

GLIMPSES OF KINSHIP CONCERNS IN LAHIRI'S  
*UNACCUSTOMED EARTH*

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**ABSTRACT**

Jhumpa Lahiri, a dazzling storyteller, has established herself as the perfectionist capturing the imperfections of the displaced. Lahiri, through her enriching themes such as the immigrant experience, the clash of culture, the conflicts of assimilation and most poignantly the tangled ties between generations which are all deepened, darkened, distinct, elegant and deeply moving made her collections an international best seller. The whole world of emotions is opened through her deft touch for the perfect detail of the fleeting moments. Her stories unerringly chart the familial relationships and emotional journeys of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations and generations. They are imbued with the sensual details of Indian culture and family unity. She elucidates through her penmanship the distinctive features of a family and its pivotal role in the society whether it is in the homeland or in an alien land.

Her *Unaccustomed Earth* won the Frank O'Connor award of €35000, the richest short story prize in the world. This much coveted prize for her stories encompassed different aspects of the Bengali migrant experience (Irvine), there by overtaking Booker prize winners namely Anne Enright and Roddy Doyle.

The present paper sheds light on the kinship concerns with special importance laid on the parent-child and grandparent-grandchild relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story, "Unaccustomed Earth".

**Introduction**

*Unaccustomed Earth* returns to the terrain-the heart of family life and the immigrant experience that which she has made completely hers exploring the emotional tangles, multiple identities, mysteries of the human heart figuring through multiple relationship and human plights in the lives of immigrants in Diaspora. Lahiri has exhibited in this collection, tales of parenthood, generational conflicts, older and new

generations' varied responses to the new diasporic space, fragile marital and love relations, commotion in the family space, so on and so forth.

Nandhini Sahu lauds her inevitable status as the writer of the Indian Diaspora. She states: "through Lahiri's stories we learn bits and pieces about Indian life in diaspora and how Indians fit into their lives in America" (Sahu 171). The stories in a way furnish a far deeper understanding and fresh new hopes and personify characters that have least resemblance to the previously created characters. When asked by the Book Forum about the source of the characters of this new work, Lahiri said, "some bits and pieces are taken from my own parents and their parents that I knew growing up. And sometimes they're totally invented....I knew a lot of people and was privy to the whole spectrum of types and personalities and characters". Lahiri concentrates on the cross roads of complex kinships in the modern situation whether it is diasporic or non- diasporic kinships. Human relationships are inborn and are a key bondage throughout the universe. But, sometimes the sensitive chords of family bondage undergo changes and get hardened up when it is stretched across continents and generations. When delving from a close glimpse, it is found that the best portion of her writing deals with the understanding of human beings, their life and relationships that can cut across national lines. Human relations are all that matters in a world created by Lahiri.

The crux of her writing thus appears to be the kinship concerns that she paints in all their diverse and sparkling colors. Saloni Prasad says that Lahiri's stories are about the inner psyche of the characters: the relationship between parent and child, siblings, lovers, husband and wife and even simply between the residents of the same building (Prasad-261). It is clear that her stories are not more about the encounter between Indian and Indian Americans but more about the importance of understanding, communicating and faltering marriages. A glance at her stories shows Lahiri as a writer of human relationships, analyzing on how the land of diaspora builds up tensions which would ultimately manage or damage human relationships. The human mindscape and human relationships has become the focal point for many modern writers with the emergence of psychoanalytic theory. Diaspora writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri have taken strenuous efforts to show the human predicament in a land of exile, who are far away from their homeland-trying to find a place for themselves and thereby find meaningful relationships.

*Unaccustomed Earth*, contains the narrative of the inner conflict of an Indian-American woman, Ruma, who is married and is about to have her second child and about the visitation by her father, an Indian retiree, in her new home in Seattle. The visit brings about a myriad feeling, bringing back old resentments and a deep reflection on her relationship with her past. As in her previous books, Jhumpa Lahiri's characters are immigrants from India and their American-reared children. As far as first generation diasporic people

are concerned they feel like fully grown trees that get uprooted; they are born and brought up in India, and move to an alien land leaving their homeland, due to some economic, political or marital reasons. So there is always a deadlock between their longing for homeland and belonging to the newly adopted land. At the same time they want to belong to both the lands.

