

The Awakening of a Second Generation Protagonist to Diaspora Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth"

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The present paper focuses on the textual content of the title story in *Unaccustomed Earth*, a 2008 collection by Jhumpa Lahiri. As will be discussed, the author refuses to be labeled as an ethnic writer, and an analysis of her works justifies her contention. Her works are suited to be closely examined for their textual contents rather than simply treated as examples of historical and geopolitical phenomena relating to a specific ethnic group in the United States. Therefore, her works also reflect a trend in Asian American criticism toward the aesthetic and the universal, away from approaches that primarily deal with socio-ethnic aspects of particular ethnicities.

The first section of this paper refers to the statements by Lahiri on this point and to some critical materials about this pendulum swing, and stresses the need for a close textual analysis of her works. Thus, the second, third, and fourth sections closely trace and explicate how the second-generation female protagonist struggles to come to terms with the culture of her parents' origin, especially its language, which she has neglected, if not purposefully. The second section conveys her isolation as a female. The third and fourth sections are on how the issue of language isolates her within the context of familial intricacies and how she comes to realize the importance of the language of origin of her immediate ancestors, even if it is hardly necessary for material and social survival in the United States. Finally, the fifth section concludes that "Unaccustomed Earth" ends with the awakening of the protagonist from an assimilationist ideology to her diasporic identity.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, diaspora, Asian American literature, Indian American, language and culture

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The Universal and the Transnational in the Works by Lahiri

The focal points in the analysis of works by Asian-American authors have often been historical, social, and cultural aspects of the ethnic group in question. In these approaches to analyzing Asian American literature, each literary work may have been regarded by critics mostly as an example of the historical and social circumstances of a given ethnic group, rather than addressing universal and aesthetic themes that cross ethnic boundaries. *Literary Gestures*, edited by Davis and Lee, is subtitled *The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing*, and calls for greater acknowledgement of aesthetic and universal elements in each work of Asian-American literature, while emphasizing that this pendulum swing toward aesthetics will not entirely result in the neglect of social and geopolitical issues facing each ethnic group. Other aspects that have attracted greater critical attention in the evolution of Asian American literary studies are cross-racial and transnational aspects, while earlier studies tended to focus on Asian-American groups of a specific national descent.

Jhumpa Lahiri's works are exemplary in encompassing all these universal, cross-ethnic, cross-racial, and transnational qualities. In an interview in *The New York Times* in 2013, five years after the publication of *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri makes a statement in which she clearly rejects the labeling of her works as "immigrant fiction." She emphatically states that, in the entire history of literature, writers have always addressed themes that have a great deal in common with those in works categorized as "immigrant fiction." Representative themes are boundary crossing, roaming, exile, and encounters with the unfamiliar in unaccustomed sites. Lahiri aptly points out that the themes of "alienation and assimilation," the most prominent themes in immigrant fiction, have been an underlying theme of literature from any place and any time. Furthermore, especially when it comes to American literature, she declares, "Given the history of the United States, all American fiction could be classified as immigrant fiction." In making this statement, she refers to writers such as Hawthorne and Willa Cather. Readers of *Unaccustomed Earth* open the book to find a quoted epiphany from "The Custom-House" by Hawthorne.

Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht also point to the rise of critical approaches that do not overly focus on the writer's ethnic descent. They refer to a more "content-centered

approach" as suggested by Jennifer Ann Ho, who attempts to delve more into "the complexities of the Asian American experience" and who also challenges a "monoracial approach" regarding Asian American identity. In observing this pendulum swing in critical approaches to Asian American literature, Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht introduce Lahiri's collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*. They especially commend its title story as an example rather suited for such a critical approach. They comment that the novella is characteristic of "the kind of domestic scenes Lahiri excels in detailing" and that the issues of ethnicity and kinship are both essential themes in them.

