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STUDY OF DIASPORA IN THE SELECTED STORIES OF JHUMPA LAHIRI
"UNACCUSTOMED EARTH"

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ABSTRACT

Lahiri graduated from South Kingstown High School and received her B.A in literature from Barnard College of Columbia University in 1989. Later, she received multiple degrees from Boston University such as M.A in English, M.F.A in Creative Writing amongst others. In the beginning of her writing career, she faced rejection to get her debut Short Story Collection "The Interpreter of Maladies" published. It addressed a lot of the sensitive dilemmas faced by Indian Immigrants. In 2003, Lahiri published her first novel, The Namesake which was inspired by a story she heard in her family as a child. Later on, she published her short story collection,

"Unaccustomed Earth". Her stories and novels are often autobiographical and rely on the experiences the writer herself experienced and of her parents, friends, and acquaintances. All her characters face the struggles, anxieties, and biases immigrants usually face problems. Jhumpa Lahiri has been exploring the expatriate Indian experience in America for some time so it comes as no surprise that her second collection of short stories mines this territory. she amazes it with such originality in each one and yet ties the experience together so perfectly. Lahiri's 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 Rootlessness, traditional culture, generation conflicts, reconstruction.

Introduction:

Jhumpa Lahiri is an American author of Indian descent whose works explore the problems 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. Unaccustomed Earth is Jhumpa Lahiri's

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s second short story collection and her third book. Her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), won her the Pulitzer Prize. *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, *Unaccustomed 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". The trauma of exile is derived from Diasporic Trauma in *Unaccustomed Earth* 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.

Generation conflict:

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 demanding 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 originated from a sense of self-hate, an inferiority complex, a suffering which Anlin Cheng calls "the melancholy of race". For Ruma the loss of her mother signifies the loss of 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.

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.

Identity crisis:

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 is a retrospective person living in the past. 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 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. 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.

Conclusion:

Immigrant communities face unique challenges socially and emotionally. Many would sympathize with the financial burden of immigration, but cultural barriers tend to prevent people in other ways too, other than the obvious drama of moving to a new country. This theme is the driving

factor that connects all of the stories in this collection. By highlighting immigrant populations in New England, different senses of ethnic heritage pose challenges in modern America. People are people where ever they live. This theme occurs by humanizing the immigrant or foreigner. By showing their cultural backgrounds as a matter of common human drives, such as the need for love, family and career, the stories end up being more about what people have in common, and isolation is depicted as the product of pain and tragedy, unhappy not as a product of social difference.

By allowing the characters in these short stories to suffer from realistic tragedies, like the death of Kaushik's mother in "Year's End," or by the alcoholism of Rahul in "Only Goodness," the storyteller begins to paint a thematic picture that tragedy and suffering are universal, and maybe that means we should help one another, and be a family to people who are lonely. Large families are an important part of life for many, and in American culture, that is largely absent. For these immigrant families, a common thread occurs: The need for family and community support. Many of these families do have parents and siblings and grandparents, but without a broader network of communal culture, many of these immigrant families are incredibly lonely, causing depression and isolation. *Unaccustomed Earth* examines the Indian expatriate experience in America again both from older generation immigrating to America and of their children, who are truly American but always burdened by the Indian cultural past. These are all highly successful, upper middleclass professionals whose children have rejected so much of their heritage by marrying or forming family with non-Indians.

The title story explores a daughter's difficulty dealing for the first time with her recently widowed father. Ruma has married Adam and moved to San Francisco. Her father, a retired professional, pays a short visit to see his new grandson, Akash. We learn about the complex relationship between Ruma and her mother. But we also find out that the father is on the brink of a new relationship with an Indian woman he has met on senior citizen travels to Europe. Lahiri expertly revolves the roles here and helps us to better understand the daughter-father conflict in a sobering light.

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