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INTERPRETATION OF MALADIES IN AN UNACCUSTOMED EARTH; CONFLICTS OF
ASSIMILATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S WOMEN PROTAGONISTS

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ABSTRACT

JhumpaLahiri was born in London to Bengali parents; grew up in Rhode Island (USA), studied at Boston University; has settled down in America and considers America her "home". Unlike most of her fellow writers, she belongs to the second generation diaspora, who has hardly had any sustained experience of India. However, for Lahiri, displacement and loss of one's cultural self-exerts a powerful pull on the collective imagination and psyche of the immigrant. In nearly all her works she writes about the challenges faced by the children of Indian immigrants in the United States. This Paper deals with the assimilation challenges faced by the second generation immigrant women in the short stories written by JhumpaLahiri. While discussing the same I have taken into consideration, the female protagonists of the title story of her two short story collections: Interpreter of Maladies and Unaccustomed Earth. Even though all her writings are replete with characters struggling both psychologically and physically in a land which may not be theirs fully, discussing all of them will exceed the scope of the paper,

Keywords : Assimilation, Second Generation, Displacement, Cultural expectation.

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In an essay that appeared in a 2006 edition of *Newsweek*, aptly titled 'My Two Lives', Lahiri writes,

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.

JhumpaLahiri's first and second generation Indian immigrant women characters play the traditional gender roles in a conscious effort to preserve the culture left behind. They try to preserve Indian culture in their home through their attention to religion, food, dress, and raising Indian children. The challenges of mainstream American life require Lahiri's women to adjust their approach to their gender roles. While the division between home and outside is essential in the sense that home is still the sacred space in which to act on one's cultural identity, the demands of life in the United States, particularly the independence of the modern American

woman, make it difficult for immigrant women to move back and forth between their native cultural traditions and mainstream American society on their own terms.

Mina Das, the protagonist of the title story of Lahiri's debut story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, is a second generation Indian American who must straddle both American and Indian cultures. Her position as the daughter of immigrants and as an American wife and mother curiously alienates her from both Indian culture and her own family. While on a vacation in India with her husband and children, Mina attempts to come to terms with her unhappiness by confessing her anxiety to the tour guide her husband has hired. Mina's problem -- her inability to be understood by Mr. Kapasi -- stems out of her failure to translate the social, political, and historical expectations he has of her because of her appearance and name, which in his eyes mark her as Indian. She shows little interest in the country of her parents' birth, which passes her by as she touches up her nail polish in the car, scolding her daughter, "Leave me alone," when she asks to have her nails painted, too (48).

Her willing absence from the family structure, her apathy towards her children, her disdain for her husband, and her alienation from Indian culture are inextricable from one another, and her appearance, particularly the exaggerated femininity-- represented by a self-absorbed superficiality that catches Mr. Kapasi's attention -- and a lack of certain feminine qualities that parallel her lack of Indianness, reminding us that her roles of wife and mother are equally unstable. She is caught between the cultural expectations that guided her into the role of matriarch and the promise of individual fulfillment available to American women of her age.

Although Mina's marriage is only half-arranged, her choices seem to have been predetermined by social and cultural obligations. She admits to Mr. Kapasi that she feels trapped by her husband and children, and that at certain moments she yearns to "throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything" (Ibid 65).

Unable to navigate the cultural contradictions that often persist in the lives of children of immigrants, she ultimately fails at both. Mr. Kapasi represents the expectations of Indian patriarchy, balking at her claim that what she feels is anything more than guilt at her common, trivial little secret. The impossibility of translating her frustrated condition into a legitimate malady reflects the challenges Mina continues to face in translating cultural expectations into anything resembling personal fulfillment. Mina seems destined to exist -- uncomfortable and misunderstood -- between cultures.

Lahiri's stories outline the tensions of preserving one's cultural background in a foreign environment and the conflicts of assimilation. At the same time, they articulate the difficult positions of second-generation migrants who do not face displacement directly, physically, but have to struggle with the legacies of their parents nevertheless.

The title story in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri's second story collection is about 38-year-old Ruma, a second generation Indian immigrant expecting her second child with her American husband. Ruma finds herself in a conflicted position since she has inherited a sense of exile and loss from her parents. The visit of her recently widowed father to her home in Seattle occupies the central space in the narrative. The parent-child kinship may be regarded as a continuation of the dialogue between past and present. Yet the conversation is not always smooth. The father-daughter relationship in *Unaccustomed Earth* is rather complicated; Ruma has always been closer to her mother, a traditional Bengali woman, strictly adhering to all habits and customs even after moving to the United States. After her sudden death, however, the distance between Ruma and her father seems to grow even bigger. While her mother's death shocked Ruma and left her totally unprepared for life without her, her father appears to be less distressed by it.

During the week-long visit Ruma and her father scrutinize each other; yet neither of them is willing to talk openly. Ruma's father, who remains nameless till the end of the story, gradually realizes how much his daughter resembles his deceased wife as the difference between mother and daughter gradually blur and disappear:

Like his wife, Ruma was now alone 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. He had always assumed Ruma's life would be different. (40)

Exhausted by motherly duties and her second pregnancy, Ruma shuts herself in the monotonous world of domestic chores, following her mother's example. The part-time job in a law firm in New York is a matter of the past; in Seattle, Ruma has transformed into a housewife, giving up all her ambitions. Ruma's social isolation and her preference for solitude, which inevitably leads to her discontentment and frustration, contrast immensely with her father's socializing and traveling adventures.

Like most of Lahiri's narratives, *Unaccustomed Earth* also tries to address the problem of complicated intergenerational relationships viewed from the migrant's perspective. Belonging to the second generation of immigrants, Ruma (like her brother Romi) displays typical signs of assimilation and gradual alienation from Bengali customs, a change noticed by her father as his children grew up. "The more the children grew, the less they seemed to resemble either parent – they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way, from the texture of their hair to the shapes of their feet and hands" (54).

Unlike her father, who was always more prone to assimilation in certain matters, Ruma's mother was the cultural anchor in the family – she had kept wearing her saris and jewels all the time, had spoken only Bengali with her children, had created a circle of Bengali friends, and had regularly returned to Calcutta to visit their relatives. Ruma is aware of the fact that "her mother who would have stuck out in this wet Northern landscape" while her father "resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere" (11).

Despite Ruma's drifting away from her Bengali roots, she is painfully aware of a certain loss. Her three-year old son Akash, "a perfect synthesis of Ruma and Adam" (10) speaks only English, hates Indian food and has no memory of her mother. The fragile connection to her parents' past, and to Akash's roots as well, is slowly disintegrating. Not even Adam, her successful American husband, is able to provide the necessary consolation. Even though he supports Ruma in all her decisions and appears to be almost an ideal husband, Ruma has the feeling that "she and Adam were separate people leading separate lives" (126). The death of her mother equals the death of all the things she embodied to Ruma, her native identity mostly.

The image of Ruma's neglected backyard garden becomes one of the central symbols of the story. Gardening has always been her father's passion, which was never understood by Ruma or her mother. "He had toiled in unfriendly soil" in order to produce beautiful flowers and vegetables for his wife's use in the kitchen (16).

The cultivation of Ruma's garden turns into a mission during his visit. The "unfriendly soil", when approached purposely and knowingly, is suddenly turned into a fertile place by the hand of the cultivator. This subtle image of transformation is paralleled by Ruma's and her father's different approaches to their lives. Ruma, who is stuck at the same place, in the same worn-out soil, withers while her father, who refuses to settle down and establishes a new relationship (with Mrs. Bagchi), thrives. At the end, however, through an unexpected discovery in her garden, Ruma accepts the fact that her father has moved on; yet the question of whether she will be able to do the same remains unanswered.

Jhumpa Lahiri is undoubtedly one of the few novelists who have successfully narrated the fundamental conflict in the second generation Indian migrants, perhaps because she herself is one. In a recent article *The New York Times* called "India's Post-Rushdie Generation", she states:

My connection with India is fundamental...But at the same time it is very slippery and confusing. It has been a cause of bewilderment and sometimes strife and frustration within me. It's a messy thing. But it's been a blessing for me and my writing. I would like to see myself as an American writer. When I was raised I was told not to think of myself as an American. It was very important to my mother to raise her children as Indian, thinking and doing things in an Indian way, whatever that means. Even now it is hard for me to say I am an American.

Lahiri's admitted difficulty calling herself American despite her desire to be considered an American writer reminds us of Bharati Mukherjee's unapologetic claim to the American identity. Even though Lahiri came to the

U.S. at a much younger age than Mukherjee and spent almost all of her life here, what contributes to Lahiri's hesitation is having been raised as Indian in America. This fact helps explain the role of the family/home in as she understands firsthand how the immigrant home becomes the transnational space where identity is negotiated.

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