



Diaspora and Hybridity: A study of the Second generation Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Unaccustomed Earth'.

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Abstract

The United States of America is a dream destination for many Indians. In fact, Indians settle down in America for a variety of reasons, like trade, better job opportunities, better education, marriage, better future and also in the pursuit of a better life. In such a scenario, it is interesting to know as to how the second generation Indian American diaspora, who are born in America live their life in America, their place of birth, as their parents, the first generation Indian American diaspora always look back and consider India to be their home and the place to which they will eventually 'return'. The offsprings of the first generation Indian American diaspora who are born in America face a predicament as to which culture or way of life they will follow. They appear to be torn between the culture of the parents' homeland, India and the culture of USA, where they are born and raised. This paper seeks to study and to interrogate as to what extent the second generation diaspora follows the culture of their parents' homeland vis-a-vis the culture of the hostland. This paper seeks to analyze the second generation diaspora through an examination of Indian American diaspora writer, Jhumpa Lahiri's story 'Unaccustomed Earth'. Thus, through an exploration of the character of Ruma, a second generation Indian American diaspora, this study arrives at a conclusion that though Ruma is born in the U.S. and lives her life in the U.S, she continues to follow in many respects, certain elements of Indian culture. She, we note, occupies a 'third space' and emerges as a 'hybrid'.

Keywords: Hybrid, Third space, First generation Diaspora, Second generation Diaspora, Homeland, Hostland, Culture.

1. Introduction

'Unaccustomed Earth' is the first story in the Indian American Diaspora author Jhumpa Lahiri's famed collection of stories titled '*Unaccustomed Earth*'. This title story is about first generation immigration parents, their daughter Ruma, a second generation Indian American, her American husband Adam and their son, Akash. This story, we learn is a poignant exploration of the immigrant experience and how the second generation diaspora, Ruma, deals with the complexities and how she confronts and negotiates her life in America. This story features vivid descriptions and poignant reflections by which we can acquire a glimpse of the inner lives of the characters, their emotions, their relationships and thus helps us

gather a nuanced understanding of the way of life of the second generation Indian American diaspora character, Ruma. We can formulate our understanding of the culture or the way of life of Ruma, the second generation Indian American through an in-depth study of a number of cultural markers like food, clothing, language, marriage, way of life, beliefs, traditions, and customs, to help us analyze as to which culture she follows-Indian or America.

2. Objectives

To know the lives of the Second Generation Indian American diaspora in the US

To know and to understand the kind of culture the first generation diaspora and the second generation

diaspora follow in the land away from their native land, India

To acquire a nuanced understanding of the second generation Indian American diaspora and how they explore the complexities of cultural identity, family relationships and the immigrant experience and how they evolve themselves into new hybrid identities in America

3. Methodology

The study of the second generation Indian American diaspora is primarily based on the close reading of the fictional work, 'Unaccustomed Earth'. This research paper also makes its analysis by reading not only the primary text but also the secondary sources like books and articles and web sources. The diaspora theory is used as a lens to undertake this research to unearth the life of the second generation diaspora, Ruma, in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section is an analysis of the different cultural markers. The second section is our understanding of the different elements of Indian and American culture that Ruma follows. The third section shows us that though Ruma is U.S. born and prefers to follow American culture, yet she follows many aspects of Indian culture and thus emerges as a 'hybrid' or as a fusion of two cultures, Indian and American.

Section 1

This section is an examination of the various cultural markers through which Ruma, the second generation diaspora is to be studied and analyzed.

Food helps preserve cultural roots, offering a sensory connection to the homeland through aromas, flavours and cooking utensils. Food gives us the energy by which we remain active and carry on our day to day activities. Food provides comfort and evokes nostalgia. It often serves as a means to emotional contentment. Food gives joy and serves also as a way to develop friendships, build connections and cooperation among different people. Thus, availability of home cuisine or the cuisine of the country of birth sustains migrants in an alien country and enables them to remain connected with their homeland or the country of origin.

Clothes are worn to cover and protect our body. They adorn the human body and also highlight a person's sense of beauty, style, fashion and identity. Clothes reflect our personal choices and preferences. Clothes also define who we are and what we stand for.

Language is an important vehicle of expression.

Through language people communicate with one another and thereby convey their ideas, feelings, thoughts and plans to other people. Language is also a reflection of who we are. The use of the mother tongue when communicating with members of their family or the community in an alien space affords the diaspora a sense of comfort and security.

