Títol: The Representation of Second Generation Migrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Abstract:

This dissertation examines the feelings and difficulties Bengali diaspora communities experience in the USA based on two short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri of her compilation *Unaccustomed earth* (2008). People living in these communities struggle to adapt to a new home where they do not fit completely because of their background, sense of loss, isolation and dual identity. Through the analysis of the short stories, what became very clear in the comparison of different generations is that there is a gap between first and second generations. Regarding the double perspective, writers like Rushdie believe that diaspora individuals are capable of looking at the world without limiting it to fixed ideologies, but in the short stories this is not made obvious. What is demonstrated in the dissertation, is that second generations struggle with their duality for various reasons and, most of the times, they do not know how to cope with the situation nor express their thoughts.

Key words: Bengali diaspora communities, hybridity, generational gap, rootlessness
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India, as one of the biggest countries in Asia and once the 'Jewel in the Crown' of the British Empire, is the home of many ethnicities, cultures, religions and traditions. Not only are its features visible within the country, but also outside its frontiers due to its growing popularity, migration and acceptance (Saha 2009, 191). At the present time, more than twenty million people of Indian heritage live outside the borders of the homeland (HAF 2014). This shows very clearly how the world is becoming a cultural commingle, making it increasingly difficult to define clear nations and identities. Such a situation promotes the creation of communities which cannot define themselves through a fixed nation-state, and thus need to interact and join different states. These groups of people are known as diaspora communities. The dissertation will focus on those migrant individuals who cannot identify completely with their homeland culture, neither do they feel mirrored in the host land culture. They are thus forced to express themselves in a new way, mixing features of both backgrounds and creating something out of dust.

In order to get a clear picture of this kind of blend identity and to see how it is distinct from other diasporic identities, two of the extraordinary short stories by the American writer of Indian descent, Jhumpa Lahiri, will be analysed. In her compilation of short stories called *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), the author explores the difficulties and characteristics of living in what is a somewhat of a foreign country. The main protagonists in these stories are mostly second generation Bengali migrants and through their feelings, preoccupations and actions, it will be possible to look at their experience of living in displacement. However, by way of introduction, it is necessary to define the term 'diaspora', according to critics in the field, and clarify what kind of people are described by this concept.

Throughout time, the term 'diaspora' has experienced many changes in meaning. Initially, it was very specific and used only to refer to the Jewish experience of living in exile and not owning a land of their own (Mishra 2005, 3). In this case, the meaning highlights a particular cultural background of those people who are displaced. However, the concept has widened its horizons to encompass any group of people from any cultural heritage. It is different from the first definition because the people are “dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sense of displacement […] and rootlessness.” (Saha 2009, 191). They do not feel part of their original community in the homeland, nor do they fit completely into the new country. But diaspora does not necessarily imply that the community which has been displaced changes its customs and traditions to
adapt to the new surroundings. Often the opposite takes place, they live as foreigners in their new homes, keeping features of the old motherland. The term diaspora, as used in the present, designates a wide range of people of different ethnicities, generations and countries who live in one place but who “do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated in their passports” (Mishra 2005, 1).

Critics agree that there are migration periods that create different diasporic communities, which can be divided according to the reasons for leaving one's motherland. In his article “From sugar to Masala” (2003), Sudesh Mishra makes a clear distinction between the old and the new Indian diasporas. The former one includes people whose reasons for leaving their home were not totally voluntary, such as indenture labourers from the colonial period, whom he calls “the sugar diaspora” (2003, 294). The new diasporas, on the other hand, are the so-called technocrats along with other intellectuals and workers who are looking for a better future in the land of opportunities which in the case of *Unaccoustumed Earth* is supposed to be the USA. Often, this idea of a better life in a new country is smashed by harsh reality and turns out to be a simple illusion. These new migrants Mishra calls “masala diaspora” (2003, 294).