### **Father and Daughter Relations**

Lahiri very skillfully scans the minute details of all types of relationships such as father-daughter, grandfather-grandson, sister-brother, and husband-wife. The title of the story “Unaccustomed Earth” very aptly displays the paradoxical relationship of the immigrant father and daughter. In this story the father tries his best to get the unaccustomed earth, accustomed to his daughter, by refreshing the old ties and getting along new ties with her and her son Akash. The story begins with a recapitulatory reflection of Ruma’s father, a retiree from a pharmaceutical company who takes up traveling on package tours. It not only shows Ruma’s great excitement before her father’s laconic comments, but also her grievance towards her father for not being emotionally attached to her. This lack of communication between father and daughter is marked well by Lahiri in these words:

“The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had ever received from her father. In her thirty-eight years he’d never had any reason to write to her. It was a one-sided correspondence; his trips were brief enough so that there was no time for Ruma to write back, and besides, he was not in a position to receive mail at his end..... It was only in his closing that he acknowledged any personal connection with them. “Be happy, love Baba”, he signed them, as if the attainment of happiness were as simple as that. (UE 4).”

The relationship with her parents that was distant even before her marriage now extended little more resulting into a longer break when she moved to Seattle. According to Indian tradition, it is the daughter who cares for the father in his old age, but Ruma does not feel prepared for that. This reveals the conflict in Ruma’s mind. But on one hand, it shows her concern for her father when she watches the news bulletin to know his flight schedule and also to make sure that there have been no plane crashes. On the other hand she “feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to” (UE 7). At the initial stage the relationship between Ruma and her father is quite contradictory. She seems to be vacillating at the thought of her father’s stay with her in the same house, even before his arrival. She is torn between her duty as a Bengali daughter and her duty as an American wife. But when her father comes to Seattle and stays with her for a few days, the relationship be-

tween father and daughter undergoes a transformation. She sees the helping and caring attitude of her father. Her father also sees the changes in Ruma who has now become a mother. He glimpses at the change in Ruma becoming more intense. Ruma who had been labeled as a rebel in the past has been turning into a woman resembling her mother: “For several minutes he stood in the doorway. Something about his daughter’s appearance had changed; she now resembled her mother so strongly that he couldn’t bear to look at her directly”. (UE 28)

The very sight of her father’s involvement with her son Akash, enables Ruma to undergo a change positively and wishes that her father would continue to stay with her family. She says, “You can have the whole downstairs. You can still go on your trips whenever you like. We will not stand in your way” (UE 52). Lahiri comments that while staying in an alien culture the modes of thinking of Diasporas have intermingled with the dominant American culture and undergoes drastic modifications. She also says that the Indians living in America seem to have a liking towards Americanization. She reminisces her youth, how the Indian etiquette seemed to be very difficult to fit in herself. Ruma confesses that she and her brother Romi, were much attracted to the American life style than the Indian.

Lahiri also portrays the efforts taken by her father to make a garden in his daughter’s home. He purchases the plants, seeds and manure - little steps that he takes to add his own contribution to beautify the home, even though he knew that his daughter or son-in-law would never give any attention to the grooming of the garden. He wants to teach them the value of tending plants on an unaccustomed earth. Here, plants symbolize the uprooted diasporic people. They can get their roots fixed in an unaccustomed earth just by their whole hearted efforts to get themselves acquainted in the host-land. The writer very adeptly employs the ‘Garden’ as a metaphor. It is only through the metaphor of the garden, she gets the inner out of her characters. The relationship between Ruma and her father that was once aloof and emotionally detached, came to a close heart to heart relationship between them, through the garden metaphor. Ruma’s father as a representative of the Indian Patriarchy wants to possess the central place for himself and avoids staying at the margins. It also reflects his struggle for integration in the host country instead of living on the border lines. In the same way, he had been a source of inspiration for his daughter to be independent and self-reliant; individual liberty is something he thinks necessary for himself as well as for others. At the same time he is very much clinging to his past, to the Bengali language, old food habits, people from Bengal especially Meenakshi Bagchi. It is revealed very well that his life had changed after the demise of Ruma’s mother. Being all alone after leading so many years of family life did not produce in him any saddening effect, rather he found for himself a free and liberating existence where he was no longer bound to perform

the duties a family life demands. His attachment and interaction with the mainstream American culture had widened his outlook towards life and he had also started enjoying the bliss of individualism, an American lifestyle. That is why he never harbored the idea of living in his daughter's family which his wife would have done if he died earlier. Not following the same track, he opted an alternative living which the new cross cultural space had offered to him. The statement by Ruma's father, "But this is your home not mine" (UE 52) proves his individualistic thinking and a sense of independence. The immigrant feeling of being marginalized penetrates the familial lives and the father doesn't wish to continue living in his daughter's house.