Traditions mean a long established custom, practice or belief that is passed down from one generation to the next. They reflect the values and beliefs of a particular group of people.

Customs are the traditional practices or rituals that are passed down through generations. Customs shape individual and collective experiences, cultural practices and social norms.

Marriage is another important cultural marker. Through marriage, we can decipher a person's personal choice, habits and also about their ideas of identity and what they consider life to be.

As a cultural marker home represents a house with people, family members, material goods and any other possessions which the family desires. Home is where people live comfortably and enjoy the shelter and protection. Home symbolizes a sense of belonging to a particular community, culture or a family. Home is closely tied to the cultural identity, reflecting traditions, values and cultural practices. Home evokes powerful memories, emotions and nostalgia. Home, we note represents one's roots and heritage and thus connects people to their ancestors and also cultural traditions.

Values are principles or standards that determine a person's behaviour, actions, thoughts, judgement and decisions.

Section 2

In this section we study as to how the different cultural markers will help us to ascertain to what extent Ruma, the second generation Indian American diaspora is an American. This section depicts how far Ruma follows the American way of life, enjoys American food, American clothes, the American way of speaking, traditions, customs, marriage and the American idea of home.

Ruma, the second generation diaspora, we note likes to prepare American food. In the story, the speaker mentions as to how Ruma's father enjoyed the American food his daughter Ruma prepared: "At dinner he was ... appreciating the grilled fish and chicken breasts she began preparing after the Indian food ran out..." (Lahiri 2008, p. 48). Ruma, it is seen, craved for American food. The speaker points out that: "...her first thought was of food (in the morning); she wanted

a burrito, or one of the egg and cheese sandwiches...” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 31).

The second generation Indian American diaspora Ruma was not so adept at cooking Indian food like her mother. The speaker says: “Ruma’s cooking didn’t come close, the vegetables sliced too thickly, the rice overdone...” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 22). In fact, Ruma did not take much interest in cooking Indian food. The speaker elaborates, “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. ‘Is that all’ her mother used to sometimes exclaim in disbelief on the phone...” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 22). Such was her lackadaisical attitude towards Indian food. Through this cultural marker of food and the description of how well Ruma cooks American food, we can understand that Ruma embodies the experience of being raised in the host country, America and how she feels a sense of belonging to the type of food eaten in America. We can clearly infer that as far as food is concerned, Ruma’s tastes and preferences certainly veer towards American food.

As far as dress is concerned, Ruma likes to wear only American clothes: “She’d already ordered pants and skirts with elastic waistbands from catalogues” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 13). In fact, Ruma never liked to wear a sari which is the dress of her parents’ homeland, India. The speaker brings to light this aspect of Ruma as it is mentioned that “Of the two hundred and eighteen saris, she kept only three, placing them in a quilted zippered bag at the back of her closet, telling her mother’s friends to divide up the rest” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 17). The speaker further talks about Ruma’s preference for western outfits through the following lines: “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” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 17). Rama Islam (2017) maintains that: “...to preserve traditions, they (first generation Indian Americans) attempt to disseminate Indian culture to the second generation who have assimilated with American culture... The second generation identifies itself more with the Western community.” (p. 2).

Ruma was never interested in learning Bengali though her mother always tried to teach her the Bengali language. Gnanamony aptly defines the attitude of the second generation diaspora when it is said that: “Immigrant parents’ children seldom obey their parents, as the children in the west feel matured and independent as soon as they matriculate, the Indian

children too emulate their western counterparts and seldom listen to their parents’ advice” (ed. Sarangi 2009, p. 4). The following lines capture Ruma’s attitude towards her parents’ native language: “...staring at the Bengali letters her mother had once tried and failed to teach Ruma when she was a girl” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 59). Thus, what we learn is that since Ruma grew up in America, acquired her education in America, the English language she uses acts as a bridge to the American society and helps her to assimilate with the American society.

It is interesting to note that as far as the third generation diaspora is concerned, the second generation diaspora Ruma, used to teach her son Akash, her native language, Bengali. However, slowly she lost her zeal to converse and teach her son Bengali. The speaker succinctly captures the second generation diaspora’s feelings towards the language of the place of origin in the following words: “By now Akash had forgotten the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when he was little. After he started speaking in full sentences English had taken over, and she lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 12).

Ruma later on in life discarded some of the customs she followed when she was living with her first generation immigrant parents. For instance, she ceases to practice the Indian custom of removing or taking off her shoes when she enters the house. The speaker sheds light about Ruma abandoning this tradition in the following way: “... she’d shed in her adult life, without knowing when or why” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 14).