Yet another distinction must be made regarding different generations, because as Mcleod states “generational differences are important” (2000, 207). As already hinted above, second generation migrants are the protagonists of the book and indeed of this dissertation, because although they might not remember the act of migrating, they are still part of the diasporic community. Consequently, it becomes clear that diasporas do not include only a set of migrants, since not every individual living in a diaspora has experienced migration at some point in life. But the influences of the move to another culture affect future generations, as well as the ones who truly left the homeland. Moreover, it can be said that these communities experience life in a new land in very different ways, always being influenced to different degrees by the original roots to which they once belonged. The stories in Lahiri's book are her own reflections on the difficulties and the in-betweenness of second generation individuals. Having a look at the author's biography, it can be seen very clearly that Lahiri writes from her own experience. She was born in England into an Indian family forty-eight years ago and when she was still a baby, the family moved again, this time to America. She is a second generation diaspora identity who knows how hard it is to live in a land where you are supposed to be a foreigner, but where at the same time you are struggling to come to terms
with your past and future. (Leyda 2011, 66-67)

In the analysis which follows below, the two short stories, “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Only Goodness”, have been chosen for their representativeness of two components which are very relevant when talking about diasporas. In the first point, the factors that cause feelings of alienation and displacement in diasporic identities will be explored, these include the weak but present link with the old country. The motif of death will be examined only in relation to the mother(land) figure, as it is a very wide issue which has given rise to wide interpretations such as those shown in Munos' book *After Melancholia: A Reappraisal of Second-Generation Diasporic Subjectivity in the Work of Jhumpa Lahiri*. In the second part, evidence of the hybrid identity, along with the different ways of how this situation affects migrants of any generation and how they cope with such a situation, will be presented. The final aim of the analysis, apart from exploring the experience of second generation diaspora, will be to prove that the children of migrants are more able to look at the world from two perspectives, compared to the first generation. However, they are generally incapable of fully expressing and celebrating their duality, because of their missing communication with their environment.

**Alien in the new home**

Probably one of the ideas repeated most throughout Lahiri's collection is when Ruma's baba, one of the narrators of “Unaccustomed Earth”, states that “Indians are everywhere these days” (40)¹. Although India is so diverse and different within its borders, outside the country these differences are forgotten; whenever migrants come across a comrade in America, for instance, they feel immediately connected to each other, because of their common background. This is especially the case with first generations who go to a completely new land, where they do not usually know anyone; they thus look for familiar elements in the host land and find it in other migrants who practise the same (or at least similar) traditions and culture as they do. Here, the idea of home is related to the feeling of belonging, which for migrants often was non-existent. For this reason, the Indian diaspora outside the motherland is united by a tight bond of solidarity creating a strong community of people with similar conflicts, feelings and struggles. In the words by Salman Rushdie: displaced people are

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¹ All parenthetical references that include only the page number are quotes taken from *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008).
incapable “of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost” (1991, 10) and for this reason they will start creating little spots of India within the USA, what he calls “imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (1991, 10). These scattered Indias of the mind are also very clearly seen in the stories whenever there is an important celebration. For example, in Sudha's wedding to a British man, the guests were “almost all friends of Sudha's parents, almost all Bengali”(156). This story, “Only Goodness”, portrays a Bengali family formed by Sudha, her brother Rahul and their parents. Their parents have always put pressure on them to achieve success in America as Indians, not realising how difficult this sometimes was for the siblings, as will be shown in the second part of the analysis.

However, this creation of communities does not completely serve as a substitute for the motherland. Migrants still had to adapt to and interact with the newly founded home that surrounds them. Their greatest challenge, in fact, was this difficulty in communication or, as Munos suggests, this “conspiracy of silence in diaspora” (2013, 185), as seen in Lahiri's stories. In all of them, there are characters who have problems expressing their feelings and thoughts. Communication, especially between generations, is extremely difficult or completely missing. Thus, after the birth of Sudha's brother, she “was delighted [...] no longer to be an only child, to have someone help fill the emptiness she felt in her parent's home” (124). Yet it turns out that her brother is also incapable of doing away with the void, and after finishing her degree Sudha distances herself from the family, while her brother loses his way, drops out of school and develops a drinking problem. Another example is shown in “Unaccustomed earth”, where the protagonist Ruma is married to an American with whom she has a son who will grow up knowing almost nothing of the land of his grandparents. Her father's “succinct, impersonal”(4) postcards, he wrote to her when on vacation in a foreign country, never included “a sense of her father's presence in those places”(4). This shows again the gap between generation, as well as their difficulties of interaction.

