



## Diasporic Trauma in *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Received 19 January 2014; accepted 23 March 2014

Published online 15 April 2014

### Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is a famous Indian American author whose works consistently deal with the themes like diaspora, dislocation and belonging. She explores the trauma of diaspora in her third book *Unaccustomed Earth* in which the characters suffer from the loss of a traditional culture, death of a family member, the sense of rootlessness, double consciousness and generation conflicts. This paper argues that only by renegotiating the relationship between the past and present, keeping the balance between memories and forgetting, can characters in the novel gradually work through their trauma and reconstruct a new identity.

**Key words:** Diasporic trauma of loss; Balance between the past and present; A new identity

Yun, L. (2014). Diasporic Trauma in *Unaccustomed Earth*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 10(2), 141-144. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/4654>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4654>

### INTRODUCTION

Critically acclaimed for her novel and short fictions, Jhumpa Lahiri is an American author of Indian descent whose work focuses on challenges faced by Indian immigrants living in the United States. She explores how Indian Americans struggle to assimilate to American culture while trying to reconcile their strong Indian traditions and heritage. Lahiri's writing easily transcends Indian American setting as she explores themes of

human conditions like loneliness, alienation, love and self-realization. *Accustomed Earth* is Jhumpa Lahiri's second short story collection and her third book. Her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), won her the Pulitzer Prize and her second book, *The Namesake* (2003), was made into a film by Mira Nair in 2007 and achieved a big commercial success. Many of the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* first appear in *The New Yorker*. The title of the book is borrowed from a line in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House", ("My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into Unaccustomed Earth"). By mentioning the epigraph, Lahiri seems to hint that the characters in the novel are transplanted people who have to adapt themselves in the unaccustomed earth in order to survive and prosper.

According to Martin David, *Accustomed Earth* is "quietly devastating" as it "contains some of the best, most beautiful fiction written this decade—the kind that will be read 50 years from now". The eight stories in this collection is divided into two parts—five individual short stories followed by three interlinked stories about two childhood friends grouped under the heading "Hema and Kaushik". The eight stories in this book turn a penetrating eye on the second generation Indian American children to explore their suffering and trauma in an exile life. The very seeds of human diaspora are germinated in the traumatic exile of Adam and Eve from Heaven to an alien earth. From then on, exile has the connotation of deep pain, loneliness and alienation. In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward W Said comments on the suffering of exile. "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted.... The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever". According to Said the trauma of exile is derived from

a real sense of loss, the loss of a homeland, a national culture and an identity. In “Mourning and Melancholy” Sigmund Freud also mentioned that both mourning and melancholy can be caused by a loss of loved ones, such as a person, or a more abstract object. Therefore, this paper intends to analyze how loss has caused trauma for second generation Indian Americans in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Trauma in the novel includes loss of traditional culture, death of a family member, the sense of rootlessness, double consciousness and generation conflicts. The paper argues that characters in the novel are nostalgic of the past so they often recall their painful past. By retrospection, they negotiate the relationship between past and present, memory and forgetting to construct a new identity so that they can gradually work through the trauma and strive for a better future.

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## 1. THE LOSS OF A NATIONAL TRADITION

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In the title story “Unaccustomed Earth”, Ruma, a thirty-eight year old Indian American woman, has just moved to Seattle with her husband. She has a three-year-old son Akash to take care of, meanwhile waiting for the birth of her second child. The sudden death of her mother makes Ruma feel traumatic. Ruma and her mother have very close relationship with each other so she is often nostalgic and recalls her childhood. With her mother’s death, she feels that she has no way to return to traditional culture. She also feels very worried as her father offers to visit her because she is afraid that her father will move in to live with her. “Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to”. According to Bengali culture, people enjoy an extended family where parents and children live together to care for each other. Children should take the responsibility to take care of their parents when they grow up. But many years of independent life in America has deprived her of the traditional Bengali culture. She feels that she has lost her Indian culture. She has married a white man against her parents’ will. She chooses to wear western clothes instead of Indian saris. Her mother left her the two hundred and eighteen saris upon her death, but “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”. She seldom uses her Bengali language now. To use a foreign language is to accept the ideology embedded in it. To refuse to use her native language shows that she has become a stranger to her own culture. When an aunt or uncle calls from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya, or Akash a Happy Birthday, she trips over words, mangles tenses. But Ruma often remembers her mother who is a traditional woman and holds to many Indian traditions like endurance, patience and hard work. She is an excellent housewife who cooks well and runs the house “as if to satisfy a mother-law’s fastidious eye”. For Ruma, whenever she

