



**Hyphenated Identities: Navigating Interpersonal Challenges and the
American Dream in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth***

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Abstract

The concept of immigrant identity involves both acts of resistance and adaptation to an unfamiliar environment. According to scholarly reports, the first waves of Indian immigrants are known to show a deep attachment to their native cultures, their ancestors, their languages, and their interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, their second-generation constantly face the challenge of moving between two different cultural contexts and finding a harmonious balance between these two divergent identities. The hyphenated identity of people in diaspora communities has a significant impact on their closest interpersonal relationships, leading to various issues such as longing for the past, feelings of isolation, mourning and melancholy, and to name a few. These issues are effectively explored by renowned Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Jhumpa Lahiri in her third book, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and are, therefore, the focus of this paper. The short stories included in this collection exhibit a poignant and intricate connection to the prevailing social landscape of contemporary society. This paper explores the impact of hyphenated identity on interpersonal relationships in the context of the 'American Dream' as manifest in the chosen text. Furthermore, this research paper examines the tactics employed by the characters in Lahiri's short stories to overcome the obstacles in their diasporic encounters.

Keywords: American Dream, Migration, Hyphenated Identity, Jhumpa Lahiri, Interpersonal Relationships, Unaccustomed Earth

While introducing the concept of the "American Dream" in the context of the inevitable economic and political turmoil of the Great Depression, James Truslow Adams (1931) constitutes an ever-evolving myth that offers hope of a "better and richer life for all the masses" (Adams 324) even for the "humble and ordinary folk" (Packer-Kinlaw 3) through hard work and determination. Despite its problematic nature, the American Dream projects America as a land of limitless opportunity in the Western world, particularly in the face of the significant rigors endured during the Great Depression. This depiction of America resonates explosively with the conception of

Cockaigne, a vision embedded in human capability to imagine and presume a better future. Of course, the progress of America and its emergence as the most powerful and safest nation after the Second World War has attracted immigrants from all over the world to look upon America as the perfect place where they can hone their skills and fulfil their dreams. Indian diaspora, like other diasporas, has emerged as “the exemplary communities of the transnational moment” (Tölölyan 5) or as “the exemplary condition of late modernity” (Mishra 426). Diaspora individuals, carrying many burdens and attachment to cultural paraphernalia, feel a strong pull towards their homeland, whether their move is voluntary or involuntary. These individuals are confronted with an uncertain self-image, navigating “interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present” (Chambers 6). The complex diasporic experiences highlight the challenge of adhering to rigid paradigms when attempting to understand transnational identity formation because diasporic individuals want to integrate into the society and culture of the host country, and many return all the possessions they brought with them when they arrived (Sharma 2013; Shuval 2000; Kearney 1995).

Indian diaspora writers like V. S. Naipaul, Bharti Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri and others have effectively portrayed the complex cultural and social problems of diasporic communities in their works. These writers explore the existential challenges that arise in the interpersonal relationships within these communities and portray the immigrant experience in general, particularly alienation, fragmentation, nostalgia, displacement, assimilation, and rootlessness, in psychological, social, and cultural discourses. These writers of the Indian diaspora thus contribute to the formation of historical narratives by drawing on “broken pots of antiquity” (Rushdie 18) and show how the concept of diaspora is intertwined with cultural hybridity, acceptance in mainstream society, fragmentation of identities and the history of nation-states.

Jhumpa Lahiri, is one of the significant writers of the Indian diaspora whose oeuvre offers unique insights into the Indian immigrant experience by exploring challenges such as the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the duality of identity. This article focuses on the experiences of the acculturation of Indian immigrants and how they navigate their interpersonal relationships in America, as manifest in Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*, Inevitably this exploration, while underpinning a brief theoretical foundation of diasporic theory contextualizing Indian immigrants, will aid in explaining how macro-level shifts in the dynamics of time and space play a crucial role in shaping and reshaping the interpersonal relationships of the immigrants at the micro level. The sense of identity and challenges in interpersonal relationships are omnipresent in diasporic society. As Salman Rushdie states in *Imaginary Homelands* (1982): “Our identities are at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures, sometimes between two stools...but however

ambiguous and shifting this terrain may be, it is a barren territory for a writer to occupy” (16). As “diaspora is simultaneously a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings, of networks of affiliation” (Zeleva 32), the identity of migrants is always in flux, and the dream of a new land form a dialectical relationship that signifies an ongoing interaction shaping and reshaping each other in the pursuit of a fulfilling life in the adopted homeland (Bhabha 4).