On that account, it can be said that throughout the compilation, the idea prevails that there are many issues that are left unspoken. In Mendira Sen's review of the book, she suggests that the emphasis on this lack of communication is used to express that “what is unsaid is perhaps more important than what is said” (2008, 29). This statement is justified by the fact that Lahiri's stories describe everyday events, so she may have used this lack of communication to symbolise the loneliness and isolation felt by diaspora people in their new homes. Diaspora individuals thus have no one to talk to and are unwilling to share their
impressions and thoughts, or are sometimes even unable of doing so. This idea could be compared to the feeling of reluctance often experienced when a person does not bother to talk because there is no one who will completely understand. As Baba has experienced it, his migration is “a part of their lives only he and his wife carried with them.” (29); there is therefore no point in trying to explain it to other people. It exemplifies the isolation of many young migrant couples and how their experiences remain a kind of secret kept and understood only by those who have actually had this adventure.

Moreover, in some stories, the idea of isolation and loneliness is conveyed through the motif of death. The passing away of a beloved person is obviously a terrible event, but when it occurs to a displaced family, the fact that there is not the whole extended family and cultural background behind them to give support, makes them feel even lonelier. After the birth of Lahiri's children, she started reflecting on the importance of parental figures in the life of children, because as she explained in an interview:

> It’s so different to know that you come from a family that goes back even four or five generations in one place, as opposed to being raised in a country where you go back only as far as your parents and your parents are at sea. It’s a very different way to grow up, without having anything in the past, anything behind you. (Leyda 2011, 78)

In her book Munos explores the idea of death in the last three short stories that build the “Hema and Kaushik trilogy” thoroughly and, although this theme will not be analysed in depth, it is interesting to highlight one interpretation that can be applied to the other stories. She explains that the death of many mother figures can be understood as a metaphor of the loss of the motherland or, in other words, the loss of the link between second generations and their country of origin; once the parents are dead there is no existing tie between the two constituents (2013, 2). In “Unaccustomed Earth”, the story of Ruma illustrates this idea. It becomes very difficult for her to cope with her daily routines after her mother's sudden death and her move to Seattle. When her father announces that he is coming for a week, she believes it will become even more difficult because she regarded her mother to be the helping hand. Thus, it comes as a surprise when her father starts to look after Akash, even teaching him some Bengali during his stay. This way, Lahiri reflects on the passing away of a parent figure as having a great impact on second generation diasporas and sees it “as the irretrievable loss of a culture-specific universe” (Munos 2013, 2), which is that of the diasporic community.
The last element that causes the diasporic communities to feel isolated is their lost sense of belonging. In the short story “Only Goodness”, the parents of Sudha and Rahul are visibly struggling in America and cannot hide this fact from their children who consider their “parents’ separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer” (138) hence, viewing migration as very negative. Shortly after arriving in America, they were “aware that they faced a life sentence of being foreign”(138), not solely because they cannot adapt completely but also because the natives will always consider them as being different. This is already very problematic for first generations though they still can relate to the motherland, but it becomes even harder for second generation migrants, who have never lived in another country. Although “their sense of ‘identity’ borne from living in a diaspora community will be influenced by the ‘past migration history’ of their parents or grandparents” (Mcleod 2000, 207), they cannot consider it their home. In the above mentioned short story, this is very visible in the siblings who are haunted by a feeling of rootlessness. Sudha, the older one, seems to feel responsible to look after her brother and help him to adapt more easily to the new culture. Often this adaptation involves the progressive loss of cultural aspects such as language, food and traditions. In fact, the second generations of the short stories show the fading away of the homeland culture. For instance, Ruma no longer eats her food with her hands, only in dinners with her parents, and her “Bengali [is] slipping from her” (12). What becomes very clear then is that for diaspora communities, it is difficult to create a feeling of home in the new land because they feel alienated.

Duality and family pressure

When people leave their secure homes to pursue a better life in a new place, as Lahiri explains in an interview, “there’s a lot of conflict and regret involved” (Leyda 2011, 81). Diasporic identities keep the rituals of the traditions of the motherland with greater or lesser frequency; this often causes alienation within the new society. Many migrants, as Mcleod states, are “excluded from feeling they belong to the ‘new country’, and suffered their cultural practices to be mocked and discriminated against” (2000, 208). This reaction by the host land often encourages displaced Indians to drop their customs and reject the old culture to try and fit into society. It is in such a context of two cultures influencing one individual in different degrees where the concept of ‘hybridity’ comes into play.
There have been different ways of understanding hybridity throughout time. The first one was used especially in colonial and postcolonial discourses where it was regarded as negative and undesirable. It depicted people of different cultures and ethnicities who celebrated their digression from the colonial culture (Edwards 2008, 140). These people were forced to fit into the norms of the colonizers and had to drop their traditions to be considered in society. On the other hand, the more current definitions for hybridity consider two different ways of interpreting the cultural commingle; defining it either as a ‘salad bowl’ or a ‘melting pot’. These concepts are very commonly used nowadays to define the coexistence of different societies and traditions in America. The salad bowl metaphor refers to the tolerant cohabitation of different identities in the same place, whereas the metaphor of the melting pot is more connected to the first definition mentioned. It refers to a phenomenon that mixes different cultures so that the outcome is a new one for all, forgetting the distinctive peculiarities of each background. (Surgeon 2013, 486-488)

