Tribhuvan University

# Ambiguous Adventure: Cultural Pangs of Bengali-Americans in Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth"

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**Letter of Recommendation**

Mr. Saurav Bhandari has completed his thesis entitled “Ambiguous Adventure: Cultural Pangs of Bengali-Americans in Lahiri’s ‘Unaccustomed Earth’” under my supervision. He carried out his research from March 2008 A. D. to January 2009 A. D. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voce.

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**Approval Letter**

This thesis entitled "Ambiguous Adventure: Cultural Pangs of Bengali-Americans in Lahiri's 'Unaccustomed Earth'" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Mr. Saurav Bhandari, has been approved by undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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## I. Introduction: Jhumpa Lahiri's Reflection on Exile in "Unaccustomed Earth"

Living with strange status of an immigrant unlike all others is often a troubling aspect of daily life, since marginality and the solitude of the outsider, can frequently overcome one's sense of habitually being in it.

(Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*)

This research based on Jhumpa Lahiri's story, "Unaccustomed Earth," is an attempt to assert that Lahiri's narrative flows directly into the social phenomena, the celebrated sensibility of tour, abhorring the postcolonial world for its lies, its mediocrity, cruelty violence, and self-indulgence. This research comes to illumine Lahiri's immigrant characters and their experiences as second generation of Indian immigrants in America-- that is, life of immigrant is strongly compelling to think about but terrible to experience. Immigrant's life is the unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. Edward Said's aforementioned lines resonate with Lahiri's discovery of alienated self in her characters in "Unaccustomed Earth." And while it is true that "Unaccustomed Earth" contains heroic romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in immigrants' lives, these are more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrows of estrangement. The material achievement that the immigrant family gets is permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever, living the life of succeeding generation spiritually orphaned and alienated.

Lahiri's story objectifies anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience first hand. The postcolonial 'global' world has begotten millions of bereaved people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography.

Jhumpa Lahiri's work has primarily focused on Bengali first-and second-generation immigrants, exploring themes of exile, isolation, and assimilation. "Unaccustomed Earth" continues to examine this territory while enlarging and further universalizing its scope. The

story haunts the readers for days. Lahiri's insights into the psychology of relationships, aging, maturity, loss of remarkable, and her prose is a marvel—slightly formal and luminously straightforward. *The Boston globe* describes "Unaccustomed Earth" as "beautifully crafted story that reaffirm Lahiri's status as one of this country's most accomplished and graceful young writers" (26). "Though she is a young writer, her work is confident and timeless," Robert Simmons reiterates, "*Unaccustomed Earth* is a fiction that will be read, deservingly, for years to come" (27).

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London, and grew up in Rhode Island. She has travelled several times to India, where both her parents were born and raised. She graduated with a B.A. in English literature from Barnard College. She applied to various graduate English programs but was rejected from all of them. Eventually, Lahiri did enter Boston University, and received an M.A. in English, an M.A. in Creative Writing, and an M.A. in Comparative Literature and the Arts, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. She currently lives in New York City.

Three of Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories have appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1998. Her debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, came out in early 1999, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Swastika Das contends on Lahiri's achievements as a young generation writers in English:

> Jhumpa Lahiri has boasted an enviable literary career since nabbing the Pulitzer Prize for her 1999 debut story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which introduces Indians and Indian Americans grappling with, among other things, deracination and assimilation. In 2006, an adaptation of Lahiri's second book, *The Namesake*, by celebrated filmmaker Mira Nair, earned the kind of praise her internationally best-selling novel drew three years earlier. (45)

Both of her books—*Interpreter of Maladies* and and *The Namesake* (a novel that later took shape as a popular film— explores the cultural dissonances experienced by immigrants caught between the culture of their Indian birthplace and the unfamiliar ways of their adopted home. Lahiri as an author incorporates her opinions and perspective into the literature to better portray the experiences of her characters. The interpretation and comprehension of a story is largely dependent on the inclusion of accounts from the author's own life and experiences. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, diaspora makes it difficult for the characters to assimilate to the new customs and moral convictions of each new environment.

Lahiri has lived in the United States for almost thirty-seven years and anticipate growing old in this country. Lahiri expresses herself in an interview for *Book Forum*, "therefore, with the exception of my first two years in London, 'Indian-American' has been a constant way to describe me" (148). Lahiri herself suffered from the cultural shock:

> Less constant is my relationship to the term. When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another. (148)

At home she followed the customs of her parents, speaking Bengali and eating rice and dal with her fingers. These ordinary facts seemed part of a secret, utterly alien way of life, and, she reveals, "I took pains to hide them from my American friends" (147). "For my parents, home was not our house in Rhode Island but Calcutta, where they were raised," Lahiri recounts her life with her parents before she was married off, "I was aware that the things they lived for--the family they missed, the clothes my mother wore that were not available in

any store in any mall--were at once as precious and as worthless as an outmoded currency" (148).

Lahiri's life becomes a thing thrown to darkness. She confesses: "I also entered a world my parents had little knowledge or control of: school, books, music, television, things that seeped in and became a fundamental aspect of who I am" (151). She spoke English "without an accent" (151), comprehending the language in a way her parents "still do not" (151). "And yet there was evidence that I was not entirely American," Lahiri unfolds the knot of her coming to America:

> In addition to my distinguishing name and looks, I did not attend Sunday school, did not know how to ice-skate, and disappeared to India for months at a time. Many of these friends proudly called themselves Irish-American or Italian-American. But they were several generations removed from the frequently humiliating process of immigration, so that the ethnic roots they claimed had descended underground whereas mine were still tangled and green. According to my parents I was not American, nor would I ever be no matter how hard I tried. I felt doomed by their pronouncement, misunderstood and gradually defiant. (152)

When she first started writing, Lahiri was not conscious that her subject would be the Indian-American experience. What drew her to this craft is the desire to force the two worlds she occupied to mingle on the page. "On the cup of a new century, the term 'Indian-American' has become part of this country's [America's] vocabulary," Lahiri resents on her compulsion to leave her homeland, "I've heard it so often that these days, if asked about my background, I use the term myself, pleasantly surprised that I do not have to explain further" (*Interview*, 153).

Her experience of cultural intermingling are shocking and interesting at the same time: "the traditions on either side of the hyphen dwell in me like siblings, still occasionally sparring, and one outshining the other depending on the day" (154). But like siblings they are intimately familiar with one another, forgiving and intertwined. It is when she married that she could reveal her culture and tradition, and her lineage to Indian heritage:

> When my husband and I were married five years ago in Calcutta we invited friends who had never been to India, and they came full of enthusiasm for a place I avoided talking about in my childhood, fearful of what people might say. Around non-Indian friends, I no longer feel compelled to hide the fact that I speak another language. I speak Bengali to my children, even though I lack the proficiency to teach them to read or write the language. As a child I sought perfection and so denied myself the claim to any identity. As an adult I accept that a bicultural upbringing is a rich but imperfect thing. (155)

The publication of *Unaccustomed Earth* marks the tradition of immigrant writers writing in English: the book is a story collection by Jhumpa Lahiri, the acclaimed chronicler of the Bengali-immigrant experience. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, a collection of eight short stories, Lahiri continues to explore this theme of Said, this time with a focus on the lives of second-generation immigrants who must navigate both the traditional values of their immigrant parents and the mainstream American values of their peers.

Speaking to Isaac Chotiner on the issue of her characters often playing the life of exile, Lahiri clarifies her stance:

> It interests me to imagine characters shifting from one situation and one location to another for whatever the circumstances may be. In the first collection, characters were all moving for more or less the same reason (which was also the reason my parents came to the United States): for opportunities or

> a job. In this collection there's a similar pattern of movement, but the reasons are more personal somehow—they're reasons of family dynamics or death in the family or things like that. In this book I spend more time with characters who are not immigrants themselves but rather the offspring of immigrants. (qtd. in Chotiner, 307)

She finds the subject interesting because when she grow up the child of an immigrant she is always very conscious of what it means or might mean to be uprooted. One is conscious of that without even having ever done it. I knew what my parents had gone through—not feeling rooted.