The story is structured mainly on the speculations of Ruma and her father, who with ceaseless effort justify the world around him. He tried justifying to himself his newly developed relation with Mrs. Bagchi, a Bengali tourist. This seemed to be an 'occasional relation' as Mrs. Bagchi resisted the idea of marriage and they planned to meet only in trips. This relation, according to him, was propelled not by any 'passion' but by his long 'habit companionship'. However, he hesitated to tell Ruma about this and preferred keeping it a secret. He could not justify telling this as he remembered how he and his wife used to react to Ruma's or Romi's affair. With the unfurling of the plot, it is realized that Ruma's conviction about her father was not completely correct. Several glimpses of fatherly concern and affection are shown during his visit to Ruma. The affection that was shy and that Ruma seemed to be unaware of such an expression. Though a bit reserved by nature, he came out of his character and praised open-heartedly the dishes whatever Ruma managed to prepare. He was also concerned for the fact that Ruma was not looking for any job and was quite satisfied being full-time home maker. But Ruma's willing replication of her mother's life and not following what most of the women in America do was in a way a kind of liberty or freedom that she had been enjoying. Her father, however, failed to understand it. The best part of the story comes out when Ruma's father got absorbed in a very long deliberation. In spite of the advent of the 'Feminist' theory, the role played by the father having in him the features such as duty, affection and selfless devotion, has made him to be a carrier of the prevailing patriarchal system. A daughter's relationship with her father is usually her first male-female relationship which in due course of time, becomes as a shadow of a relationship with her husband binding that a daughter's psyche is very significantly affected through this relationship.

Thus, on the surface their relationship seems to be divided but it is also complementary to each other. Both of them feel the same kind of dilemmatic situation while adjusting themselves in an alien land. In the course of the story, the father-daughter relationship is not the same from the beginning but undergoes a drastic transformation from distant to very intimate to each other, and yet again they are depicted as strangers.

### Mother-Daughter Relations

The role of a mother in a family is a crucial one who not only nourishes the family members but also the social, cultural values, customs and tradition. It is mainly for this reason she reacts violently when any inconstancy in the family space occurs. Ruma's mother in comparison to her father was always concerned in maintaining cultural ties who never allowed her children to speak to her other than in Bengali. As she postulated that the marriage would not last long, she left no stone unturned to stop Ruma for the marriage. But when the marriage worked out, it was Ruma's mother who accepted Adam first and most: "Over the years her mother not only retracted her objections but vehemently denied them; she grew to love Adam as a son, a replacement for Romi ....Her mother would chat with Adam on the phone, even when Ruma was not at home, e-mailing him from time to time, carrying on a game of Scrabble with him over the internet. When her parents visited, her mother would always bring a picnic cooler filled with homemade mishti, elaborate, syrupy, cream-filled concoctions which Ruma had never learnt to make, and Adam loved."(26)

Interestingly, when it comes to some positive changes, it is the mother figure who shows signs of incredible flexibility and adaptability in her character. Ruma's mother not only took Adam as her surrogate son, she developed a bonding with Ruma never found earlier:

It was after she'd had a child that Ruma's relationship with her mother became harmonious; being a grandmother transformed her mother, bringing happiness and an energy Ruma had never witnessed. For the first time in her life Ruma felt forgiven for the many expectations she'd violated or shirked over the years. She came to look forward to their nightly conversations, reporting the events of her day, describing what new things Akash had learnt to do. (UE 27)

Not only in her attitude towards Ruma and her family, Ruma's mother displayed notable changes in her outlook to life. With a desire to live more, in the company of her grandchildren, she started physical exercise 'wearing an old Colgate sweatshirt of Ruma's'(27). She expressed her craving to visit the beautiful tourist places on earth. Further, when Ruma planned to take her to Paris, she diligently learnt communicative French in order to enjoy the tour to the maximum. Her adjustment to culture reminds one of Ashima in *The Namesake*, Lilia's mother in 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' or Mala in 'The Third and Final Continent'. Ruma, on one hand, began appreciating her mother whose role in Ruma's life has been transformed from a dominating patriarch to an elderly, experienced friend. She not only started admiring her mother's life which she so far considered ordinary, unadventurous and avoidable - 'moving to

a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household- she had also been following the same in her own life. Ruma wished her mother to stay with her during her maternity instead of her father's presence since she thought that her mother would have been helpful, "taking over the kitchen, singing songs to Akash and teaching him Bengali rhymes"(6). But the sudden demise of her mother due to heart failure was a great shock to her. Ruma had to reach a turning point at this very stage.

Unconsciously, Ruma left behind a position that paved way for her independence, individuality, and then finally the devotion over her household, embarking her mother's social role. She wondered how her mother could've done it. "Growing up, her mother's example, moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household, had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now" (UE 11). She herself managed to teach her son Akash a few words in Bengali by keeping one foot in the past but she wasn't able to maintain the same discipline as her son became a bit older. In fact, her own world of the two languages was at loggerheads: Bengali, in childhood, and English, in her adult life. Thus, the predicament of language seen in Ruma had got transferred to her son, too.