Lahiri’s second anthology of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* comprises eight short stories spread over two different sections. The first part of the work comprises five different stories, while the second part consists of three interconnected stories centred on the characters Hema and Kaushik. The central theme of this compilation revolves primarily around the challenges in interpersonal relationships which offers neither comfort nor solace to Indian immigrants. Moreover, the narratives reflect the experiences of second-generation Indian immigrants who undergo harrowing ordeals in terms of interpersonal relationships, romantic entanglements, displacement, and loss of life. In all the stories, the immigrants actively and introspectively construct new identities in America.

In this context, Peter van der Veer refers to the terms ‘belonging’ and ‘longing’ as the two dialectics of migration and recognises their inherent ambiguity. These two discussions can be seen as relevant in the context of identity, relationships and the dream of a better country and are often seen as representative of today’s challenges. Furthermore, the theme of belonging serves to counter the concepts of rootedness and uprootedness, as well as establishment and marginality. The concept of longing encompasses the yearning for change and progress and, at the same time, the paradoxical tendency to return to what one has left behind (Veer 4).

The seeds of the sense of loss of human belonging, however, germinated in the diasporic experiences of the pursuers of the American Dream. From then on, migration is synonymous with new opportunities, a better lifestyle and education, accompanied by challenges in interpersonal relationships, alienation, intergenerational conflicts, hyphenated identities, nostalgia, etc. The loss of a sense of belonging is evident in Lahiri’s interrelated stories of Hema and Kaushik in the second part of the book. These stories explain how the main characters met in the past and how they continued their lives independently until they reunited and began their romance, which ends in the present (Hashim 138). In “Once in a Lifetime,” Hema, the protagonist, takes on the role of a first-person narrator and writes to Kaushik about their confusing past characterised by the constant relocating of people, thus making one of her earliest attempts to alleviate and recombine the longing for a place that no longer exists. She writes:

I had seen you before, too many times to count, but a farewell that my family threw for yours...is when I begin to recall your presence in my life. Your parents had decided to leave Cambridge, not for

Atlanta or Arizona, as some other Bengalis had, but to move all the way back to India, abandoning the struggle that my parents and their friends had embarked upon. (223)

Against the backdrop of dislocation, the geographical elements of fragmentation and cohesion undergo alterations, indicating the forthcoming interaction between emotions and interpersonal connections, that simultaneously bring together and divide the two main characters throughout the trilogy. Hema's father, an economics teacher in the US, and Kaushik's father, a civil engineer with a Ph.D "...left India in 1962 before the laws welcoming foreign students were changed" (224). As a result, their mothers become "instant friends [and spend] their days together while [their] fathers [are] at work. They talked about the lives they had left behind in Calcutta" (225). Despite their different backgrounds, socio-economic status, and cultural experiences, both women find themselves in a similar situation of feeling alone or isolated. Their relationship in a new environment is a poignant observation of how common challenges or circumstances can bring people together and bridge the gaps created by societal differences.

Contrary to Hema's parents' belief that Kaushik family's move to the United States is due to Kaushik's father's issues at his workplace in Bombay, the real reason, as Kaushik reveals later in the first story, is a fatal "cancer in her [mother's] breast, that [spread to] the rest of her body" (249). This revelation adds to the complexity of the story by linking the Choudhuris' second departure from India, to the dreaded disease, and forces "Hema to confront a 'diasporic truth' that is even more unimaginable and consequently more harrowing than the notion of her own 'rooted' death on American soil" (Munos 16). The disclosure of Kaushik's account is a crucial turning point in the plot, forcing both characters and readers to grapple with the complicated dynamics of identity, mortality, and the complex web of relationships that characterise the experience of residing in a foreign country as part of a diaspora. Hema's assertion about "leading antipodal lives" (236), symbolises the geographical divide that ultimately ends their relationship. "Year's End" explores Kaushik's self-ignorance and his tendency to deceive and deny his true nature. His parents' behaviour has awakened in him a tendency to avoid social contact and instead indulge in fantasies of oblivion. Kaushik's father consents to an arranged marriage with Chitra, a school teacher, to negotiate the enormous void Parul's death. As Kaushik asserts:

She had lost her spouse two years ago, not to cancer but encephalitis. Chitra [is] a schoolteacher and, at thirty-five, nearly twenty years younger than my father. Her daughters [are] seven and ten. He offered these details as if responding diligently to questions I was not asking. "I don't ask you to care for her, even to like her," my father said. "You are a grown man; you have no need for her in your life as I do. I only ask, eventually, that you understand my decision." ("Year's End" 253-54)

After hearing it, Kaushik silently endures the unyielding memory of "the nauseating sensation that had taken hold the day he learned his mother was dying, a sensation that had dropped anchor in [him] and never fully left" (254). This unavoidable memory complicates Kaushik's perception that his family is "a refugee in [Hema's] home" (263). In the meantime, Kaushik tries to erase these memories by wandering aimlessly, resulting in the erasure of his personal identity and his

connection to his family. The third story, "Going Ashore", is set in the present, and the omniscient narrator tells us about the resumption of the romance between Hema and Kaushik in Rome. This is followed by a few incidents in which Hema describes her marriage to another man and her shock at Kaushik's untimely death. The plot revolves around the implications of the resumption of their relationship and their eventual separation. After Kaushik refuses to marry Hema, she sticks to her original plans to consummate her conventional marriage to Navin, an Indian American whom she barely knows. Lahiri writes:

She had denied herself the pleasure of openly sharing life with the person she loved, denied herself even the possibility of thinking about children. But Navin had changed that, too. They were both aware of her age, and as soon as they were married, Navin told her, he was eager to begin a family. ("Going Ashore" 301)

Therefore, these stories involve multi-layered transitions: from teenager to adult, from home to host country, from romance to separation. These transitions continue in migration (to find a dreamland) that eventually turns out to be a chimaera, a place of no return that leaves them in a state of mourning and melancholy. According to Sigmund Freud, profound mourning is the loss of a loved one, and melancholia is associated with a loss of object that withdraws from consciousness. According to him, however, the loss of a loved one's produces melancholia instead of mourning. He goes on to say that mourning means a serious deviation from the normal way of life and melancholy, on the other hand, is "cessation of interest in the outside world and a loss of the capacity to love someone" (Strachey et al. 236-37). Yun Ling believes that Freud's notion of mourning is relevant to Hema's life because her suffering is always negotiated with her traumatic past. Kaushik's sadness is attributed to a pathological condition that prevents him from overcoming the loss of his mother. He also argues that the characters in Lahiri's novel negotiate the memories of their unpleasant past and maintain a new identity in the host country in order to strive for a prosperous future (Yun 142-43).

Mrs Bagchi emigrates to America at the age of twenty-six to live freely after the death of her husband, whom she had loved since childhood. She has a doctorate in statistics and teaches at a university. The American dream has a different connotation for her. She immigrates to America as a rebellious individual to escape her second marriage due to parental influence. As an independent Indian woman, she lives alone in America and visits "Calcutta only to attend her parents' funerals" (Lahiri 8). It is possible to consider that Ruma's father becomes acquainted with Mrs Bagchi because of his need for a companion after the loss of his wife. His attraction to Mrs Bagchi is not only based on his physical needs, but also on the need for a confidante to fill the void in his life.

For Ruma's father and Mrs. Bagchi, assimilation takes place gradually to achieve the realisation of the American dream. After his wife dies, Ruma's father feels liberated from India and "his surroundings did not feel foreign to him" (28) as he embraces American culture happily. After he

retires, he pursues American activities such as “traveling in Europe...[on] package tours, traveling in the company of strangers, riding by bus through the countryside” (3). The septuagenarian travels comfortably from the East Coast to the West Coast to visit his daughter. In contrast to his European adventures, “his surroundings did not feel foreign to him” (28), and he feels at home in Seattle and familiar with the American landscape. His fellow traveller, Mrs. Bagchi, wears western clothes and a western haircut, but more importantly, her life is a rebellion against Indian beliefs and customs and a willing adaptation to the American way of life. As “She was adamant about not marrying, about never sharing her home with another man (9).