American society, in the course of its earlier history, was shaped by the competing visions of nativism and cosmopolitan liberalism. The first defined the American identity in restrictive fashion, and sought to curtail naturalization and immigration. The second, taking an expansive view of American identity, pressed opposing policies. In the period following World War II, new visions of American society have developed in the course of the struggles of people of color to overcome their historical exclusion from the American cultural identity. The latest of these visions are expressed in the movements of multiculturalism and political correctness, which are seen here as facets of a new, and morally assertive, view of American society, revolving around the efforts of previously excluded groups to construct new identities. All of these forms of consciousness--Nativism, cosmopolitan liberalism, and multiculturalism -now compete on the American scene in the politics of identity.

Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" that comes at the age of multiculturalism is a significant and recent reflection of the long-continuing politics of identity in America, and else where. This is evident in Lahiri's work that would raise such questions as the following: 'What is an Indian?' 'Who am I?' 'What is/are my cultural heritage(s)? The Indian-Americans appear least likely of all of these immigrant groups to acquire a new collective

identity in the United States. They are widely separated by barriers of language, religion, and situation. “Unaccustomed Earth” has a substantial basis for retaining-in a highly literary form –their [Indian-American’s] sense of distinct national identities, as ethnicities, on the American scene.

“Unaccustomed Earth” is patterned after identity-politics in America which also differ from those of the past in that the threat to an inclusive American identity comes from the creation of new identities, and the unwillingness to surrender old identities. “They are dealing with the reluctance of new immigrants to shed their old identities,” Isaac Spencer reiterates in “Refusal to Political Correctness: Jhumpa Lahiri’s Savage Indian,” “in the case of Lahiri it is the synthesis of new identities that is at issue, in response to the particular circumstances that these groups face in contemporary American society” (559). The melting pot thesis that extols the assimilative power of American society with respect to the old identities misses the mark In Lahiri’s narrative. Spencer’s observation applies with particular force to Indian-Americans, for whom the construction of a new identity is most advanced:

> The patterns of segregation and identity-construction that are visible in Lahiri’s work differ from those that occurred in the past. There are indications of a self-segregation currently developing on the heels of the re-segregation that followed the massive upheavals of integration. The segregation of the Indians also represent a new phenomenon in that it is accompanied by the development of an aggressive youthful ghetto culture competing for primacy with assimilating tendencies of the Black middle classes. (564)

This, Lahiri’s work, in turn, is linked to the sharpening class divisions of American society between a class of white Americans who repudiate re-distributive taxation, and a swelling class of poor Americans, the Indians immigrants, who have, in recent years, been successfully beguiled by the conflict of social liberalism and social conservatism into

ignoring the tendency for the concentration of wealth that works so profoundly to their disadvantage.

Samir Dayal, in "Diaspora and Double Consciousness" holds that it would have been fatuous to suggest that all diasporics are automatically in possession of double consciousness, that they are fully self-reflexive 'ambivalent' and cosmopolitan nomads 'riding' cultural difference. Neither the existential accident nor the choice of diaspora confers upon an individual or group that transcendental sophistication of double consciousness. Diaspora in the First World, furthermore, is not always an elective or volunteerist condition: "the diasporic sensibility presented in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri is very different from that in Tayeb Salih's or in Yambo Ouloguem's" (46). The cosmopolitan doesn't share the same cultural location as the refugee or the exile:

> And complicity is not necessarily complicity with national elite in either host or home country, but may be allegiance to what Jenny Sharpe has called 'a global consumerism that thrives on cultural hybridities.' Of course, for some diasporics the condition is not as empowering as it is for other relatively cosmopolitan intellectuals. For white migrants in the west, assimilation is not constituted in the same way as it is for non-white migrants. (48)

To resist the homogenizing tendencies of diversity talk Lahiri one recognizes the constitutive heterogeneity of diasporic positionalities and affiliations, and the shifting identifications and unpredictable alliances of the diasporic transnational.  Lahiri's narrative to unfold requires skepticism about the aspirations of migrants and minorities. As Dayal reminds, "model immigrant success stories . . .  [are] models precisely because they remind us on every page that the author simultaneously celebrates the supposedly complete transformation of that identity" (148).

Oliver Munday writes in “American Children” that “America is still a place where the rest of the world comes to reinvent itself — accepting with excitement and anxiety the necessity of leaving behind the constrictions and comforts of distant customs” (344) and that “it is the underlying theme of Jhumpa Lahiri’s sensitive story, ‘Unaccustomed Earth’” (344-5). Lahiri, who is of Bengali descent but was born in London, raised in Rhode Island and today makes her home in Brooklyn, shows that the place to which one feels the strongest attachment is necessarily the country he/she is tied to by blood or birth: it’s the place that allows you to become yourself. “The eight stories in this splendid volume expand upon Lahiri’s epigraph, a metaphysical passage from *The Custom-House* by Nathaniel Hawthorne,” Oliver Munday writes in “American Children” which suggests that transplanting people into new soil makes them sentimental and more anxious. Munday quotes Hawthorne: “human fortunes may be improved, Hawthorne argues, if men and women ‘strike their roots into unaccustomed earth’” (345). It’s an apt, rich metaphor for the transformations Lahiri oversees in these pages, in which two generations of Bengali immigrants to America — the newcomers and their hyphenated children — struggle to build normal, secure lives. But Lahiri does not so much accept Hawthorne’s notion as test it, as Munday interrogates: “is it true that transplanting strengthens the plant? Or can such experiments produce mixed outcomes?” (346).

Lahiri shows that people may be felled at any time by swift jabs of chance, wherever they happen to live. Uncontrollable events may assail them — accidents of fate, health or weather. More often, they suffer less dramatic reversals: failed love affairs, alcoholism, even simple passivity — the sort of troubles that seem avoidable to everyone except the person who succumbs to them. “The men and women of Lahiri’s stories often find themselves overwhelmed by unexpected passions,” Munday further reiterates, “again and again, the reader is caught off-guard by the accesses of emotion and experience that waylay Lahiri’s

characters, despite their peregrinations, their precautions, their concealments" (346). Munday interprets the title story:

Each of the five stories in the book's first section is self-contained. In the title story, Ruma, a Bengali-American lawyer, repeats her mother's life pattern when she gives up her job and follows her husband to a distant city as they await the birth of their second child. Ruma's identity, Lahiri suggests, is affected less by her coordinates on the globe than by the internal indices of her will. She is a creature of the American soil, but she carries her own emotional bearings within her. What are the real possibilities for change attached to a move? Lahiri seems to ask. What are the limits? (348).

Lahiri's story explores the overlapping histories of the title characters, a father and daughter from Bengali immigrant families, set during significant moments of their lives. Roland Sinclair writes in "Migration, Assimilation, and Inebriation: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*" that In Lahiri's new story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* "we encounter first-generation Indian Americans—often married to non-Indians and starting families of their own" (12). Sinclair notes that they have come of age in two cultures, America and the more insular if still vast world of their Indian parents and friends, whose expectations and experiences are in stark contrast to their own:

> Lahiri delves into the souls of indelible characters struggling with displacement, guilt, and fear as they try to find a balance between the solace and suffocation of tradition and the terror and excitement of the future into which they're being thrust. The title is borrowed from a line in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" ("My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth") and evokes the themes

> within the pages—pages that further establish her as an important American writer. (14)

Lahiri discusses about the generational distillation of cultural conventions, the intuition that informs her of the most effective form for each of her narratives, the characters who've haunted her for nearly a decade, and the grief of letting them go.

The first-generation Indian Americans in the story—many of whom marry non-Indians—are reckoning with the growing chasm between the families they're creating and those in which they grew up. The Indian father in the title story observes of his daughter and his half-Bengali, green-eyed, fair-haired toddler grandson, "The more the children grew, the less they had seemed to resemble either parent—they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way" (Lahiri, "Unaccustomed Earth," 24).