In the stories we can see that the American culture is the dominant one; it imposes itself more and more, triumphing over the passing of Bengali generations. Second and later generations generally show this fusion of different kinds of being in forming a new identity. Even so, it is a slow process of assimilation, which includes many difficulties and sadness; this hybrid identity can be detected, as many critics remark, because of their double perspective. They are, as Rushdie describes it, “at one and the same time insiders and outsiders” (1991, 19), more able to look at cultures and ideologies in different ways, without proclaiming a fixed one to be the only truth. This way the hybrid identity has the ability to think about and see the world beyond the limits of fixed nations and established cultures (Edwards 2008, 140). Moreover, it is true that the joining of two different ways of existing offers hybrids many possibilities but the effects of their blend are not only positive as will be seen bellow.

In Lahiri’s book, these ambiguous identities that originate from the mix of two cultures can be seen from different perspectives. They become very clear when compared to fixed identities, but also between different and the same generation, there are variations in the way they approach their foreign situation. One of the clearest situations where the difference between hybrid and rooted identities can be seen is in mixed marriages. In both stories of the analysis we can find a married couple formed by a second generation migrant and a rooted native. The diaspora identities face concerns and issues that rooted identities might not share
nor comprehend, so the gap becomes very visible. For instance, Ruma talks about her feeling of duty towards her father, because now that he is a widower, she believes herself to be obliged to offer to have him come and live with them. Her husband, Adam, does not understand her anxieties, because his culture and upbringing did not teach him the same mores as Ruma's parents had taught her. The couple is definitely struggling with their different backgrounds, which makes her feel there is “a wall between them, simply because he had not experienced what she had, because both his parents were still living in the house” (26) where Adam had grown up. There is again lack of communication and comprehension between different identities but this time it does not reflect the isolation and dislocation; rather it emphasizes the migrant’s hybridity. The other couple, formed by Sudha and her husband Roger, also shows this afore-mentioned gaps as she did not tell Roger about her brother's drinking problem. This culminates in a dangerous situation for their son Neel, whom Rahul forgets in his bath tub because of his drunkenness.

Now, if different generations are analysed it becomes obvious that they experience an unequal degree of hybridity. As already demonstrated, first generations still hold onto their original roots to define themselves, while for later generations this is no longer such a strong source of support in their struggle to forge a dual identity. In “Only Goodness”, Sudha's parents are unable to talk to their son and make him see sense, because they do not realize how his uncertain identity is a burden for him. Ruma's father also reflects on this issue and informs the reader that he is aware of the generational gap:

The more the children grew, the less they had seemed to resemble either parent – they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way […]. He remembered his children coming home from college, impatient with him and his wife, enamoured of their new-found independence, always wanting to leave. (54)

Second generations seem to be more capable of accepting and absorbing the different people and traditions that surround them. They even have the desire to experience the world as a lover wants to experience his amorousness. It can therefore be said that the way of thinking about the world is different between generations, whose relationships are usually “complex and overlapping, rather than forming a neat contrast” (Mcleod 2000, 213). Often these differences create tensions within the family unit because parental figures often expect too much or simply want the opposite of their children’s desire, who are highly aware of this
pressure. For second generations this pressure becomes a source of even more anxiety when they are faced with conflicts evolving around their duality. In Kakutani’s review of the book, he argues that the short stories present a perfect picture of “how haunted [second generations] remain by the burden of their families’ dream and their awareness of their role in the generational process of Americanization” (2008). For instance, Ruma's father is very much interested in her professional life after her giving birth, because he doesn't want her to quit the job and career to become a housewife. Again she feels “the prick of his criticism as she had all her life” (13), like when she was not admitted in any of the Ivy Leagues or even now that she wants to fully commit herself to her own little family. This shows that migrant parents aim high for their children's future, since they know it is not easy to live in a foreign place and they themselves had a very difficult time.

