the fourteenth floor" (2008 29).

While Ruma was growing up, as far as her education is concerned, we understand that Ruma pursued a law degree in Boston according to her own choice. It was at this time that she met her future husband Adam in Boston when he was pursuing an MBA degree. Lahiri informs us about her course in the following way: "For the first time ... they'd met, at a dinner party in Boston when she was a law student and he was getting his MBA ..." (2008 25).

In fact after finishing her studies she worked as a paralegal in a law firm in America. In New York, after her son Akash was born, she negotiated a part-time schedule at her law firm. She spent Thursdays and Fridays at home and such an arrangement where she could spend time at home with her son proved like a 'perfect balance' (Lahiri 2008 5). However, after availing two weeks leave for her mother's bereavement, she didn't want to go back to work. Lahiri tells us that: "Overseeing her clients' futures, preparing their wills and refinancing their mortgages, felt ridiculous to her, and all she wanted was to stay home with Akash, not just Thursdays and Fridays but every day" (2008 5). Hence, she does not want to work leaving Akash in the day care centre and as she tells her father: "Part-time litigation work is hard to find" (2008 36). Under such circumstances, she decides not to work for a few years until her two children grow up, though her father had reservations about her decisions as he was concerned about her well-being. He worried that they would have no other sources of income to fall back on in case Ruma's husband, Adam lost his job.

As for her relationship with her parents, we find that Ruma was closer to her mother than her father. It was her mother who always helped her. After the birth of her son Akash, it was her mother who assisted her in her household chores. She took "over the kitchen, singing songs to Akash and teaching him Bengali nursery rhymes, throwing loads of laundry into the machine. Ruma had never spent a week alone with

her father” (Lahiri 2008 6). Moreover, we note that “She had never been able to confront her father freely, the way she used to fight with her mother. Somehow, she feared that any difference of opinion would chip away at the already frail bond that existed between them” (Lahiri 2008 37). However, after her mother’s death she would keep inquiring about him every day. Lahiri mentions, “After her mother’s death it was Ruma who assumed the duty of speaking to her father every evening, asking how his day had gone” (2008 4). Even when he travelled for two or three or four weeks and Ruma did not hear from him she would keep his flight information handy and keep herself abreast by watching the news about any plane crash anywhere in the world. Such details inform us that Ruma cares for her father and is concerned about his well – being. Moreover, when he was staying in their house in Seattle she was happy to be with her father, but was very disappointed when he refused to move in with them. She was also very disturbed and sad when he was leaving them and going to his own home.

Coming to her relationship with her peers, we understand that Ruma did enjoy with some of her friends by going on a holiday with them. Lahiri brings to light this feature of her life when she informs us about Ruma and her peers through the following words: “Nearly fifteen years had passed since Ruma’s only European adventure, a month-long Euro Rail holiday she’d taken with two girlfriends after college, with money saved up from her salary as a paralegal. She’d slept in shabby pensions, practicing a frugality that was foreign to her at this stage of her life, buying nothing but variations of the same postcards her father sent now” (2008 3-4). We can say that Ruma did travel and do some interesting things with her peers.

Home for Ruma is in America. She likes her new home in Seattle. Though she knew no one in Seattle, she was beginning to settle down in her new home which she and her husband Adam had purchased. Lahiri makes us know that: “Ruma and Adam hadn’t planned on living in a suburb, but after five years in an apartment that faced the backs of other buildings, a home so close to a lake, from which they could sit and watch the sun set, was impossible to rest” (2008 14). Moreover, we see that Ruma becomes very emotional “When her father mentioned their old house, tears sprang to her eyes ... imagined speaking to her mother on the telephone, her mother complaining as the workmen hammered and drilled ... For when she pictured that house in her mind, her mother was always alive in it, impossible not to see” (2008 45-46). Ruma,

it appears has many memories of the old house that her father bought, where she lived with her father, her mother and her brother Romi, prior to her marriage with Adam. We can surmise that home for Ruma is in America where there are a lot of memories and beautiful happenings and things associated with it.