In an interview with Peter Scholas for *Book Forum*, Lahiri compares her own life with the lives of her characters in her stories. "Some of the culture goes by the wayside, or the link is never made," Lahiri holds, "I was aware of that myself when I had my kids . . . I really felt a sense that I was the end of a line, and that it was a very short line" (64). Lahiri is sensitive over her loss of Indian heritage and the generational gap in Indian-American family:

> I knew my parents had parents and so on, but to me, the universe was my parents and they were the far end and I was the near end. There were certain intensities to the experience of that first generation and their offspring that don't carry over. I'm very aware of my parents' experience, how I grew up, and now how my children are growing up. There is such a stark difference in those two generations. (28)

Jhumpa Lahiri's experiences of second generation Indian-Americans provided her with food for writing. America is a unique country for the immigrant experience: "it is harder to immigrate to one place or the other . . . it was hard for my parents to move to England, and it is hard for me to come here" (29). Lahiri get frustrated by this "tendency to flatten" (30) whole segments of the population, like the Indian immigrant or the Jewish immigrant. "I know these are just words and phrases, but I think people tend to see these other groups as a people," Lahiri blurts out, "they are 'other,' and it's harder to see the nuances and the variations because they're just a group of people" (30).

This research comes to examine this sensitivity of Jhumpa Lahiri on the life of exiles in "Unaccustomed Earth." Deriving from many of the critical voices on life in exile that has become a new born part of human civilization, this research will proceed to apply and search the relevance of these theories in the following chapters. The research aims to unfold the propensity of Lahiri's annoyance to this postcolonial condition. I have been sensitive to it my whole life, and annoyed by it. As a writer, she conveys her feelings from the "solitude of an outsider" (5) which overcomes her feeling of "habitually being" (qtd. in Said 5) in the culture of exile.

## II. Post colonialism, Diaspora, Hy bridity, and Cultural Variation

This chapter consists of definitions and implications of the term 'Post colonialism' deriving from variety of scholars whose contributions consider the ways in which colonial discourse studies and postcolonial modes of thought have shaped intellectual, political, and literary agendas within the discipline. Theoretical modality, for the present research purpose, is designated to reflect on most crucial issues for the study of post colonialism and the contemporary world pertaining to the vital issues like diaspora, hybridity, and cultural variation. Moreover, the chapter outlines the most recent theoretical voices on the impact of cultural dislocation to serve our purpose of research.

### Postcolonial Studies

The term is resonant with all the ambiguities and complexities of the many different cultural experiences it implicates. It addresses all aspects of colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact. Postcolonial studies do not refer only the meaning of the term such as 'after colonialism' or 'after independence.' All the postcolonial societies are still subjected to in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neocolonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem. The development societies, often buttressed by neo-colonial institution; the development of internal divisions based on racial, linguistic or religious discriminations; the continuing unequal treatment of indigenous peoples in settler/invader societies all these testify to the fact that post colonialism is the continuing process of resistance and reconstruction.

Ella Shohat, in "Notes in Postcolonial: Anxieties and Ambivalences," remarks that "spreading from India into Anglo-American academic contexts, the 'post-colonial' tends to be associated with Third World countries which gained independence after World War II" (102). However, it also refers to the Third World diaspora circumstances of the last four

decades—"from forced exile to voluntary immigration  within First World metropolises" (102). Postcolonial studies have focused especially on Third World countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean islands, South America. Shohat contends on the diverse coverage of Postcolonial studies: "some scholars extend the scope of such analysis also to the discourse and cultural productions of such countries as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, which achieved much earlier than the Third World countries" (124).

In recent years, the term postcolonial is used in various purposes. The term refers to text and practices, to psychological condition and concrete historical process, and to the intermingling of all these. In this regard Padmini Mongia admits, "postcolonial theory becomes the locus of complex debates and the target of virulent criticisms" (2). Mongia notes Homi Bhabha's contribution on defining the term: "Homi Bhabha asserted that the term postcolonial is increasingly used to describe that forms of social criticism that bears witness to those unequal and uneven process of representation by which the historical experience of the once colonized Third World comes to be framed in the west" (1). Thus, for Bhabha, Postcolonial Studies debate the complexities of its locus. It seems to direct the attention, indeed to bear witness, to inequalities in modes of representation.

Critics read the 'Post' in postcolonial as signifying both changes in power structures after the official end of colonialism as well as colonialism's continuing effects; particularly as they are manifested discursively. For them, postcolonial theory is an umbrella term that covers different critical approaches which deconstruct European sociology and political science. From this perspective the term postcolonial refers not to a simple periodization but rather a methodological revisionism which enables wholesale critiques of Western Structure of knowledge and power, particularly after the period of Enlightenment. Postcolonial Studies have embraced a number of aims:

> Most fundamentally, to reexamine the history of colonialism from the perspective of colonized; to determine the economic, political and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized people and the colonizing powers; to analyze the process of deep colonization; and above all to participate in the goals of political liberation which includes equal access to material resource, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities. (qtd. in Habib 739)

It seems that these studies focus on the overall right, liberation, and the access to all the once colonized countries. It analyzes the economic, political and cultural impact of colonialism. Habib further seems to illustrate that postcolonial studies signify both official end of colonialism.

Published in 1978, Edward Said's *Orientalism* is a crucial text for what has become known as postcolonial theory where his most influential argument is that Orientalism need to be understood as a "discourse by which European culture was able to manage–and even produced– the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (qtd. in Mongia, 3). In *Orientalism,* Said comes to the same line as Habib in that post colonialism seems to be a pervasive term which affects the overall aspects of human life especially in the Third World. Said sees the relationship between 'Occident' and 'Orient' as a relationship "of power, of domination, and of varying degrees of complex hegemony" (Said 23).The vast majority of postcolonial critics and theorists seem to agree that the discourse surrounding 'post-nationalism' offers a more satisfactory reading of the colonial experience. The random flow of global capital is accompanied by an unprecedented movement of people, technologies and information from one location to another. In such circumstances post colonialism is "just another name for the globalization of cultures and histories" (qtd. in Ashroft et. al. 126).

Over the last decades the term has been replaced with what earlier went under the names of 'Third World' or 'Commonwealth' literature, "to describe colonial discourse analysis, to detail the situation of migrant groups within First World states and to specify oppositional reading practices" (Mongia 2). Mongia further reiterates,

> Postcolonial studies involve a dialectical relationship between European 'ontology' and 'epistemology', and the impulses to create or recreate independent local identity. It has generated an enormous corpus of specialized academic writing because of its diverse and interdisciplinary uses. Nevertheless, although much has been written under its rubric 'post colonialism' itself remains a diffuse and nebulous term. On one level, the 'post' signifies after, it potentially inhibits forceful articulation of what one might call "neo- colonialism". It includes a multi- racial/ ethnic composition that have been subjected to political and economic structural domination of recently independent third world countries such as Libya, India etc. (2)

The term 'postcolonial' carries with it the implication that colonialism is now a matter of past, undermining colonialism's economic political and cultural deformities traces in the present: "the 'post-colonial' inadvertently glosses over the fact that global hegemony, even in the post-cold war era, persists in forms other than overt colonial rule" (qtd. in Shohat, 105). Shohat seems to define postcolonial in relation to other terms such as 'neo-colonial' and 'post-independence' which allows for mutual illumination of the concepts. 'Neo-colonialism' is designated for the broad relations of geo-economic hegemony. Likewise, 'post-independence' invokes an achieved history of resistance, shifting the analytical focus to the emergent nation state. Therefore, 'post-independence' provides an analytical space for confronting some issues like religion, ethnicity, patriarchy, sex, gender, etc.

Post-colonial theory deals most significantly with cultural contradictions, ambiguities

and ambivalences. It accounts for the "displacement of Third World people in the metropolitan centers, and the cultural syncretism generated by First/ Third World intersections in a relatively binaristic, fixed and stable mapping of power relations between 'colonizer/colonized' and 'center/periphery'" (Shohat, 107-8). It seems that such articulations help to create discourse which allows for movement, mobility and fluidity. It further helps to foreground hybridity and syncreticism to imbricate central and peripheral cultures.