Although parents generally want only the best for their children, it seems that for diasporic families this is somewhat different. According to the diasporic parents, their children were “immune from hardship and injustices they had left behind in India” (144). They seem to believe that their children’s life is much easier compared to what they had to go through and even reproach this fact as if it were the children’s fault. In the parental figures of “Only Goodness”, there is also this pressure on the siblings to always work hard and exert themselves, even though all the effort seems to be in vain. Sudha, regardless of how much she tried to please her parents, always “felt that her good fortune had been handed to her, not earned” (140). At least in Sudha’s case, she managed to cope with the situation by adjusting to their expectations “only to ensure that one day she would be set free” (129) of this pressure imposed by the diasporic parents. The opposite happens with Rahul, as will be seen later.

Throughout the dissertation, it has been taken for granted that members of the same generations, although they differ from others before or after them, share the same conflicts, and react alike. However, this is not always the case as can be seen in the compilation of short stories where each individual of second generation Bengali diasporas in America responds somewhat differently, even though their preoccupations are usually very similar. In the two stories of the analysis, this is demonstrated through the dichotomy between brother and sister. As mentioned above, Sudha is able to cope: although she is strained by her hybrid status and the family pressure, she finally realises that she “can’t keep fixing what’s wrong with this family” (156). The real problem lies in Rahul who is supposed to be in the same position as his sister, but is not able to manage the pressures. Within the same generation, individuals
cope with their duality in different ways. While Sudha is always the one the parents can rely on, for example when her good speaking skills are demanded, Rahul is more distant to the world: “He seemed always to be in a slightly bad mood and in urgent need to get somewhere” (139). He has no clear aim in life and seems to have serious issues with his missing roots that drive him to become an alcoholic. In the case of Ruma, there is also a dichotomy between her and her brother, Romi. They ironically have very similar sounding names, but their lives and decisions are very different. The only information the reader obtains about her older brother is that he moved abroad, as soon as he could, and maintains only distant ties with the family.

In this part of the analysis, then, it becomes clear that living as a migrant can have both positive and negative side effects. Migrants are generally more open-minded when it comes to different cultures and ways of looking at the world. They thus create a “democratic ethos of equality that does not privilege any particular ethnic community” (Mishra 2005, 18) but still they are affected by the fixed and rooted ideologies because of which they suffer racist prejudice. This makes it harder for the individual hybrid to embrace his reality and forge his new blend identity causing “existential angst in their psychology [and it seems for them as if] the world simply refuses to become less complex” (Saha 2009, 194).

**Conclusion**

In the last few decades, issues related to the experiences of Indian diaspora communities have created a very popular and huge body of literature. Their experiences of moving out of the borders of the homeland are “necessarily similar in that they are displaced from a homeland that is connected to language, religion and a sense of cultural belonging” (Edwards 2008, 150). However, each case is somewhat particular because every diaspora identity, regardless their generation, copes with the situation in different ways. In her short stories, Lahiri shows the struggles and problems Bengali migrants face in America not only when they interact with the host land but also the issues within the family and the inner turmoil. As shown in the dissertation, the issues of origin and identity are never completely defined in these diasporic identities because their “passports, location, sense of belonging, and cultural affiliations are not always congruent” (Priyamvada 2009, 160). Although many critics agree that migrants have a so-called double perspective that affects the way they look at what constitutes the world, this duality is not shown explicitly in Lahiri's book. She rather focuses
on the family relationships and the different ways of coping with displacement.

Therefore, throughout the analysis of the two short stories by the Indian American, it has been demonstrated how the individuals who have left the mother country are affected by such a move, struggling to adapt and interact. The protagonists of the short stories fight against their feeling of loss by forging a new identity which merges features of the mother-culture and the new culture, creating this way a hybrid identity. Other solutions to cope with the displacement of diaspora identities, as portrayed in the short stories, are the creation of diasporic communities and the decision to remain silent. The act of physically migrating may be a decision many people regret, but everybody takes decisions at some point in life which have an impact on future generations. This view is evident in the famous words uttered by Rushdie: “the past is a country from which we have all emigrated” (1991, 12). Once decision are made, they cannot be reversed. It depends on oneself to make the best of the situation and change the fixed views of the world.
References:


