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## **Navigating Existential Struggles and Diaspora Trauma: Indian Immigrant Experience across the Generations in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth***

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### **Abstract:**

Immigration is a global concern, and Jhumpa Lahiri, an American writer of Indian descent, delves into her immigrant experiences in her novels. Lahiri's main theme centers on the clash between traditional Indian values and modern American life, causing cultural disorientation and feelings of displacement among her characters. This multi-cultural struggle often results in a sense of rootlessness among immigrants, particularly Indian immigrants in America. Cultural evolution is influenced by many factors such as climate, environmental surroundings, dietary practices, and socio-economic circumstances. Individuals deeply connected to an established cultural background often experience a strong sense of identity, while immigrants encounter the dilemma of navigating between two distinct cultural spheres. In her work 'Unaccustomed Earth,' comprising eight stories, Jhumpa Lahiri poignantly depicts the plight of Bengali immigrants, exploring dislocation, cultural dilemmas, and the conflict of ideas in the first and second generations of immigrants in our globalized world. This paper primarily examines the deep sensitivity in relationships in Lahiri's 'Unaccustomed Earth.'

**Keywords: Multiculture, Dislocation, Existential Struggle, Cultural Confusion.**

Jhumpa Lahiri, a renowned diasporic writer of Indian origin, was born in London to Bengali-Indian parents. Her family relocated to America when she was three years old, where her parents instilled in her the values of Indian culture. Lahiri achieved literary acclaim by

winning the Pulitzer Prize for her debut collection, 'Interpreter of Maladies,' and has won numerous prestigious awards throughout her career. Originally named Nilanjana Sudeshna, she adopted the nickname "Jhumpa" due to its easier pronunciation, eventually becoming her pen name. As the daughter of Indian immigrants, Lahiri grapples with the complex issue of identity. Her works as a writer of the Indian diaspora prominently address themes of identity, alienation, and adjustment. Lahiri has shared her immigrant experience, describing life in the U.S., where she and her family felt like transplanted individuals without strong blood connections (Wolfe, Alexandra, "Jhumpa Lahiri: On Dislocation"). Her deep connection to her Indian roots drives her to explore these issues with utmost seriousness, earning her widespread acclaim in the area of literature.

Diaspora Literature is a genre that delves deeply into the profound experiences of individuals who, driven by diverse motivations, leave their countries of origin behind to forge new lives in foreign lands. As they embark on this transformative journey, they carry the rich tapestry of their distinct religious beliefs, cultural traditions, languages, and societal norms. These elements not only shape their identities but also become integral components of their existence in unfamiliar territories, creating a dynamic interplay between the old and the new.

This literary realm has attracted the attention of numerous authors who have devoted considerable efforts to exploring the multifaceted dimensions of diaspora literature. They intricately dissect the nuanced experiences of individuals who find themselves living between two worlds, navigating the complexities of cultural adaptation, and grappling with the evolving facets of their identities. Within this expansive landscape, Indian Diaspora writers have emerged as remarkable contributors on the global stage. Their literary contributions have significantly enriched the discourse on identity, belonging, and the intricate process of cultural adaptation. Among these gifted writers, Jhumpa Lahiri stands as a prominent figure, celebrated not only for her exceptional literary prowess but also for her profound insights into the human condition, especially within the context of migration and cultural dislocation.

Diaspora represents a fascinating convergence of diverse cultures, where scattered populations retain a deep sense of cultural belonging to their places of origin. Throughout history, individuals have uprooted themselves in pursuit of improved opportunities, bringing with them the values and traditions of their homelands as they integrate into new environments. This process often results in a complex dual consciousness, where individuals must reconcile and fuse aspects of their original culture with those of their adopted homes.

Lahiri presents her individuals in *Unaccustomed Earth* in an irascible manner. The restlessness of these individuals may rightly be interpreted in terms of their frantic search for identity and self-knowledge. Most of them are cut off from their society and surroundings and lead a life of loneliness and frustration. They live in an alienated world of their own and drift constantly against the current while waging a grim fight for their existence and freedom. Hence, alienation is closely associated with Lahiri's works.

The migration journey is not without its initial challenges, but over time these individuals leave a lasting impact on the communities they join. It is not just their dietary preferences, clothing choices, lifestyles, and languages that transform, but a profound shift in behavior as well. This blending, or hybridity, along with the co-existence of multiple cultural influences, fosters a new path of change and innovation. However, this process also has its share of downsides, including feelings of alienation, rootlessness, and homesickness. A persistent nostalgia often lingers, with individuals grappling with questions about their true sense of belonging. Despite the amalgamation of two cultures, there can be a sense of detachment or aloofness. However, this hybrid identity becomes an integral part of their existence.

In navigating this complex terrain of hybridity, individuals synthesize the best elements from both cultures, leading to the evolution of unique linguistic, sociological, psychological, and historical perspectives. Their affinity for both their ancestral homeland and their current residence keeps them grounded in the reality of their multifaceted identities. This ongoing interplay between cultures enriches the tapestry of human experience and fosters an ever-evolving cultural landscape. Lahiri's storytelling acumen has resonated with readers across the globe, transcending cultural boundaries and linguistic barriers. Her narratives capture the essence of the diaspora experience, inviting readers to explore the profound emotional landscapes of her characters. Through her thought-provoking works, she has not only solidified her place as a literary luminary but has also elevated the genre of diaspora literature itself, contributing to her enduring global reputation.

Salman Rushdie in his study-provoking essay 'Imaginary Homelands', delves into the gestures of immigrants, particularly Indian emigrants in America and Britain. He eloquently expresses the sentiment that for emigrants like himself, history represents a cherished, albeit distant, home, while the present frequently feels foreign and disconnected (Rushdie, 9). Rushdie's visit to Bombay, where he sets up unchanged telephone figures and addresses in

the telephone directory, elicited a sense of durability and made him question the reality of his distant life gestures (Rushdie, 9).

Jhumpa Lahiri has conveyed her emigrant experience through the character Gogol in her 2003 novel, 'The Namesake.' In this work, she explores the themes of artistic disaffection and the loss of identity that emigrants grapple with in their hunt to find a sense of belonging in a foreign land. Her erudite works vividly portray the trauma endured by Indian emigrants in America and their sweat to recreate an Indian atmosphere in a foreign land, touching on the empirical struggles of these individuals and the challenges faced by them. Lahiri's fictional narratives revolve around the emigrant experience and the profound sense of disturbance that frequently accompanies life in a foreign country. The increased global movement of people has given rise to issues similar to migration, identity loss, multiculturalism, loneliness, adaptation difficulties, and artistic metamorphosis. As different languages and societies intertwine, they form new artistic links.

Salman Rushdie aptly captures the complexity of the Indian identity when he states, 'Our identity is at formerly plural and partial, occasionally we feel we straddle two societies; at other times, that we fall between two droppings' (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*). This sentiment resonates deeply with Jhumpa Lahiri, who explores the complication. Indian diaspora writers have made significant contributions. Jhumpa Lahiri stands out as one of the prominent numbers in this order. She has achieved transnational recognition solidifying her global identity as a writer of Indian descent.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri explores the theme of migration with her typical lyrical style and immense emotional involvement. The stories in the book are frequently dominated by a universal sense of loss and instability. Lahiri contemplates on disaffection of her protagonist substantially performing in psychosis and frustration. Her estranged characters, engaged in the conflict to balance two different worlds, enable us to understand the complications and empirical confusion of the emigrants in the new land of agreement. Lahiri elucidates the problem of disaffection associated with race and identity.

The characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" frequently grapple with a myriad of complex issues, including assimilation, cultural adaptation, and the clash between divergent cultural values. They find themselves in a perpetual struggle to harmonize their Indian heritage with the American way of life, occasionally feeling as if they don't fully belong to either culture. This profound conflict of identity is particularly conspicuous among

the second generation, who often find themselves caught between the cultural richness of their Indian roots and the American society in which they are immersed. "Unaccustomed Earth" is known for its poignant and beautifully written stories that capture the nuances of immigrant experiences and the complexities of cultural identity. It's a book that resonates with readers who have faced similar challenges of balancing multiple cultural influences in their lives.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, 'The Unaccustomed Earth,' she delves into the challenges faced by Indian immigrants. This collection is divided into two parts, with the first part containing five stories titled 'The Unaccustomed Earth,' 'Hell-Heaven,' 'A Choice of Accommodation,' 'Only Goodness,' and 'Nobody's Business.' The second part includes three stories: 'Once in a Lifetime,' 'Year's End,' and 'Going Ashore.' These narratives predominantly revolve around the immigrant experiences of Bengali families and explore a wide spectrum of relationships. The story 'Unaccustomed Earth' within this collection portrays Bengali immigrants in America as they grapple with the reconstruction of their identities and ultimately establish themselves in unfamiliar territory.

The title draws inspiration from Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Custom House,' where it is stated, "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato if it is planted and replanted for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil... shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth." This title symbolizes the immigrants' desperate attempts to establish roots in a foreign land and sets the stage for exploring themes of adjustment disorder among first and second-generation Indian immigrants and the impact of cultural clashes on family relationships. Lahiri sensitively depicts parent-child relationships in the chapter "Unaccustomed Earth." The title itself encapsulates the concept of foreignness, rootlessness, cultural confusion, conflict, and a sense of isolation in an alien land. Lahiri's writing emanates empathy and compassion for immigrants, as she is one. Through her work, she encourages diasporic individuals to make efforts to find their place in a foreign land.

The first part of the story titled 'Unaccustomed Earth' primarily delves into the generation gap, revealing the opposing experiences of first and second-generation immigrants. Lahiri intricately portrays characters with sensitive relationships in this story. The Indian American community depicted in her stories consists mainly of Bengalis who grapple with complex issues stemming from the intercultural marriages of their parents, the secret love stories of the first generation, and their impact on the second and future

generations. The title also hints at the world of first-generation immigrants who have become accustomed to the world of their children. The story focuses on Ruma, a second-generation immigrant, a well-educated woman living in Seattle with her American husband and child, Akash. Ruma undergoes trauma following the sudden loss of her mother, which deeply affects her.

After the sudden death of her mother, Ruma finds herself in a state of profound trauma. Her father, who had worked for a pharmaceutical company for many decades, retires and embarks on European travels, which he had never done before. Their lives take separate paths, with Ruma and her father living in a way that allows them independence and minimal interference in each other's affairs. However, a significant development emerges as Ruma's father develops a new relationship with Mrs. Bagchi, keeping it concealed from Ruma. This newfound relationship makes Ruma feel as though her father has completely moved on from her late mother, adding to the strain on their already imperfect relationship. 'The Unaccustomed Earth' serves as a profound exploration of the multifaceted immigrant experience and the intricate dynamics within diasporic families, all set against the backdrop of a foreign land where individuals seek to find their place and establish their roots.

Ruma's relationship with her father has never been harmonious. She fears that her father's presence will become a continuous responsibility, disrupting the family she had built on her own with her husband and children. This fear pushes her to relive a pattern similar to her mother's life when she gives up her job to follow her husband to a distant city for the birth of their second child. As she transitions to her new life, Ruma begins to resemble her mother more closely, which intensifies her cultural identity crisis. Her mother's sudden death triggers feelings of loss of national identity and self-doubt for marrying a white man.

Ruma's concern for her son Akash's upbringing reflects her deep cultural ties to her parents' homeland. Despite her efforts, she sees her son adopting American traits that contrast with her cultural background, mirroring the type of American child her mother disapproved of. Although Ruma's mother is no longer alive when the story begins, her presence is felt throughout Ruma's life. Her father steps into the maternal role by teaching Bengali to Ruma's son and tending to her garden, trying to help Ruma overcome her trauma and accept the reality of her mother's absence. Ruma's journey of cultural preservation and adaptation, set against the backdrop of her son's upbringing, constitutes a central theme in the story. It

beautifully encapsulates the complex interplay between the immigrant experience and the evolving dynamics of generational identity.

Ruma eventually discovers her father's secret love affair with Mrs. Bagchi through a postcard, shedding light on the reasons for his trips and his newfound happiness. She is surprised by her father's actions at his age but begins to understand the loneliness he has endured. Their relationship starts to mend during his visit, with certain incidents and gestures bringing father and daughter closer together. As he departs, he plants some flowers in Ruma's garden in memory of his late wife, the only flowers she ever favored. This act symbolizes a reconciliation and understanding between them, with Ruma now appreciating her father's actions and motives.

In the second narrative titled "Hell-Heaven," Bengali culture is vividly portrayed through linguistic nuances, with words like 'Kaku' (uncle), 'Da' (brother), and 'Boudi' (sister-in-law) serving as linguistic signposts. These terms are synonymous with familial relationships and exemplify the intricacies of Bengali kinship bonds. Additionally, the story highlights the cultural practice of applying vermilion in the center parting of a married woman's hair, as well as the significance of red and white bangles, which are emblematic of Bengali marital customs. These elements evoke a strong sense of nostalgia. This story beautifully captures the tension between embracing change and preserving one's cultural roots, reflecting the complexities of personal and cultural identity.