In sum, the concept of post-colonial should be interrogated and contextualized historically, geopolitically and culturally. But what is apparent is that a postcolonial study is not necessarily the righteousness of one conceptual frame over another one. Rather, each frame illuminates only partial aspects of systemic modes of dominations, of overlapping collective identities, and of contemporary global relations. Shohat concludes: "[it]can address the politics of location which is important not only for pointing out historical and geographical contradictions and differences but also for reaffirming historical and geographical links, structural analogies, and openings for agency and resistance (112).

**Diaspora**

Diaspora, the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into a new region, is a central historical fact of colonization. Although the concept of Diaspora has been epistemologically derived form that of dispersal experiences of those ancient Jews almost four thousand years ago. It deals with the strategic disintegration of territory, race, language, culture, religion, history, sovereignty. The concept of diaspora goes back to a very long history of human civilization–from a scattering of the Jews after the Babylonian captivity to the colonial and postcolonial phases. Ashcroft et. al. remark on the connection of diaspora to colonialism: "colonialism itself was a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans

over the entire world" (69). This remark illumines that colonialism and diaspora have been running simultaneously which cover a wide range of different cultural and ethnic groups who shared a common culture and religious commitment. Observing diaspora from this standpoint, Thomas Bloom Hansen opines:

> The term 'diaspora' not only transmits a certain sense of shared destiny and predicament, but also an inherent will to preservation and celebration of the ancestral culture and equality inherent impulse toward forging and maintaining link with the 'old country'. Thus, diaspora is contentious of the ancestral culture and culturally inherent impulses. (24)

At the heart of diaspora the key concepts such as dislocation, cultural identity, hybridity, ethnicity, and nativism are merged. After the slave trade, the denial of cheap agriculture labors in colonial plantation economics was met by the development of system of indentured labors. This involved transporting a large population of agriculture labor from highly populated areas, such as China and India, to the areas where they were needed for farming and plantation. Analyzing the history of colonial diaspora, Aschroft writes:

> Indian population formed (and form) substantial minorities or majorities in colonies as diverse as the West Indies, Malaya, Fiji, Mauritius and colonies of Eastern and Southern Africa", he further states about Chinese minorities who found [...] "their way under similar circumstances to all these regions too, as well as to areas across most of South Asia (including the Dutch East Indian colonies, in what is now Indonesia) and the Spanish and later American dominated Philippines. (69)

The recent diasporic theorists engage on the discussion of how the two generations have their different starting points regarding diaspora. Radha krishnan remarks: "the older generation cannot afford to invoke India in authoritarian mode to resolve problems in

diaspora and the younger generation would be ill advised to indulge in a spree of forgetfulness about where they have come from” (206).

Shukla talks about the situation of South Asian diaspora in “Locations of South Asian Diaspora”: “the expression of South Asian diaspora produces a range of analytical dilemmas, not least of which a kind of essentializing of character, identity, and inclination” (552). Her point seems to question the origins and locations of diaspora. It deals with the real and imagined world of all people, especially migrant people. She foreshadows a brief assertion on the relationship between India and the world as:

> Postcolonial theory has established one important axis on which the development of South Asian subjectivities turn. The realities, memories, and rebuttals to British colonialism have profoundly affected diasporic people and their cultures. In idea and deed, colonialism, then, has created a language in which to understand the development of nationalisms, at home and abroad. (553)

South Asian migrant culture seems to have more inclination to utilize transnationalism or diaspora as explanatory set of instructions that post colonialism can be of service. This field also contains questions related to gender sexuality that illuminate the imaginaries central to South Asian diaspora cultural productions and experiences. Shukla connotes the old and new nations of diaspora in a postwar period where diverse multicultural societies have existed. Concerning Indians, she says, “the language of nationality has been ultimately tied to and created within the ideologies, as well as actual power structures, of colonialism” (560).

Shukla finds the most dramatic of illustrative events regarding diasporic effect is the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (Rushdie 1998). It has tremendous response elicited from British Muslims, largely migrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh. She defines the impact of Rushdie’s work around the globe: “spectacular events to support the Iranian Ayatollah's death

warrant, Muslims in London and other British cities burned books as well as effigies of Rushdie" (563). She further reiterates:

> Expressing a sense of profound victimization by the text itself, the Rushdie affair, and its effects on diasporic cultures, illustrates how the process by which ethnic communities claim a text has to do not only with whether it is actually read by community members but also with what it and its author represent because they command psychic and even bodily identification. (563)

This citation encapsulates a vital trend that the local-global tension of diasporic formations expresses the specificity of migrant communities. Thus, the version of postcolonial studies is to a larger extent focuses on questions of diaspora, migration, exile, displacement. Simultaneously, it is important to remain attentive to the differences within diaspora or between overlapping diaspora. To assert this Sen's skepticism in "The Women's Review of Books" seems relevant: "in a different register, we need to move from one position, 'is this hybrid?' to the question, 'how is this hybrid?'" (8). Sen further interrogates, "are all hybridities, to put it bluntly, built equal or how useful is it to read Shani Mootoo, Meera Syal, Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Desai as all parts of South Asian diaspora?" (8).

Contemporary discussion on diaspora speculates on some theoretical relation between the concept of diaspora and double consciousness. The debates about multiculturalism and transnationalism demand a rethinking of diaspora. This debate finds a resonance in resurgent multicultural debates. In this regard, Dayal in "Diaspora and Double Consciousness" quotes James Clifford: "we are seeing the emergence of new maps: broad land cultural areas, populated by strong, diasporic ethnicities assimilated to dominant nation states" (46). Dayal sees a strategic value in cultivating a diasporic double consciousness. "It affords an interstitial perspective on what it means to be, say, 'British' or 'American'– a perspective that allows for the emergence of excessive and differential meaning of belonging," Dayal contends, "as well

as a ‘parasitic’ location, where double consciousness is not synthetically and dialectically resolved, but rather enables and internal critique while suspending the mundane question of assimilation” (47). Thus, Dayal finds ‘double-consciousness’ as bearing a strategic value of cultivation. This helps European perspective to have the “differential meaning of belonging as well as parasitic.” That is why the question of assimilation for him is not more than a mundane. He conceptualized double consciousness as “neither just this/nor just that” (47).

The diasporic perspective as double-consciousness seems fruitful particularly in such emphasis like transnational scope for contemporary Cultural Studies. All diasporic elements seem to have the automatic possession of double consciousness, that they are fully self reflexive ambivalent and cosmopolitan riding of cultural differences. To prove this Dayal insists that “diaspora in the First World, furthermore, is not always an elective or volunteerist condition . . . diasporic sensibility presented in the fiction of Hanif Kureishi or Anitav Ghosh is very different from that in Tayob Salih’s or in Yambo Ouloguem’s” (49). The cosmopolitan does not always share the same cultural location as the refugee or the exile. The figure of diaspora defines the limit of 'nation-ness' and its operational rhetoric of assimilation or belonging, of ethnicity, of the other. Such double-consciousness holds the power to split, to render irrecoverably multiple– the official narratives that together make up the nation.

Diasporic doubleconsciousness can be the name for transcultural studies which includes the possibilities of reading one culture's space and time from the space and time of another. It problematizes the correspondence different identity and place or biology, and the cultural differences in a more pivotal case of post colonial hybridity. Said shows a political touch regarding diaspora by the different perspectives of Nair and Fusco. He further writes:

> While Nair's diasporic eye lights upon a localized politics of recognition and representation interstitially situated between the South Asian diaspora and the older diaspora of African-American, Fusco's more fully theorized interest is in

> the circulation of a symbolic economy, where recognition and representation are redeemed into a new uneasiness about the confrontation of self and other in transnational frame. Both Nair and Fusco thematize double consciousness as irony. Fusco explicitly theorizes a counter-ethnographic irony, where else Nair confidently turns this irony upon the diasporic themselves. (58)

This helps to conclude that for Nair double consciousness is less politicalized, less pained. And on other hand, Fusco's sense of hybridity seems more acute, as a desire or nostalgia for some cultural solidarity. These diverse experiences of diasporic double consciousness offers a starting point for exploring the implication for cultural and postcolonial studies and criticisms.

Despite the immense popularity in Diasporic writing, the theory of diaspora is not free from controversies. The diasporic writers and theorists have been assailed for being inauthentic and misrepresenting the reality. They are also critiqued for using more fantasy and exaggerating the reality of their faraway homeland in order to create and aesthetic effect on the reader or to engage large audiences. Despite the adverse criticism, fantasy is still an inevitable part of diasporic writing. It is an only source that makes it possible for the immigrant characterizes to be connected between their past and present.

**Hybridity**

Hybridity is a term that commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization as the most widely used and most disputed term in post colonial theories. Hybridity is a result of bringing together of people and their culture from different part of the world. The term is related to the traumatic colonial experience. The term hybridity has been most recently associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha whose analysis of colonizer/colonized relation stresses their interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities. Ashcroft et.al. quote Bhabha’s definition:

“hybridity contends that all cultural statement and systems are constructed in a space that is the 'third space of enunciation'” (118).

One of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in postcolonial theory, hybridity, commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone. To culminate the scientific definition and the different forms of hybridity, Ashcroft explains, “in horticulture, the term refers to a cross breeding or cross pollination to form a third, hybrid species; hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc . . . linguistic examples include pidgins and creoles languages” (119). Hybridity has frequently been used in postcolonial discourse to mean simply cross cultural exchange. But the term has been widely criticized because it neglects the imbalance and inequality of the power relations. Ashcroft further views that “it is the 'in-between' space that carries the burden and meaning of culture, and this is what makes the notion of hybridity so important” (119). By stressing the transformative cultural, linguistic and political impacts on both the colonized and the colonizer, it has been regarded as replicating assimilationist policies by masking or 'whitewashing' cultural differences. Robert Young suggest that the contributions of colonial discourse analysis, in which concepts such as hybridity, are couched as:

> Provides a significant framework for that other work by emphasizing that all perspectives on colonialism share and have to deal with a common discursive medium which was also that of colonialism itself. Colonial discourse analysis can therefore look at the wide variety of texts of colonialism as something more than mere documentation or evidence. (qtd. in Ashcroft 120)

Young notes the influence of the term hybridity in imperial and colonial discourse. Hybridity thus became, particularly at the turn of the century, part of a colonialist discourse of racism. This is, however, the way in which some proponents of decolonization and anti-colonialism have interpreted its current uses in colonial discourse theory. The idea of hybridity also

underlies other attempts to stress the mutuality of cultures in the colonial and postcolonial process. It also involves the idea of an equal exchange. Hybridity is politicized so that it embarrasses the subversion and challenge the division and separation. It is similar to Bakhtin's formulation of hybridity: “sets different points of view against each other in a conflictual structure, which returns a certain elemental, organic energy and open-endedness” (qtd. in Ashcroft 120).

The twentieth century definition of hybridity emphasizes the concerns within a field rather than with an analysis of discrete objects, and the production of such relations. Ashcroft illustrates the occurrence of hybridity in postcolonial societies. He further remarks:

> Hybridity occurs in postcolonial societies both as a result of conscious moments of cultural suppression, as when the colonial power invades to consolidate political and economic control, or when settler-invaders dispossess indigenous peoples and force them to 'assimilate' to new social patterns. It may also occur in later periods when patterns of immigration from the metropolitan societies and from other imperial areas of influence from the metropolitan societies and from other imperial areas of influence (e.g. indentured labourers from India and China) continue to produce complex cultural palimpsests with the postcolonized world. (87)

It is probably true to say that no postcolonial form has been able to avoid the impact of the shifts shadowed upon the postcolonial world. The term hybridity has been sometimes misinterpreted as indicating that denies the traditions which all postcolonial forms inevitably subscribe. The degree to which these forms became hybridized varies greatly across practices and between cultures.

## Cultural Variation

Culture is a fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions. Such actions then take the forms of social structure, the actually existing network of social relations. Culture and social structure are then different abstractions from the same phenomena. The culture is a term defined in an ethnographic way too. E. B. Tylor, in “Culture or Civilization: Rudimentary Definition,” contends that “culture or civilization taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a number of society (Tylor I). Thus, the object or target of culture is to refresh to the morals, manners and ways of life of subordinate social strata.

In the contemporary postcolonial period, the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involve in political and social authority within the world order. It forces us to involve in an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value other composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival. Homi K. Bhabha, one of the postcolonial critics, takes culture as strategy of survival:

> Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement... It is translational because such spatial histories of displacement...make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, rather complex issue. (Bhabha 438)

In contemporary postcolonial studies, the varieties of culture and the need to acknowledge these varieties to avoid universal cultural definitions plays a vital role. In common uses the cultural diversity or cultural variations suggests that cultural authority resides not in a series of fixed and determined diverse objects but in the process of how these objects come to be known and so come into being. In this regard, Ashcroft quotes Homi Bhabha: “cultural

variation employs the terms as oppositions to draw a distinction between two ways of representing culture" (60). It is insufficient to record signifiers of cultural diversity which merely acknowledge a range of separate and distinct systems of behavior, attitudes and values. Thus, Bhabha's view seems to contend that cultural differences enhance to create different identities because cultural diversity includes "a range of separate and distinct systems of behavior, attitudes and values" (60).

The cultural diversity seems to grasp the spirit of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, and the culture of humanity. It studies the culture in its micro level opposing the cultural universalism. It also helps to know the formation of cultural totalities by emphasizing our awareness of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons. Stuart Hall in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" mentions two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. He further defines:

> Cultural identity is defined in terms of its own shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self'. Hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting division and vicissitudes of our actual history. (111)

Halls' argument regarding cultural identity seems to reflect that identity is a shared culture, and a sort of collective true self. It focuses the communal feeling and a sense of 'us.' These identities share common historical experiences and cultural codes. It connotes that cultural identity is a formation of particular social and cultural necessities which has a long historical lineage.

Cultural identity has played a critical role in the postcolonial struggles which has reshaped our perception of the world. It continues to be a very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation among hitherto marginalized people. Cultural identity, which follows along the many points of similarity, has critical points of deep and significant difference that constitute what we really are, or rather what we have become. Hall expands his notion:

> Cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming 'as well as that of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything, which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (112)

In this sense, identity is subject to continuous play of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere recovery of the past, waiting to be found, identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past. It is only from this second position of the identity proposed by Hall seems that we can properly understand the traumatic character of the colonial experience out of which are constituted the identities such as Indianness, Carribeanness, Africanness and Blackness.

In the nutshell, postcolonial discourse is formed in a common belief that people deprived of their root are judiciously resisting and assimilating the alien culture. Proponents of postcolonial studies like Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and others tend to theorize resistance which erupts from cultural shock and negotiation. In the light of aforementioned issues central to postcolonial discourse: hybridity, diaspora, and cultural varieties, this research proposes to trace out identities that are dislocated, particularly that of Indian immigrants in Lahiri's “Unaccustomed Earth.”

## IV. Cultural Pangs of Bengali-Americans in "Unaccustomed Earth"

Jhumpa Lahiri establishes herself as a clear-eyed and compassionate chronicler of the lives of expatriate Bengalis and their second-generation American-born children in her latest work, "Unaccustomed Earth". Those children have left home and are starting families of their own, as they struggle both with tangled filial relationships and the demands of parenthood. The straddling of two cultures has been replaced by the straddling of two generations. The alienation and straddling that most of the characters experience in "Unaccustomed Earth," title story from Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*, despite their glazing material life, is because of their displacement from native Bengali culture and adoption of unaccustomed earth-America.

This chapter is designated to reflect on most crucial issues for the study of postcolonial world in Jhumpa Lahiri's story, "Unaccustomed Earth" and the world of Ruma, a representative figure of second generation of Indian immigrants pertaining to the effects of diaspora, hybridity, and cultural variation. Moreover, the chapter outlines the narrative voices on the impact of cultural dislocation to serve our purpose of research.