### **Mother-Son Relations**

Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Unaccustomed Earth*, is worth notable about Ruma's motherly attachment towards her son Akash. She takes every effort to teach him some Bengali words in his babyhood itself which reveals her love for her homeland and her mother-tongue. But when he grows out of his babyhood she turns over to English, thinking that "Bengali had never been language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her".(UE 12). Since she did not master the Bengali language completely, she remained an incomplete Indian. Akash's attachment towards his father was a distant one because of his frequent outdoor assignments. Ruma had to bridge this gap between him and his father, which in the meantime a stronger mother-son relations griped them- "...and all she wanted was to stay home with Akash, not just Thursdays and Fridays, but everyday".(UE 5).

Lahiri continues to say that Akash was 'a perfect synthesis of Ruma and Adam'. When her son was three years old and that when they had moved on to a new place, it was difficult for Ruma to discipline him. Akash in his anger would throw himself on the ground without warning and sometimes would trouble Ruma to hold him even while she is preparing some dishes. Ruma always wanted to bring up her lad in the Indian customs and traditions and on its values in a land that was all alien to her wishes, and thereby it was not a long lasting dream for Ruma.

Ruma's father's stay at her house eased Ruma many a times in doing the household chores. The little kid who had been trailing behind his mother often, now started to take sides with her father, leaving Ruma to find out whether he is comfortable with her father. Akash exclusively stayed in her father's care. On the other hand, Ruma "worried that perhaps Akash would suddenly demand her presence".(UE 42).Ruma's affectionate relationship is evident when she says that she felt quite 'abnormal', being without her son for a few moment. The mother-son relationship is always a million -dollar worth. It was only at the birth of Akash, "in his sudden, perfect presence, Ruma had felt awe for the first time in her life....he was her flesh and blood. His presence in her life made Ruma to realize the supernatural in everyday life". (UE 46).

### **Grandfather-Grandson Relations**

Another interesting glimpse at the kinship concern in the stories of Lahiri is the filial bond between grandparents and grand children. Unaccustomed Earth brings to light the pivotal role of a grandfather towards his grandson, Akash. The story unfolds several glimpses of a grandfatherly concern and affection during his visit to his daughter's house.

Ruma's father, the grandfather of Akash willfully performed many household duties and was a great help to Ruma. He takes the charge of nurturing-grandfather for Akash. He sows the seeds of Bengali cultural customs within Akash such as taking off shoes inside the house, eating with fingers and learning Bengali words, the customs which Ruma has abandoned. He is a supportive 'feminist father' who instills the importance of self-reliance in his daughter's life. He encourages his daughter not to sacrifice her career as a lawyer for the sake of motherhood: "work is important Ruma. Not only for financial stability. For mental ability". (UE 38). Akash lovingly calls his grandfather as "Dadu" symbolizing a blood relationship towards him. Their intimacy grew day after day in an awesome manner. Ruma's father relieved her in taking care of Akash for most of the time as she was conceived for the second time. Her father assisted his grandson in taking up him to the swimming classes and then to see the nursery plantations. Akash still as a little child never bothered to sleep beside his mother as he was used to, before his grandfather's presence. He instead found even more a cozier place beside his grandfather who would read 'Green Eggs and Ham' stories.

....Akash insisted on being read to at night by her father, sleeping downstairs in her father's bed".(UE 48). Apart from this, her father imbibed in him the most interesting and honored vocation of gardening. After his grandfather departed from them, "He picked up the empty watering can her father had left underneath the porch and pretended to water things in his little plot.(UE 57).

Her father's stay at her home was not a permanent one because he thought he might be an additional responsibility for them so he determined to leave for Pennsylvania. The last night that both the grandfather and son spent was quite emotional. He lulled him to sleep and 'kissed him lightly on the side of his head, smoothing the curling golden hair with his hand'.(UE 57). He doubted whether he would be alive to see his grandson in his adulthood, his middle age and his old age, and this very simple fact of life saddened him. The departure of her father made both the daughter and his grandson emotionally upset and disappointed that is clear through these words "in her son's small face, she saw the disappointment she also felt".(UE 57).

### Conclusion

The moments of self-doubts and insecurity, the feeling of alienation and isolation are passed down from Ruma's mother as parts of genetic predispositions. Thus, children are contaminated by their parent's migrant experience and parent-child kinship may be regarded as a continuation of the dialogue between past and present. Lahiri's stories have poignantly portrayed the eternal struggle of Indian-American community with disruptive cultural differences. The author has touchingly encapsulated how family ties and family loyalty transmute in the process of immigration.

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