comes, her mother is very helpful, taking over the kitchen, singing songs to Akash and teaching him Bengali nursery rhymes, throwing loads of laundry into the machine”. For Ruma, both marrying a white guy and loss of national culture originate from a sense of self-hate, an inferiority complex, a suffering which Anlin Cheng calls “the melancholy of race”. Frantz Fanon also discussed this inferiority complex in *Black Skin White Mask* in which the black people want a white mask. This is quite alike the girl Pecola who wants blue eyes in *The Bluest Eye*. For Ruma the Loss of her mother signifies the loss of a role model in life and the source of traditional culture to return to. On the father’s visit, he teaches his grandson to speak Bengali and helps his daughter grow a garden at her backyard. He also encourages his daughter to live like a hydrangea in the garden which changes color depending on the acidity of the soil. The recall of the mother and the help from the father relieves the daughter’s pressure who gradually comes to terms with her traditional culture and the death of her mother. At the end of the story, she helps mail the postcard her father forgets to his new companion Mrs. Bagchi which means that she is expecting the future life both for her father and herself.

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## 2. THE SENSE OF ROOTLESSNESS

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Mourning and trauma are integrally linked. According to Sigmund Freud, “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstraction which has taken place such as one’s country, liberty, and ideal and so on. As an effect of the same influences, melancholy instead of a state of grief develops in some people, whom we consequently suspect of a morbid pathological disposition. It is also well worth noticed that, although grief involves grave departures from the normal attitude of life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a morbid condition and hand the mourning over to medical treatment.” Freud thinks that mourning involves departure from the normal attitude to life but it is never a pathological condition. It doesn’t need any treatment. It can overcome after a certain lapse of time. Melancholy is also the reaction to the loss of a loved object. but it is a kind of “morbid, pathological disposition”, causing the dysfunction of mind and body. In mourning it is the world which becomes poor and empty; in melancholy it is the ego itself that becomes empty. In the novella “Hema and Kaushik”, both Hema and Kaushik suffer from trauma because of their rootlessness. But for Hema, the suffering is only mourning because she can have a negotiation with her past; but for Kaushik he can’t work through his loss in the past so he becomes a person who always lives in the melancholy situation and dies at last. The story recounts their initiation from young children to mature people, the association between two families and the tragic love story between them. The two families of Hema and Kaushik get to know each other when they are living as Bengali

Americans in an Indian community in Boston. As kids, Hema and Kaushik have a puppy love for each other. When they grow up, they meet in Rome and resume their affair. As a young woman Hema always feels very lonely because she is a second generation Indian American who suffers from an identity crisis. She doesn't want to think herself as an Indian so she wants to marry an American husband. But after getting tangled with a married white man Julian for ten years, she sees no result from such an affair. So she has to admit her Indian side and accept the Indian husband her parents have arranged for her. But she knows that the marriage has died before it begins. She is a retrospective person living in the past. She is a scholar who studies Etruscans, a dead people in Rome. She loves Kaushik because of their shared past. But their last romance in Rome makes Hema get an epiphany. She knows that they will never return to the past. The bangle she forgets to carry at the Customs after the security check in Rome before her flight back signifies that she has determined to sever her unhappy past and look forward to a new life. She has realized the importance to keep a balance between her past and present, tradition and future. But Kaushik is different. His mother dies of breast cancer when he is a child. His father remarries a traditional Indian woman when he is in college. He can't come to terms with his personal tragedy. He can't accept his father's remarriage and two step-sisters. When he finds that his two step-sisters are watching his mother's photos and make comments, he is furious. He deserts his family and becomes a nomad, living a rootless life. His occupation as a newspaper photographer also forces him to live a mobile life in order to capture the eventful moment in the world. Kaushik is what the Freud called the melancholy person who can't negotiate from his past and the death of his mother. He can't keep the balance between memory and forgetting and finally dies in a tsunami in Indonesia.