After her mother's death, Ruma's father retires from the pharmaceutical company where he has worked for many decades and begins traveling in Europe. The narrative unfolds with a premonitory note on Bengali-American family's beginning of disintegration after, as is believed in India, death of a wife, "a continent he'd never seen" ("Unaccustomed Earth" 3). Ruma's father becomes a ruthless wanderer that even Ruma cannot hear of him for weeks:

> In the past year he had visited France, Holland, and most recently Italy. They were package tours, traveling in the company of strangers, riding by bus through the countryside, each meal and museum and hotel prearranged. He was gone for two, three, sometimes four weeks at a time. When he was away Ruma did not hear from him. Each time, she kept the printout of his flight

> information behind a magnet on the door of the refrigerator, and on the days he was scheduled to fly she watched the news, to make sure there hadn't been a plane crash anywhere in the world. (3)

The beginning of the story is resonant with all the ambiguities and complexities of the many different cultural experiences it implicates. It addresses several aspects of second generation Indian-Americans. All the characters in the novel are subjected in one way or another way to overt or subtle forms of neocolonial domination. The material fulfillment does not blur the internal divisions based on racial, linguistic or religious discriminations; the continuing unequal treatment of indigenous peoples in settler/invader societies testify to the fact that Lahiri's narrative is the continuing process of resistance and reconstruction.

At the literal level, this citation provokes humor in the narrator's commentary that to get the news of her father "she watched the news, to make sure there hadn't been a plane crash anywhere in the world." But it punches at the middle of confused relationship in between family members of immigrant Indians. What if a daughter realizes her father's presence only when going through a newsreel!

The generational gap that prevails in the family of Bengali-immigrants can be noticed through the very formal delivery of stuffs and expressions that serve to deposit the whole narrative as a conspicuous commentary of their existence. Take for example Ruma's father's information about his whereabouts: "her father wore succinct, impersonal accounts of the things he had seen and done; yesterday the Uffizi Gallery, today a walk to the other side of the Arno, a trip to Siena scheduled tomorrow" (4). Life in America, as it is believed, serves to strengthen economic security. But the opposite is applicable in Ruma's life: "She'd sleep in shabby pensions, practicing a frugality that was foreign to her at this stage of her life, buying nothing but variations of the same postcards her father sent now" (4).

"Unaccustomed Earth" portrays a vivid and bleak picture of Bengali-Indians migrating to America in search of good livelihood that compels them to disperse outside their homelands. Ruma recollects her life with her parents:

> The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had received from her father. In her thirty-eight years he'd never had any reason to write to her. It was 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 on his end. Her father's penmanship was small, precise, slightly feminine; her mother's had been a jumble of capital and lowercase, as though she'd learned to make only one version of each letter. The cards were addressed to Ruma; her father even included Adam's name, or mentioned Akash. (4)

It was only in his closing that he acknowledged any personal connection between them. "Be happy, love Baba," (4) he signed them, as if the attainment of happiness were simple as that. A wide gulf of despair has erupted in the old man's life now since he lost his only friend of his [Indian] heritage, his wife. He would very rarely share this with his daughter because he thinks she cannot understand his sentiments.

Ruma is married to Adam who "worked for a hedge fund and since the move had yet to spend two consecutive weeks at home" (5). Adam would be away that week; on another business trip: "tagging along with him wasn't an option" (5). The only option left for Ruma is to resent her marriage life because the commercialization and an angry rush for material collection is the only way of life that Adam can provide her with. He never went anywhere interesting – usually towns in the Northwest or Canada where there was nothing special for her and Akash to do. In a few months, Adam assured her, the trips would diminish. Since the couple come from a different cultural grounds, Adam with a western blood and Ruma running Indian blood within her, their views on parenting always differ: "he hated stranding

Ruma with Akash so often, he said, especially now that she was pregnant again" (5). He encouraged her to hire a babysitter, even a live-in if that would be helpful. "But Ruma knew no one in Seattle, and the prospect of finding someone to care for her child in a strange place seemed more daunting than looking after him on her own" truly reflects eastern blood and heritage of mothering that percolates in Ruma.

The succeeding revelations in Lahiri's narrative provide us with another bleak portrait of disintegrating family ties in Indian-Americans. Romi, his only son and Ruma's brother seldom takes notice of his family members: "it hadn't made a difference to Romi, who'd been living in New Zealand for the past two years, working on the crew of a German documentary filmmaker" (6). The concept of "home" is now a far cry:

> Ruma knew that the house, with the rooms her mother had decorated and the bed in which she liked to sit up doing crossword puzzles and the stove on which she'd cooked, was too big for her father now. Still, the news had been shocking, wiping out her mother's presence just as the surgeon had. Their old apartment was too small. But in Seattle there were rooms to spare, rooms that stood empty and without purpose. (7)

Lahiri's work involves in a dialectical relationship between the impulses to create or recreate independent local identity. It includes a bizarre life that has been subjected to political and economic structural domination of immigrant people from recently independent third world country, India. The inconsistency of psychology in Indian-Americans is the result of inconsistency of a living place that they could call the home.

It is not alone the hunger of wealth that brings Indians to the foreign land. Lahiri's account of Mrs. Bagchi is exception. She had married a boy she'd love since girlhood, but after two years of marriage he was killed in a scooter accident. "At twenty-six she moved to America, knowing that otherwise her parents would try to marry her off again" (8) to distance herself

from the Bengali belief that a daughter's life is liable in the hands of her parents: what ever happens, a daughter is compelled to accept the decisions of male-head of family though it betrays her personal desires. A daughter is never asked for decisions that concern her life. These superstitions prevailing in Indian subcontinent is the cause of voluntary migration. That is why "she lived on Long Island, an anomaly, an Indian woman alone" (8). Here the glimpse of narrator's predisposition on the Indian begotten belief is traced; despite her brilliant academic qualifications the narrator questions her remaining alone: "She had completed her doctorate in statistics and taught since the seventies at Stonybrook University, and in over thirty years she had gone back to Calcutta only to attend her parents' funerals" (8).

Lahiri provides an Indian name for Ruma's son, 'Akash,' which is synonymous term for sky in English though he falls in the third generation of Bengali immigrants to convince the readers over how much love for the native soil Ruma has preserved. Next, Lahiri imagines the boy to be of mixed heritage:

> Akash was lying motionless on the floor, on his stomach, his chin cupped in his hands. He was perfect synthesis of Ruma and Adam, his curly hair they'd never cut and his skin a warm gold, the faint hair on his legs gold as well, reminding her of a little lion. Even his face, with its slanted, narrow green eyes, had faintly leonine aspect. He was only three, but sometimes she already felt the resistance, the profound barrier she assumed would set in with adolescence. (10)

Ruma preserves the Bengali tradition of never cutting hair of a male child before he enters a certain age. She is proud of "his skin a warm gold, the faint hair on his legs gold as well, reminding her of a little lion" that is the symptom of Indianness. But it hurts her when his "narrow green eyes had faintly leonine aspect" that makes him more American than Indian.

Family is the revered concept in India, and even daughters are married off in nearby villages in India. But what a contradiction in the lives of people living in America who come from same heritage: she lived on a separate coast thousands of miles from where she grew up, a place where her parents knew no one, where neither of her parents, until today, had set foot" (11). The sight her father's rental car, a compact maroon sedan, upset her. After losing a root perhaps, it remains as a fatal curse that even a daughter and father cannot meet each-other: "the connections her family had formed to America, her parents' circle of Bengali friends in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, her father's company, the schools Ruma and Romi hade gone through, did not exist there" (11).

It is almost impossible to continue and realize the cultural heritage of native soil for a boy who hardly sees his mother's father and mother: "Akash had no memory of her mother" (17). She had died when he was two, and now, when she pointed her mother out in a photograph, Akash would always say, " 'she died,' as if it were something extraordinary and impressive her mother had done" (17). He would know nothing of the weeks her mother had come to stay with Ruma after his birth, holding him in the mornings in her arms as Ruma slept off her postpartum fatigue: "her mother had refused to put him into the bassinet, always cradling him, for hours at a time, in her arms" (17).