Minus also observes that the settings in Lahiri's works are mostly domestic, appearing to both commend and criticize her pieces for this point. On one hand, he is critical about how Lahiri's characters do not pay as much attention to historical, geographical, and political circumstances in the country of their origin—India for Lahiri's characters—as he expects from those in immigrant fiction "except in the most personal and incidental terms." On the other hand, he stresses that Lahiri should not be simply labeled as "a woman writer," either, despite her excellence in providing detailed and nuanced descriptions of domestic scenes, while being careful to remain neutral about the political correctness of the term "woman writer." However, as can be seen in the interview in *The New York Times*, appearing to focus on immigrant issues could be exactly what Lahiri may have been attempting to avoid.

Overly confined to a personal level they may seem to be, feuds, reconciliations, and negotiations within families have always been one of the universal themes in literature. In 1970 Hanisch boldly chose the title "The Personal Is Political," and the echo and the validity of her credo still have a continuing impact when one attempts to analyze the significance of detailed descriptions of domestic scenes in works of literature such as Lahiri's. In being somewhat condescending of Lahiri's domestic scenes, Minus and critics of the same mindset may not realize that personal and domestic incidents are never mutually exclusive with geopolitical settings. In other words, one pitfall in regarding the historical and geopolitical as outweighing the domestic and the personal is that the emphasis on the former could result in the neglect of the latter, as in the mechanical recitation of death tolls in reports that ignore personal implications.

Another aspect that Minus targets in Lahiri's works as being mostly domestic

without much reference to India is that her settings are mainly in America, where the characters presently reside. This tendency in her stories is partly due to the fact that many of her characters are second- or third-generation immigrants. They have looser ties to the country of their origin than first-generation immigrants. For them material and social survival in America tend to be more pressing than the legacies of the countries where their immediate ancestors were born, especially since many of them might have never been there or have visited only sporadically.

In either sense of the adjective “domestic,” who can blame Lahiri’s second- and third-generation characters for being mostly concerned with their daily survival and immediate familial crises? Who can rightfully say that historical and geopolitical factors should outweigh personal and domestic ones? Obviously, Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht are more balanced than Minus in commending Lahiri’s excellence in her detailed descriptions of domestic issues, for which an approach centered more on the content of the text itself is more suited than one focusing primarily on social issues of the author’s own ethnicity. When Ho emphasizes the significance of exploring the “complexities of Asian American experience,” she seems to be warning readers and critics against over-simplification that could result from the latter type of approach to literary materials. They could lack attention to personal complexities of the characters and could fail to come to grips with the universal.

The following detailed explication and interpretation of Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth” attempts to trace how the author develops the universal theme of familial complexities by artfully letting it intertwine with immigrant issues. Thereby she successfully unfolds how the latter affects the former. The present paper attempts to thoroughly unravel the quality of Lahiri’s art as exhibited in this particular novella.

Female Isolation within Familial Intricacy

In the title story of Jhumpa Lahiri’s second short story collection, “Unaccustomed Earth,” the isolation felt by the second-generation Indian-American female protagonist is manifold. Ruma is a pregnant mother rearing her three-year-old son in suburban Seattle. Her keen sense of isolation can be ascribed to both familial factors and situational ones typical of second-generation immigrants. This story, by a contemporary cosmopolitan author who vehemently refuses to be categorized as an

ethnic writer per se, is an exemplary work that combines these two aspects in a nuanced way. Any attempt to interpret and analyze it would inevitably bring about the challenge of having to synthesize the two.

The narrative structure of the story is well-crafted so as to provide readers with ample perspectives and to unfold layers of senses of isolation felt by the characters. The entire story consists of separate sections, each of them presented from either Ruma's point of view or that of her widowed father, almost always alternating with each other. Therefore, readers get to know the father's "side" of the story as well as Ruma's (40), although her viewpoint somewhat supersedes the father's in that the first and last parts of the story are hers. It seems appropriate, then, to interpret it as centering on Ruma's sense of isolation while letting it intertwine with those of other characters. Of all the characters, the ones granted central viewpoints are Ruma and her widowed father, whose viewpoints also constitute the narrative structure, and Ruma's recently deceased mother. Other characters—her son, Akash, grandson of her father and mother, and Ruma's Euro-American husband, Adam—are only given the roles of either causing a sense of isolation among the former three or at times helping them experience some sense of kinship; the story is rarely presented from their viewpoints.