Ruma, a successful lawyer, marries Adam, an American, and they live with their son Akash in Seattle. However, her pursuit of the American dream ends abruptly when she voluntarily gives up her professional status and personal freedom to devote herself exclusively to caring for her family and household. She constantly shuttles back and forth between memories of her deceased mother and her Native American heritage, carrying the weight of her past on her shoulders. Being of Native American descent, she upholds the traditions and practises of her indigenous culture and carries on her mother’s legacy by concentrating on fulfilling her duties as a devoted wife and caring mother. Yet, in her heart she continues to feel dissatisfied and unhappy.

Ruma, who is a conventional daughter, initially rejects her father’s liaison with Mrs Bagchi, but soon becomes aware of her feelings after observing the unseen part of her father’s personality when he spends the holidays at Ruma’s house. This visit leads to an intense reflection on her relationship with her past. Ruma never feels her father’s presence and attachment in those one-sided pieces of mail where her father mentions details of the places, he often visited together with Mrs Bagchi. These postcards and the different places suggest that her father is trying to forget his wife and his country. Even her father’s week-long visit to Ruma’s house is an added responsibility for her, as she cannot imagine spending a week alone with her father. Unlike her mother, she cannot easily talk to her father about her second pregnancy and “nothing [makes] her happy” (7). Ruma finds it difficult to converse with her father as contentedly and pleasantly as she used to do with her mother.

Akash, Ruma’s three-year-old son, is also used to following his mother’s advice about home-cooked Indian food. But for the past four months, he has been more interested in eating macaroni and cheese from a packet and has started hating Indian food. Ruma’s mother’s assertiveness made Akash eat everything she cooked for him. The death of her mother not only affects Ruma and her father, but Akash also suffers from the loss of traditional culture and food in his homeland. Ruma offers her father to live with them forever, but the offer angers him, for he feels that she does not want him here for his sake. “It was for hers. She needed him as he’d never felt she needed him before” (53). Her father wants to live his life on his own terms now and not be burdened with the

responsibility of a family. He has reached a point in his life where he has spent his life with his wife and children. He does not want to be a burden on Ruma's family.

Conclusion

The hyphenated identity of immigrants pursuing the American dream is thus a process of resistance and adaptation in the new world by overcoming challenges in their interpersonal relationships. The first-generation protagonists in the above stories yearn to find a country that offers them the fulfilment of their dream and a comfortable environment, which they mostly succeed in doing. But in doing so, they have dual identities and face some challenges in their relationships. Having first-hand experience of both environments, they can recognise the aspects they are giving up in their home country and the prospects that await them in their adopted country. Although they are hybrid individuals, their lives naturally tend towards assimilation, albeit in a fluid way. As newcomers, they have no choice but to change themselves by unconsciously adopting elements of the culture they encounter.

However, the protagonists of the second generation are often nostalgic and reminisce about their childhood, as they live in the 'third space' of their lives and maintain a close relationship with their mother. After the death of their mother, Kaushik and Ruma feel a great loss of the sense of traditional home culture. The extent to which Indian immigrants remain connected to the grassroots and culture determines their love for the nation and their ability to deal with the memories of the past. However, some people, like Kaushik, lose the ability to look forward and spend too much time dwelling on their memories. Sometimes it can be fruitful for these immigrants to have a dual identity in the diaspora. For many people, this is both a challenge and a pleasant revelation. They can maintain their traditional cultural beliefs while enjoying their American freedoms in daily life.

To sum up, these stories vividly depict the multifaceted journey of immigrants through the intricate tapestry of memories, dual identities, and relational issues. Through the lens of hybridity, Lahiri's characters embody the delicate balance between preserving their cultural heritage and assimilating to the foreign landscape. As Lahiri's narratives unfold, they invite reflection on the universal challenges of identity, belonging and the ever-changing interplay of tradition and change in a diverse web of relationships. At the same time, these stories are a compelling testament to the resilience and adaptability of those who embark on the transformative journey of building a new life in a foreign land.

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