As far as her marriage is concerned, Ruma decided on her own to marry the man of her choice, Adam, who is an American. She vividly remembers how her parents objected to her marriage with an American boy. The speaker opines: “Ten years ago her mother had done everything in her power to talk Ruma out of marrying Adam...” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 26). In fact, the speaker further elaborates about Ruma’s attitude towards marriage : “She knew what a shock it was; she had kept her other involvements with American men a secret from her parents until the day she announced that she was engaged” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 26). Ruma, is thus thoroughly enmeshed in American culture and as Gnanamony says: “It looks as though dating had been a way of life to the children in America until their marriage...” (ed. Sarangi, 2009 p. 7).

Home for Ruma signifies a place where she lives with some independence and can exercise her own free will. In the story, we find that despite her parents’ protests, we know that Ruma “... worked for as long

as her father could remember. 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" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 40). Michiko Kakutani reflects: "Lahiri deftly explicates the emotional arithmetic of her character's families... showing how some of the children learn to sidestep even defy, their parents' wishes" (ed. Sarangi, 2009, p. 62).

Home for Ruma is America. She and her brother Roni use to hate going to their parents' homeland, India. Referring to Ruma's father, the speaker conveys the feelings of his two children: "...the older his children grew, the less they wanted to go" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 8). Jaydeep Sarangi remarks: "Americanized children clash with their parents when their lifestyle goes diametrically opposite to their Indian parents expectations" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 5).

Ruma, it is seen, inculcated American values, American way of thinking and doing things. Her father brings to the forefront this aspect of Ruma when acquaintances inquire if he plans to stay in Ruma's house in Seattle, as he opines: "...Ruma hadn't been raised with that sense of duty. She led her own life, had made her own decisions, married an American boy" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 29). The values Ruma inculcates, we can say are that of an American. Gnanamony concedes that: "...when it comes to the question of second-generation children in the west, they comfortably adapt themselves to the new environment; their assimilation is tension free unlike their parents" (ed. Sarangi 2009, p. 8).

Section 3

This section seeks to analyse and to understand as to how the second generation diaspora Ruma navigates her life in the U.S. and thus emerge as a hybrid individual.

As far as food is concerned, Ruma exhibits qualities of a hybrid individual. This means that she enjoys not only American food but also Indian food. It is seen that she is fond of tea and she offers Darjeeling tea to her father when he comes to visit her in her home in Seattle, America. The speaker says: "She had brought everything out on a tray: a pot of Darjeeling, strainer, milk and sugar and a plate of Nice biscuits" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 18). Thus, her preferences for beverages from India is very notable and points to the fact that she also enjoys Indian food.

Ruma, tries to cook Indian dishes and the speaker reveals as to how she does her cooking the Indian

way. She says ruefully when she could not fry the brinjals in a proper manner for her father to eat: "Sorry the begunis broke apart ... I didn't let the oil get hot enough." (Lahiri, 2008, p. 23). It is significant that she tries to adhere to the Indian way of cooking.

As far as food is concerned, her mother insists that Ruma make her son Akash get used to Indian food. The speaker dwells on Ruma giving importance to Indian food in the following way: "When Akash was younger she had followed her mother's advice to get him used to the taste of Indian food and make the effort to poach chicken and vegetables with cinnamon and cardamom and clove" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 23). Such an act of preparing Indian food points to the fact that she has not forgotten the country of origin, India and the value of its food and the way of cooking Indian food. The speaker travels back in time when we know that "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" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 23). This proves that unlike her son Akash, Ruma always ate the Indian food prepared by her mother and never protested and was never averse to Indian food unlike her son, Akash.

Ruma's way of life in the early years of her growing up, were times when she would be happy to follow Indian values, customs and one of which was taking off her shoes before entering the house. The speaker announces that "It was one of the many habits of her upbringing..." which she had instilled in herself (Lahiri, 2008, p. 14). Such a behaviour points to the fact that she is an Indian and despite being born and growing up in America, Ruma observed Indian values and customs and never disregarded them or ignored them.

As for Ruma's eating habits, the speaker says: "She ate with her fingers, as her father did..." (Lahiri 2008 22). Thus, we learn that Ruma despite being born in the US tries to adhere to the Indian tradition of eating with her fingers.