In the scene of reconciliation between father and daughter Ruma repeats everything of her past: "she ate with her fingers, as her father did, for the first time in months, for the first time in this new house in Seattle" (22). Eating with fingers is a peculiar practice common in India. But unfortunately this part of tradition will no longer remain in Akash's generation: "Akash sat between them in his booster seat, wanting to eat with his fingers, too, but this was something Ruma had not taught him to do (22). In spite of her efforts he was turning into the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, "the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother: imperious, afraid of eating things" (23). When he was younger, he'd

eaten whatever her mother made for him. Now Akash hesitates to take Indian cuisines because they are strange for him. For sure, a new child will grow up among junk food, a part of western culture.

Ruma recalls her mother, a distant symbol of Bengali-Indian heritage: “ten years ago her mother had done everything in her power to talk to Ruma out of marrying Adam, saying that he would divorce her, that in the end he would want an American girl” (26). Neither of these things had happened, but she sometimes thought back to that time, “remembering how bold she’d had to be in order to withstand her mother’s outrage, and her father’s refusal to express even that, which had felt more cruel” (26). She is lost in reminiscences: “‘You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian, that is the bottom line,’ her mother had told Ruma again and again” (26).

The nurturing force field of pregnancy shields Ruma from the sting this reflection might be expected to provoke, but it doesn’t protect her widowed father. When he visits her in Seattle from his condo in Pennsylvania, he asks her a very American question: “Will this make you happy?” (11). Urging Ruma not to isolate herself, to look for work, he reminds her that “self-reliance is important” (11). Thinking back on his wife’s unhappiness in the early years of their marriage, he realizes that “he had always assumed Ruma’s life would be different” (14).

Ruma is struck by how much her father “resembled an American in his old age . . . with his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere” (25). Seeing his daughter, Ruma’s father has the opposite reaction: “She now resembled his wife so strongly that he could not bear to look at her directly” (26).

However, it also refers to the Third World diaspora circumstances from forced exile to voluntary immigration within First World metropolises. Lahiri’s text revolves around practices, psychological condition and concrete historical process, and to the intermingling of

all these. Lahiri exposes the forms of social criticism that bears witness to those unequal and uneven processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once colonized Third World comes to be framed in the west. Thus, for Lahiri, Ruma's condition in America seems to direct the attention to inequalities in modes of representation.

"Unaccustomed Earth" initiates wholesale critiques of Western Structure of knowledge and power, particularly after decolonization of nation states.

Most fundamentally, the wanderlust of Ruma's father is the consequence of the economic, political and cultural impact of loss of cultural root, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities.

Ruma's life necessitates a discourse by which western culture is able to hegemonizing people from other cultural backgrounds in America. The random flow of global capital is accompanied by an unprecedented movement of people, technologies and information from one location to another. In such circumstances, America is just another name for the globalization of cultures and histories.

Lahiri's narrative carries with it the implication that colonialism is now a matter of past, with the traces of cultural deformity in the present: Ruma's case inadvertently glosses over the fact that global hegemony, even in the post-cold war era, persists in forms other than overt colonial rule. Therefore, "Unaccustomed Earth" provides an analytical space for confronting issues like religion, ethnicity, patriarchy, sex, gender, etc.

Lahiri has dealt most significantly with cultural contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences. It accounts for the displacement of Bengali-Indians in the metropolitan centers, and the cultural syncretism generated by First/ Third World intersections in a relatively binaristic, fixed and stable mapping of power relations between people from center and periphery. It seems that such articulations help to create discourse which allows for movement, mobility and fluidity. It further helps to foreground hybridity and syncreticism to

imbricate central and peripheral cultures.

The conversation between daughter and father is the most riveting among all episodes in Lahiri's work. Her father laments over the loss of his wife: "She's gone now . . . a woman who looked Indian" (40). But Lahiri's tale reaches at its climax when a father is about to reveal his affair with a woman who looked more like Indian:

> It was opportunity to tell Ruma. It was more difficult than he'd thought, being in his daughter's home, being around her all day. He felt pathetic deceiving her. But what would he say? That he had made a new friend? A girlfriend? The word was unknown to him, impossible to express; he had never had a girlfriend in his life. It would have been easier telling Romi. He would have absorbed the information casually, might even have found it a relief. Ruma was different. All his life he'd felt condemned by her, on his wife's behalf. (40)

Like his wife, Ruma was now along in this new place, overwhelmed, without friends, caring for a young child, all of it reminding him, too much, of the early years of his marriage, the years for which his wife had never forgiven him.

Gardening is a symbol Lahiri uses to redeem the Bengali Heritage. Perhaps this is the only site where Akash exposes his knowledge of very few Bengali words. This whole conversation between a grandfather and grandson is relevant for our purpose; picture of a generation caught into half life, half identity.

> Akash nodded. He picked up a miniature plastic dinosaur, forcing it into the ground.
>
> "What color is it?" her father asked.
>
> "Red."
>
> "And in Bengali?"

> “*Lal*.”
>
> “Good.”
>
> “And *neel*!” Akash cried out, pointing to the sky. (44-5)

The characters in the story have the voluntarily moved from their homelands into a new region, which is a central historical fact of globalization. The dispersal experiences of Indian Americans are similar to those ancient Jews after the Babylonian captivity. Lahiri’s narrative dwells among with the strategic disintegration of territory, race, language, culture, religion, history, sovereignty.

“Unaccustomed Earth” transmits a certain sense of shared destiny and predicament: an inherent will to preservation and celebration of the ancestral culture and equally inherent impulse toward forging and maintaining link with the 'old country'. Thus, Lahiri’s work embarks for ancestral culture and culturally inherent impulses.

At the heart of Unaccustomed Earth lies dislocation, rush for cultural identity, hybridity, ethnicity, and nativism. Ruma does not stop herself to be mesmerized with Bengali tradition: today is the only day after her marriage to Adam that she finds herself truly happy. Making tea while her father was in the shower is a ritual she liked, “a formal recognition of the day turning into evening in spite of the sun not setting” (45):

> When she was on her own, these hours passed arbitrarily, she was grateful for the opportunity to sit on the porch with her father, with the teapot and the bowl of salted cashews and the plate of Nice biscuits, looking at the lake and listening to the vast breeze work its way through the treetops, a grander version of the way Akash used to sigh when he was a baby, full of contentment, in the depths of sleep. (45)

The narrator engages on the discussion of how the two generations have their different starting points regarding culture. The older generation, framed in Ruma’s father cannot afford

to invoke India in authoritarian mode to resolve problems and the younger generation, represented in Ruma herself, is ill advised to indulge in a spree of forgetfulness about where she has come from.

Ruma undergoes a wide range of analytical dilemmas. Her point seems to question the origins and locations of her psychological instabilities and that of her father.
This citation encapsulates a vital trend that the local-global tension of an individual and expresses the specificity of migrant communities.

Lahiri's narrative speculates on double consciousness: it affords a perspective that allows for the emergence of excessive and differential meaning of belonging. Ruma contends: "But given the time change and the children always at their sides, it was impossible to carry on a meaningful conversation" (35). For all the time she'd spent with these women the roots did not go deep, and these days, after reading their e-mails, Ruma was seldom inspired to write back. Even at the time of upbringing her father would not compel Ruma to act as an Indian:

> But he pointed out that Ruma hadn't been raised with that sense of duty. She led her own life, had made her own decision, married an American boy. He didn't expect her to take him in, and really, he couldn't blame her. For what had he done, when his own father was dying, when his mother was left behind? By then Ruma and Romi were teenagers. There was no question of his moving the family back to India, and also no question of his eighty-year-old widowed mother moving to Pennsylvania. He had let his siblings look after her until she, too, eventually died. (29)

That is why the question of assimilation for her is not more than a mundane. She is situated in a half way of existence. The diasporic perspective as double-consciousness seems fruitful particularly in such emphasis like transnational scope. All diasporic elements seem to have

the automatic possession of double consciousness, that they are fully self-reflexive, ambivalent, and cosmopolitan riding of cultural differences.

Diasporic double-consciousness can be the name for trans-cultural values which includes the possibilities of reading one cultures space and time from the space and time of another. It problematizes the correspondence different identity and place or biology, and the cultural differences in a more pivotal case of postcolonial hybridity.