Food is another important way by which we can study the second generation diaspora subject, Ruma. She, we note, likes American food, which is not very elaborate and is readily available in any grocery store in America. In the story, “Unaccustomed Earth”, Lahiri mentions: “She no longer felt sick in the mornings. Instead, her first thought was of food; she wanted a burrito, or one of the egg and cheese sandwiches from the bagel shop near their old apartment in Park Slope ...” (2008 31). Indian food, we observe, never interests Ruma. Ruma was not fond of cooking but when her father came “She’d spent ... two days cooking, the items accumulating one by one on the shelves of the refrigerator, and the labor had left her exhausted. When she cooked Indian food for Adam she could afford to be lazy. She could do away with making dal or served salad instead of a chorchori” (2008 22). Such instances indicate, that she put in a great deal of effort to cook an elaborate meal for her father, when he came to visit her. But for her husband she does not work very hard. She does not take the trouble to prepare anything elaborate or time consuming like Indian food. She serves him things which are easy and simple to prepare much to the chagrin of her mother who was such a good cook and could prepare many delicious Indian dishes.

As far as language is concerned, we understand that Ruma is not very proficient in her mother tongue. In fact, her mother used to make special efforts to teach her Bengali but she never appeared interested. Lahiri writes about Ruma’s indifferent skills in Bengali language. Lahiri says: “Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her. Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. But her father didn’t mind” (2008 12).

Dress for Ruma definitely is western wear. Lahiri makes us aware of Ruma’s distinct choice of clothes in the following way: “Of the two hundred and eighteen saris, she kept only three, placing them in a quilted zippered bag at the back of her closet ... And she had remembered the many times her mother had predicted this very moment, lamenting the fact that her daughter preferred pants and skirts to the clothing she wore, that there would be no one to whom to pass on her

things” (2008 17). Thus, Ruma prepared to avoid wearing her mother’s saris. Rather, she feels comfortable and prefers to adorn herself in western outfits.

Marriage and dating are two other concerns that arise in Ruma’s life. Lahiri comments on her choice of her husband Adam as she confides: “Ten years ago her mother had done everything in her power to talk Ruma out of marrying Adam, saying that he would divorce her, that in the end he would want an American girl ... ‘You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian, that is the bottom line’ her mother had told Ruma again and again” (2008 26). Her parents were not in favour of her marrying a white American boy. They did not trust him and was very angry with their daughter’s choice. As far as dating was concerned, she never mentioned a word to her parents. She was very apprehensive of their reactions to her relationships with other American men. Lahiri informs us: “... she had kept her other involvements with American men a secret from her parents until the day she announced that she was engaged” (2008 26).

3.3

The last section helps us to arrive at an understanding about the second generation diaspora character Ruma as drawn by the diaspora story teller Jhumpa Lahiri, in her story “Unaccustomed Earth”.

Ruma’s education reveals to us the fact that like an American she does apply to the top universities of the world and dreams of attending the best school for the course she desired. However, she brought disappointment to everyone in the family and definitely a lot of sadness to her father who wanted her to study in an Ivy League institution. Jhumpa Lahiri brings to light this fact as she mentions: “She knew that she had disappointed him, getting rejected by all the Ivy Leagues she’d applied to” (2008 37). Thus, just like an American she applies to top notch institutions for her studies.

In the same manner, we see that as far as her dressing sense goes, she is like an American because she wears the clothes that are commonly worn in America. She, we can definitely point out, prefers western clothing to Indian outfits. As for her mother’s saris, we know that after her mother’s death, Ruma kept aside a few of her saris for herself. The rest of the saris she gave them to her mother’s friends. Such an attitude towards the Indian clothes underscores the fact that Ruma acculturates with the Americans. She, we can say, adopts their practice of wearing the western clothes which the Americans usually wear in

their everyday life. Just like an American, the sari becomes an alien dress for Ruma. Thus, when it comes to clothes and dresses, Ruma shrugs off her Indian origins and behaves more like Americans, which shows her acculturation.

Many a time Ruma insisted on doing odd jobs, which people in India would definitely frown upon. Her parents thoroughly opposed the works that she took up while studying in school. Lahiri informs us that: “Even in high school, in spite of his and his wife’s protests, she’d insisted, 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” (2008 40). This is yet another issue in which she disregards the culture and tradition of her country of origin, i.e., India.