In the story, we note that though Ruma's clothes are typical American dresses, yet she decides to keep three of her mother's saris which is a clear indication the Ruma does like the Indian dress i.e., the sari. The speaker mentions that "... she kept ... three placing them in a quilted zippered bag..." (Lahiri, 2008, p. 17).

Ruma earnestly desires that her mother teach her son the Bengali language as she wants her son to know the Bengali language. Ruma encourages her father to make her son learn Bengali. Ruma's father once very encouragingly asks her son as to what he had taught

him in the morning and the speaker writes: “Akash recited the numbers in Bengali from one to ten” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 49). Thus, we see that Ruma encourages her son to learn Bengali, her parents’ native language and thereby she tries to retain her Indian heritage. As far as language is concerned, she uses Indian words of address like “Ma” for her mother, “Baba” for her father and encourages her son Akash and her husband to use “Dadu” for grandfather (Lahiri, 2008, p. 13) and also “Dida” for grandmother (Lahiri, 2008, p. 23).

The second generation diaspora, Ruma, was often coerced by her mother to keep speaking in Bengali in order to keep it alive and to make it a part of her everyday existence. The speaker describes how Ruma was compelled to keep both English and Bengali in her life. The speaker 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” (Lahiri 2008, p.12). Thus, we note that Ruma’s hybridity as far as language is concerned was fostered to a great extent by her mother. In fact, Ruma’s hybridity also comes to the forefront when she uses her native language on some occasions to exchange pleasantries and converse with her relatives in Calcutta. The speaker brings to light the fact that though she was not fluent with the language she had spoken in her growing up years, she continues to speak in Bengali thereby proving that Ruma despite being a second generation diaspora preserves her native language. The speaker explains: “On the rare occasions Ruma used Bengali anymore, when an aunt or uncle called from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya or Akash a Happy Birthday, she tripped over words, mangled tenses. And yet it was the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life” (Lahiri, 2008, p.12).

Another aspect of the second generation Ruma’s hybridity comes to light is when she thinks and feels like an Indian daughter but at the same time emerges like an American seeking her privacy and independence. These feelings are demonstrated in the following lines: “She knew her father did not need taking care of, and yet this very fact caused her to feel guilty; in India there would have been no question of his not moving in with her...She couldn’t imagine tending to her father as her mother had, ... Still not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse.” (Lahiri 2008, p. 7) Thus, we see a hybrid second generation who though finds it hard to keep her Dad in her own home, is simultaneously torn by her sense of duty and love towards her father.

Ruma recalls her visits to her country of origin, India. She becomes nostalgic and remembers as to how she travelled to India with her parents. She reminisces and tells her father: “... that’s what you and Ma did, taking us to India all those times” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 47). Ruma, we can say that, like many other Indian diaspora visits her parents’ homeland, Calcutta and does not sever her ties with her country of origin, India. Ruma echoes what Jhumpa Lahiri once famously confesses: “I’ve inherited my parents’ preoccupations. 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” (ed. Suman Bala, 2002, p. 24).

4. Conclusion

The above discussion is a nuanced exploration of second generation Indian American diasporic identity and it reveals the tensions between inherited cultural traditions of her parents’ home country, India and the host country, America. It strikes us that Ruma is plagued by nostalgia and longing for her Bengali culture which is slowly moving away from her. She is in fact far removed from her roots, the traditions and culture of her place of origin, Calcutta. It appears that for Ruma it is an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation where she builds up her life as a ‘hybrid’. Ruma navigates two worlds, negotiates two different cultures and in the process creates a space for herself i.e., an ‘in-betweenness’ in which Ruma feels partially belonging to Americans in lifestyle and partially Indian in heritage and yet belonging fully to neither of the two cultures. Ruma is neither fully Indian nor fully American. She is a second generation diaspora shaped by her parents’ Indian culture but deeply immersed in American life as she is English speaking, lives in a suburb, works in America and is married to a white American man. She thus experiences an ‘in-betweenness’ a psychological space of uncertainty, feeling of being rootless in both countries. Ruma is an evolving identity, a ‘hybrid’ where she merges aspects from the different cultures of India and United States to form a new identity. Ruma thus, embodies hybridity not by achieving a static blend of cultures but by actively navigating and reconstructing her identity across cultural boundaries, what Homi Bhabha (1994) noted Post Colonial theorist argues. Hence, she inhabits a third space, where this second generation diasporic individual Ruma negotiates and forges a new identity. Ruma’s identity evolves in a dynamic cultural intersection of American and Indian cultures.

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