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### 3. DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

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Regarding double consciousness of African Americans, W.E.B. Du asserts: it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eye of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,— An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. When W. E. B. Du mentions this, he is talking about African Americans who have lived in a society that has historically devalued and repressed them. They feel that their identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have a unified identity. Indian Americans who live an exiled life also struggle with double consciousness. They are constantly trying to reconcile the two cultures that compose their identity. They see India as a homeland

where they belong, America as a place where they reinvent themselves. In order to survive in a white society, they begin to internalize the prejudice and values against the minorities and see themselves as inferior. Their mind begins to be shaped by the stereotype from the main society. As a result, they develop a self-hate and self-debase. In "Hell-Heaven", an Indian girl named Usha recalls her family's experience with an Indian student Pranab. Pranab is a graduate student who comes to America for study from India. He follows Usha and her mother all the way "for the better of an afternoon around the streets of Cambridge" in order to know them because he feels so lonely and wants to make some Bengali friends. Then as a friend, he joins Usha's family dinner regularly and gets to know the family. Usha's mother likes him because he is young and shares a lot of common interest with her. She even falls in love with the young boy. But later Pranab marries an American girl named Deborah against his family's will. He then drifts away from the Indian American community and almost severs the relationship with Usha and her family. When Pranab and his wife give birth to twin daughters, the little girls "barely looked Bengali and spoke only English and were being raised so differently.... They were not taken to Calcutta every summer, they did not have parents who were clinging to another way of life and exhorting their children to do the same". They celebrate Thanksgiving and other American holidays other than observe Indian traditional ones. So for Pranab, identity is not a both-and relationship but an either-or choice. He becomes a totally westernized person. Influenced by Pranab, Usha becomes a rebellious girl who also internalizes American values and ideology. As she is in puberty period, she begins to evade her mother who represents traditional Indian culture and doesn't want to share her secrets with her. "I (Usha) began keeping other secrets from her (my mum), evading her with the aid of my friends. I told her I was sleeping over at a friend's when really I went to parties, drinking beer and allowing boys to kiss me and fondle my breasts and press their ejections against my hip". For Pranab as a minority living in a white society his inferiority complex caused by double consciousness put him under great pressure which finally drives him to tragedy. After 23-year's marriage, he has an affair with a Bengali woman and destroys two families. By narrating Pranab's story, Usha learns the importance of keeping the balance between two cultures, her past and present life. She also learns to negotiate a relationship with her mum. "My mother and I had also made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well".

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### 4. GENERATION CONFLICTS

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In "A Choice of Accommodations", Amit and his wife Megan are attending the wedding ceremony of one of

his former schoolmates, Pam Borden. Amit comes from an upper class family in India but his wife, Megan, a white American, who is five years older than he, comes from a working family in America. Megan's ordinary background, plain-looking and their age difference has displeased his parents, so after he gets married with her, his relationship with his parents has deteriorated. "His parents had not even met her. He was aware of what an insult it was to them. For all their liberal Western ways he knew they wanted her to marry a Bengali girl, raised and educated as he had been". Because of his marriage, his parents have severed the relationship with him. Therefore, he feels depressed both towards his family and his wife. At the wedding reception, when he gets drunk, he even tells a strange woman Felicia how disappointed he feels towards his marriage. But on the last night they spend together at a school dorm before they leave, the couple begin to reveal their secrets and true feeling to each other. Amit reveals to Megan that when he was young, he had a crush on Pam, the girl who was getting married. The secrets they reveal to each other help them rehabilitate their emotion. The story ends with their enjoyment in harmonious sexuality with each other which shows that Amit has determined to fix the relationship both with his parents and his wife Megan.

Compared with their parents, the second generation of Indian Americans suffers more from their exile and displacement because they have no choice for their life. If their Indian parents can claim India as their homeland, they have nowhere to claim as belonging. All the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* are victims of forced dislocation. They suffer from a sadness of deep loss. As a daughter of an Indian diaspora family, Jhumpa

Lahiri shares her characters' pining for a homeland and belonging in a press conference. "No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile". This idea of exile runs consistently throughout her first two books *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003). The characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* experience pain because they live in a marginal position between two cultures. They straddle two cultures, two traditions and ideologies which cause their identity crisis, rootlessness and double consciousness. The way how they look at their past and their own native culture will determine their future. Too much remembering past like Kaushik will cause people to get stuck in the past and lose the ability to move forward. Forgetting one's native culture is also the most tragedy for people in exile. Only when they can negotiate the past with the present, keep the balance between memory and forgetting, can they reinscribe a new self and reconstruct a better future.

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