

## **Complex Cultural Identity of an Immigrant Woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth**

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### **Abstract**

Identity crisis is one of the important factor in Diasporic Literature. Diasporic Literature focusses on alienation, displacement, identity, culture shock. People, who are migrate from their country to the other country experienced such diasporic situation while surviving in a foreign country. Diasporic Literature brings out the trauma of immigrants and focusses on their struggle while surviving in a foreign country. Jhumpa lahiri is a novelist and short story writer. Her second short story collection "Unaccustomed Earth" is published in the year 2008. It explicitly presents the lives of the second generation immigrants. These second generation immigrants are born to the Indian parents in a foreign country. Though the immigrant experience and trauma are common for both men and women, it affects more women than men. Because women expected to uphold the culture of her parents even while growing up in a foreign country. This paper indents bring out such trauma of an immigrant woman, who struggles for identity due to culture. Ruma is the protagonist of the short story "Unaccustomed Earth" suffers of her complex cultural identity.

**KEYWORDS:** Diaspora, Culture, Immigrant, Identity, Displacement.

Identity crisis is one of the important factor in Diasporic Literature. Diasporic Literature focusses on alienation, displacement, identity, culture shock. People, who are migrate from their country to the other country experienced such diasporic situation while surviving in a foreign country. Diasporic Literature brings out the trauma of immigrants and focusses on their struggle while surviving in a foreign country. Some of the Indian immigrant writers has written about these diasporic issues because they themselves are migrated from their own country. Those include writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Jhumpa lahiri is a novelist and short story writer. She has begun her literary career with the publication of her short story collection "Interpreter of Maladies" in 1999, which won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2000. This short story collection stresses the dilemma of Indian immigrants. All the works of her deals with the dilemma of US migrated Indians. Her second short story collection "Unaccustomed Earth" is published in the year 2008. It explicitly presents the lives of the second generation immigrants. These second generation immigrants are born to the Indian parents in a foreign country. The first generation of immigrants clings to their past and proud about their cultural roots and heritage of India, whereas the second generation immigrants feels alienated from their own parents while being brought up in a foreign country.

Though the immigrant experience and trauma are common for both men and women, it affects more women than men. Because women expected to uphold the culture of her parents even while growing up in a foreign country. It is presented in the short

story of “Unaccustomed Earth” by Jhumpa Lahiri. Among the eight short stories, the title story is the first one which presents the complex cultural identity of the protagonist Ruma. The protagonist of the short story undergoes a sense of alienation that leads to her identity crisis due to the sudden death of her mother.

Ruma is a thirty-eight years old, Bengali American woman married to the Euro-American husband and had a son named Akash. She settled with her family in Seattle. Ruma resigns her job as a lawyer and decides to become a house wife as she is pregnant with a second child. In this short story Ruma introduces her mother through memories, who is died of heart failure as an anesthesia triggered the anaphylactic shock during her gallstone surgery. Ruma’s father proud of her Indian tradition and manages to follow her tradition in the foreign country. Being the first generation immigrant she is not much affected by the foreign culture and is able to hold on the tradition by wearing saris, her dime-sized bindi and jewels.

Ruma’s mother serves as a propagator of Indian tradition in the family and so she teaches Bengali to her children. She speaks with them only in Bengali and also expected the same. She tries to pass on her Indian way of living and culture, tradition to her second generation immigrant daughter Ruma. But Ruma is not able to hold the Indian, especially Bengali culture as teaches by her mother. In spite of her effort, Ruma’s mother could not stop Ruma turning into an American child. “Ruma finds herself in a strange dilemma since she has inherited a sense of exile and loss from her parents” (Gulati, 71).

Ruma’s sense of alienation grows as she grows up and this leads to her fight with her parents. Ruma has complicated relationship with her father because of the unfair treatment given to her than Romi, her younger sister. She is always closer to her mother, a traditional Bengali woman. But she is not escaped from her mother’s criticism for marrying Adam. She said: “You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian that is the bottom line” (Unaccustomed Earth, 26). Amidst the disapproval of her family Ruma marries Adam, she finds the marriage as a liberation because of her alienation from her family. Ruma established her identity after founding her family with Adam and beloved son Akash. “It was a bold step on the part of Ruma to neutralise her sufferings because of displacement” said by Gulati.

After the birth of Akash, Ruma and her mother shares a harmonious relationship. The sudden death of her mother leaves her again in the mid of crisis over her identity. Ruma is unprepared for life without her mother, moreover she is the only connection between her and her father. The death of her mother even more complicated her relationship with her father. She also feels that her father is not bothered by the death of her mother which furies her and creates distant between themselves. “Though Ruma is born on American soil, yet her emotions are loaded with intense cultural traditions” (Gulati, 71).

It becomes evident in her desire to replace her mother by adopting her life as like her mother. Ruma’s father clearly understands his daughter’s emotional dependence on her mother. Thirunavukkarasu and Shanmugam said “Ruma’s father recognizes that Ruma is echoing her mother in making herself overly dependent on her husband, and that she is leading a life as an isolated mother. This makes Ruma’s father concerned that his daughter will become as unhappy as his wife was, and he wishes for a different life for her” (54). Ruma is tired with her motherly duties decides to stay at home after conceiving a second child.

After the death of Ruma's mother, her father sells the house that they used to live along with her mother and went for Europe tour. Among all the problems between her father and Ruma, she feels the responsibility to take care of her widowed father. He often visits to his daughter's house and gave a good upbringing to her son. Although Ruma finds herself Americanized as an adult, she wants her son to be brought up like a Bengali one. Ruma desires to be a better mother to Akash just like her mother, who always concentrates on self-cooking, and prefers healthy Indian foods for the family.

Ruma has realised that how her father grows up like Americanized after his travel to Europe countries. The visit of Ruma's father to her plays an important role in the short story. Her father, who became Americanized understands Ruma's personal problems which leading to an identity crisis and a sense of alienation. In the initial stage of the story, Ruma and her father's relationship is complicated due to the expectation falls on Ruma. The travelling has changed Ruma's father and when he comes to know about Ruma's decision to become a house wife. He encourages her to concentrate on her career, because he knows that once if the child grows up Ruma isolated which complicated her life even more. Moreover, he feels that women must be self-reliant, they should not depend on their husband. All the ideologies of her father cannot understand by her as she is not close to her father.

Ruma has gone through identity crisis while growing up as an adult, being brought up in a foreign country she cannot grasp her mother's teaching of Indian tradition. And so, she does her best to adapt the foreign culture and feels alienated from her own parents. She rebels against her mother's expectations on her to behave and dress like a Bengali woman. In an act of rebelling Ruma goes against her parents wish and marries Adam, a Euro- American. The unexpected death of her mother, persuades her to replace her mother's role by adopting her way of living as a Bengali woman. And so, she decides to become a house-wife after conceiving second child. Though Ruma feels like an American, she needs the support of Indian culture which she gets through her mother. She is not able to withstand on her American identity, when she lost her mother. Ruma assimilate herself with the American culture but feels a desperate need to replace her mother's role and adopts those way of living.

Thus the short story "Unaccustomed Earth" brings out the complex cultural identity of an immigrant woman. They cannot assimilate themselves with their foreign culture and also struggles to follow their parents culture. They become aware of their loss and tries to reembrace that loss through certain actions without any results.

### References

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