In "A Choice of Accommodations," Amit and his wife, Megan, attend the wedding of Amit's friend Pam at his old boarding school, Langford Academy. Pam's father was the headmaster there, and she was the only girl on campus. When Pam discovers a dress burn mark, she asks Amit for help. Amit promises Megan he'll return after calling their daughters but gets drunk and passes out. This leads to a confrontation with Megan. Later, as they say goodbye to Pam at the academy, a surprising moment in a dorm room sparks a romantic encounter, revealing the complexities and tensions in their relationship and the unexpected emotions from their past.

In the fourth story, titled "Only Goodness," we are introduced to Sudha and Rahul, two siblings whose striking differences serve as a central theme. Sudha emerges as a promising and accomplished individual, dutifully fulfilling her parents' aspirations. In contrast, Rahul embodies the challenges faced by immigrant children who grapple with emotional exhaustion and psychological alienation, ultimately jeopardizing their well-being.

While both siblings have integrated aspects of American culture into their lives to varying degrees, Sudha's choice to engage in drinking, despite her parents' disapproval, becomes a source of hidden conflict within the family. This narrative delves into the intricate complexities of the immigrant experience and family dynamics, shedding light on the tensions that arise when tradition and adaptation collide in a new cultural landscape.

In the story 'Nobody's Business', Sang, highly sought-after, juggles suitors despite being in a relationship with Farouk. During Sang's absence, her roommate Paul receives a call from Deirdre, Farouk's Vancouver lover. Struggling to break the news to Sang, their relationship sours when she discovers Paul's prior knowledge. They later reconcile and confront Farouk, resulting in a physical altercation between Paul and Farouk, requiring police intervention. Subsequently, Paul suspects Farouk may still be involved with his Vancouver mistress. In the second section, titled 'Hema and Kaushik,' the narrative explores the reconnection of childhood friends, Hema and Kaushik, in their later years. Their story, "Once in a Lifetime," is unveiled through a heartfelt letter Hema writes to Kaushik. Within this letter, Hema beautifully recounts the profound friendship they nurtured during their formative years, a connection forged by their shared cultural backgrounds and the everyday challenges they faced. The families also became closely intertwined, deriving solace from their collective experiences of both hardship and triumph. However, as time unfolds, the once-unbreakable bond between Hema and Kaushik gradually weakens. The letter becomes a poignant chronicle of their friendship's bittersweet evolution, inviting readers to reflect on how time and geographical separation can affect the enduring nature of cherished connections.

In "Year's End," Kaushik grapples with his father's decision to marry a much younger widow, becoming a big brother to two small stepsisters. Overwhelmed by the situation, Kaushik embarks on a journey up the East Coast of the United States, during which he reflects on his relationship with Hema. In "Going Ashore," set in Rome during late autumn and early winter in 2004, Hema, an engaged academic, and Kaushik, preparing for a new assignment in Hong Kong, become lovers without committing to each other. Tragically, Kaushik's life is cut short during a layover in Thailand when he is killed by the Indian Ocean tsunami on December 26.

The story continues in "Year's End." Kaushik must deal with his father's decision to remarry a much younger widow for companionship. He also becomes a big brother to two

small stepsisters. The situation becomes too much for him to handle. Kaushik drives up the East Coast of the United States. While driving, he reflects on having known Hema.

In “Going Ashore,” Hema and Kaushik meet in Rome in the late autumn and early winter of 2004. Hema is an academic engaged to be married, and Kaushik is preparing to leave for Hong Kong for a new assignment. They become lovers but do not commit to each other. On a layover in Thailand for a week, Kaushik goes swimming, only to be killed by the Indian Ocean tsunami on December 26.

### **Conclusion:**

Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" presents a poignant examination of the Indian American cultural identity crisis across three generations of Bengali immigrants in the United States. "Unaccustomed Earth" symbolizes the fresh ground on which both descendants and their parents construct their cultural identities and connections, ultimately bridging generational divides and discovering a profound sense of belonging in an ever-evolving world. Lahiri frequently addresses the recurring and emotionally charged theme of alienation, which serves as a central lens through which she scrutinizes the complex experiences of her characters. This examination is particularly poignant within the context of migration, the challenges of cultural adaptation, and the ongoing pursuit of identity.

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