However, while for certain things in her life Ruma has discarded the traditions of her country of origin, yet in many respects she retains the culture of the land of her origin and tries to preserve the customs and traditions that were handed down to her by her parents.

Though initially in the story, home for Ruma meant her husband Adam, her son Akash and the unborn baby, yet towards the end of the story, we find that she wants her father to be with her and her son in the new home in Seattle. In the earlier part of the story Lahiri says: “Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she’d created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child that would come in January” (2008 7). However, towards the end of the story after her father stays with her and her son Akash in Seattle and he is ready to leave for his tour of Paris, we hear her father talking to Ruma about his inability to come and stay with them though he has retired from the pharmaceutical company he was working for and is now lonely after the death of his wife i.e., Ruma’s mother. He confesses: “If you like, I can come for a while after you have the baby. I won’t be as useful as your mother would have been ... But please understand, I prefer to stay on my own. I am too old now to make such a shift’. His gentle words fell on her thickly, too quickly” (2008 56). We notice that Ruma experiences a certain change in her mind set and longs for her father to be with them. Such emotional pangs are quite in keeping with the nature of Indian culture as Indian traditions expect children to look after their aging parents.

Although she has a strong preference for western food, Ruma nonetheless tries to bring a balance

between western and Indian food especially when it came to her son Akash. Not being someone who makes any effort to pick up the skills of cooking Indian food, she made conscious efforts to cook Indian dishes for both her father and her son. She we note, fries brinjal pieces for her father. As she tells him: “Sorry the begunis broke apart ... I didn’t let the oil get hot enough” (2008 23). Moreover, when her son Akash was younger, she made special efforts to get him used to Indian food rather than the typical American dinner which consisted of macaroni and cheese. Ruma wants her child to enjoy and partake Indian food and thus she wants to carry on the tradition of Indian food in her family. Lahiri comments: “In spite of her efforts he was turning into the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother: imperious, afraid of eating things” (2008 23).

Marriage in her life is an important area of concern. Ruma married according to her own choice though her parents never approved it. Jhumpa Lahiri brings to our notice the fact that she is now having second thoughts about her marriage to a white American boy in the midst of grave opposition by her parents. Lahiri talks about Ruma’s feelings about her marriage: “She could not explain what had happened to her marriage after her mother’s death ... she felt a wall between them ... It was wrong of her, she knew, and yet an awareness had set in, that she and Adam were separate people leading separate lives” (2008 25-26). It appears that Ruma is becoming aware that the choice she made was perhaps not the best one for her. Moreover, it appears that she is questioning the whole idea of a mixed marriage which is against the traditions of her country of origin. Hence, it can be deduced that she feels that it would have perhaps been better if she followed the rules

and traditions of her parents’ homeland, India.

Though she never liked going to India with her parents, yet she started to like the Bengali language and tried to inculcate the love of the language in her son and help him converse in Bengali. Beena Agarwal observes: “With the long stay in America, she seems to be losing control over her native sensibility and finds it difficult to express herself in her native Bengali tongue” (2011 124). However, what we find interesting is that once in a while she still uses Bengali to speak to an aunt or uncle who call from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya or Akash a Happy Birthday. In fact, when her father came to visit them in their house which is in Seattle, she starts using Bengali words like ‘Dadu’, ‘Dida’, ‘Baba’, ‘Ma’ in the presence of her little son Akash. This deliberate initiation into the Bengali language makes us understand that Ruma does not want to shed her links with the place of origin i.e., Calcutta. She may not know to read and to converse in Bengali but she wants her son to grow up knowing and understanding Bengali.

Some of the traditions and customs of her native land she tries to follow. While eating her food with her son and her father we are told that: “She ate with her fingers, as her father did, for the first time in months, for the first time in this new house in Seattle” (Lahiri 2008 22).

In the final analysis we can say that, despite showing signs of acculturation in certain aspects of her life, yet we find that Ruma has not given up the culture of her country of origin. She still tries to assiduously preserve some elements of the culture and traditions of the land of origin. Ruma as a second generation diaspora, emerges as a diaspora subject with a kind of what Rajan and Sharma mention “a new cosmopolitanism wherein a regional and cultural identity comes to the fore” (2006 19).

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