However, there are instances that Lahiri can be assailed for being inauthentic and misrepresenting the reality and using more fantasy and exaggerating the reality of her faraway homeland in order to create and aesthetic effect on the reader or to engage large audiences. Ruma's imaginary homeland is the fine example of this:

> She tried to think of her parents' house transformed this way. She imagined a wall in the dining room broken down, imagined speaking to her mother on the telephone, her mother complaining as the workmen hammered and drilled. Then she saw her parents sitting in the shade, in wicker chairs, having tea as she and her father were now. (46)

But, fantasy is still an inevitable part of Lahiri's writing. It is an only source that makes it possible for the immigrant characterizes to be connected between their past and present. Lahiri's emphasis is on the recognition of creation of new trans-cultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. "Unaccustomed Earth" is a result of bringing together of people and their culture from different part of the world.

In Lahiri's story, the varieties of culture and the need to acknowledge these varieties to avoid universal cultural definitions plays a vital role. In common uses the cultural diversity or cultural variations suggests that cultural authority resides not in a series of fixed and determined diverse objects but in the process of how these objects come to be known and so come into being. "Unaccustomed Earth" is sufficient to record signifiers of cultural diversity

which acknowledge a range of separate and distinct systems of behavior, attitudes and values.

The cultural diversity seems to grasp the spirit of Lahiri's narrative, cultural exchange, and the culture of humanity. The story propagates the culture in its micro level opposing the cultural universalism. It also helps to know the formation of cultural totalities by emphasizing our awareness of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons.

Cultural identity has played a crucial part in Ruma's struggles which has reshaped her perception of the world. The crew was very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation among hitherto marginalized people. Cultural identity, which follows along the many points of similarity, has critical points of deep and significant difference that constitute what we really are, or rather what we have become. Hall expands his notion:

Jennifer Reese's observation on the works of Jhumpa Lahiri masquerades with the similar ethos under which this chapter is designed: " 'Unaccustomed Earth' as in her two previous books, Lahiri writes about the dislocation of upwardly mobile Bengali-Americans but strip away the exotic trappings and her urban professionals could be any anxious, overachieving Americans adrift from their cultural moorings". Reese ventures on to question the Utopia of Lahiri's characters:

> Would Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction still work if the Rahuls and Chitras were Roberts and Charlottes? If the mango-lime pickle on the refrigerator shelf were Best Foods mayonnaise? It's an interesting experiment to run while reading Lahiri's elegant, unsettling new story collection. In the startling title story, Ruma, a lawyer-turned-housewife mourning her dead mother, struggles with the decision to invite her father to live with her. She worries he'll interfere with the tidy nuclear family she's built with her non-Indian husband, Adam. (Tellingly, Adam is always off stage, traveling on business while Ruma raises their son in affluent isolation.) When Ruma gets around to asking, her

> father's answer dismays her; it's clear he's been enjoying his freedom. All along it has been she, not he, who craved the traditional connection. (qtd. in Reese 13)

An introduction to “Unaccustomed Earth” reads, “everyone has their secrets and in her stunning new collection of stories Jhumpa Lahiri gently lifts the veil to reveal how even the most ordinary lives have their dramas and tragedies” (Lahiri “Introduction” I). The page further reads: “and then, as gently, lets it fall back down again” (II). “Unaccustomed Earth” returns to the terrain—the heart of family life and the immigrant experience—that Lahiri’s has made utterly hers, but her themes, this time around, have darkened and deepened. The end of the story is symbolic of the cultural void that is to bestow on Akash’s life:

> In the name of ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered anymore, he had forsaken them. He kissed Akash lightly on the side of his head, smoothing the curling golden hair with his hand, then switched off the lamp, filling the room with darkness. (51)

The turning off of lamp is symbolically the last chapter of Akash’s Bengali-Indian identity. Identity is subject to continuous play of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere recovery of the past, waiting to be found, identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past. The identity Lahiri proposes seems to illumine upon which we understand the traumatic character of the colonial experience out of which comes Indianness.

To sum up, Lahiri’s narrative is formed under a common belief that people deprived of their roots are refusing to give in to the foreign way of life: they are in constant threat of loss of identity which erupts from cultural shock. Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth” traces out identities that are dislocated, particularly that of Bengali-Indian immigrants in America.

## IV. Conclusion

This research elucidates postcolonial culture in Jhumpa Lahiri's "unaccustomed Earth" as the historical phenomenon of colonialism with its range of references to material practices and effects, such as transportation, displacement, emigration, and racial and cultural discrimination. Lahiri's story jabs at these material conditions and their relationship to the question of cultural displacement. The emphasis of this research work on Jhumpa Lahiri's story "Unaccustomed Earth" has been to inspect the life that Lahiri's mouthpiece Ruma, and her father along with Akash, Ruma's son, has experienced as a succeeding generation of Bengali-Indian immigrant in America: the uprooting and dislocation that has made them expatriates and exiles. This is to say, this research comes to trace the pain of recollection that an exile feels at finding him/herself grounded at an unaccustomed land as well as the often desperate search for adequate expression so characteristic of Lahiri. The luxury of recollecting long residence, habitual environment, native idiom, and the compensation one has to pay for the loss of all these things is evident in Lahiri's work. Lahiri's narrative bears a unique fright of anxiety.

Nevertheless, and despite the all pervading western power, the scope of the literature of expatriate-- that is, Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth"-- has been great resistance to appalling segregation of Immigrant's culture in America that gives tiresome evidence of itself in attacks on non-european cultures, traditions and peoples as somehow unworthy of serious attention or consideration.

Ruma's father lives alone now, makes his own meals. She cannot picture his surroundings when they speak on the phone. He has moved into a one-bedroom condominium in a part of Pennsylvania Ruma does not know well. He has pared down his possessions and sold the house where Ruma and her younger brother Romi had spent their childhood, informing them only after he and the buyer went into contract. But interestingly, it

has not made a difference to Romi, who is living in New Zealand for the past two years, working on the crew of a German documentary filmmaker. Ruma knows that the house, with the rooms her mother had decorated and the bed in which she liked to sit up doing crossword puzzles and the stove on which she had cooked, is too big for her father now. Still, the news has been shocking, wiping out her mother's presence.

In the story that gives the collection its title, an aging widower experiences quiet exhilaration at being free of the demands of family. Only one suitcase to check at the airport when he goes on his overseas package tours, no lawn to mow or screens to replace now that he's given up the house. And he has a traveling companion: a girlfriend. The word was unknown to him, impossible to express. He is as guilt-ridden about his contentment as Ruma, his daughter, is about not inviting him to move in with her family; in India, there would have been no question about it.

Ruma nervously awaits a visit by her widowed father with whom she has rarely been alone in the past (her mother having always served as the go-between). The tentative interactions between these sets of people show us how circumstances can lead even the most intimate relationships into unaccustomed territory. Lahiri's usually straightforward narrative helps us make sense of how interior lives can impinge on mundane daily routines and threaten relationships. Class, gender, and other circumstances or accidents are also important to consider, along with the logic of production and the dynamics of work relations. Not all migrants are exilic or nomadic; some are refugees, some merely following the money.

To sum up, this research on Lahiri's work concentrates over the type of writing she specializes in: about the immigrant experience, more specifically the lives of first-generation Bengalis and their alienated children in the America. From this research perspective, Lahiri is poignant and perceptive of the cultural pangs of expatriates in America. "Unaccustomed Earth" is notable for its restraint, for the economical character portraits and for quiet,

seemingly effortless insights into people's thoughts and actions. "Unaccustomed Earth" has this quality: reading the story one realizes that it can refer to many other actions or experiences that bring a sense of dislocation with them--moving to a new house shortly after the death of a beloved parent, for example, and trying to think of the place as home despite knowing that the deceased person had never even seen it. This research comes to penetrate upon instances of diasporic existence and experiences providing just the right ammunition for our purpose to dissect cultural pangs of Bengali-Indian immigrants in America.

"Unaccustomed Earth" is full of lost old-world parents and the shaky modern marriages that cannot quite replace them.

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