Ruma's sense of isolation is by far the most multifold of all, her viewpoint being granted the most central part. All of the familial relationships she has are complicated with puzzles that are feminist, familial, or relating to immigrants' concerns, or some combination of two or all three of these aspects. She is feeling isolated in her relation with her husband, who is frequently away on business during the time frame of the narration, and finds it difficult or impossible to understand how exhausting his job can be. After her mother's recent death, she has begun to feel even more that she and her husband are not able to share basic sentiments: he still lacks the experience of having lost a parent, and she cannot find solace in living with a husband, a son, and a baby inside her—a seemingly typical, ideal, suburban nuclear family in a newly acquired house with a perfect view. Although her husband seems to be considerate about her sense of loss, Ruma only feels all the more annoyed by his concerns instead of feeling consoled. During his business trips he regularly calls the family and actually seems to demonstrate his concerns. He appears to be a caring, faithful husband and father,

never failing to inquire even about his in-law, Ruma's father, and about her relationship with him. However, just the way he refers to her father often exasperates her instead of making her feel appreciative.

All these emotional discrepancies between her and her husband during his trips may not necessarily be an indication that Ruma's Euro-American husband neglects his wife, family, and father-in-law. It may be simply the result of the limitations of communication via telephone. This leads to the area of the issue of the effectiveness of different modes of communication such as telephone, e-mail, postal mail, and face-to-face conversation. Moreover, the issue of the means of communication inevitably leads into the issue of the languages used among different generations of immigrant family members, which the present paper discusses in the third and fourth sections.

Another immediate relative of Ruma's, her son Akash, is not exactly depicted as reciprocating his mother's affection, always being clamorous and nervous. Ruma seems to be at a loss about how to treat him. That her father so successfully begins to form a bond with his grandson only adds to her sense of isolation, because all her life, she has not felt fully acknowledged or forgiven by her father for not having achieved in America as much as he expected her to.

In the sections narrated from Ruma's viewpoint, her father—whose name is never given in the entire story, consistently referred to only as “her father”—is depicted as being rather “reticent” in conversations with his family (22), which has not made either his wife or daughter content. His wife, Ruma's mother, due to conventional Indian familial constrictions, spent almost all of her life “exclusively” taking care of her family and household even when living in an American suburb and her husband's reticent nature never alleviated her sense of isolation (11). On one hand, since the story is alternately narrated from the father's viewpoint and Ruma's, readers can enjoy the detailed descriptions of the inner sentiments of both “sides”: Ruma's and her mother's feminist sides, and her father's “side” of the story (40), from which one knows that he has found traditional Indian familial conventions heavy and even cumbersome. He thought that his wife, being confined within the sphere of caring for the family and household, was always rather demanding on him in many ways, including her dissatisfaction with how he had exerted himself to provide for family. This is exactly the reason why he wants his daughter to avoid the same path and why

he encourages her not to entirely give up her own career outside the family even while she is caring for a small child and is also pregnant again. On the other hand, however, Ruma only feels that he is too demanding, just as he always has been about her education, and feels more allied to her deceased mother, who stayed at home to raise her and her brother. She is hardly in the state of mind to appreciate her father's advice not to exclusively stay at home for the sake of her own mental sanity, and feels all the more alienated from him, though he probably means to encourage her. She may resent the double standards of her father, whose views appear to demand that she fulfill both familial and professional achievements which can be physically too rigorous, although, in theory, such a twofold arrangement might be mentally more gratifying than concentrating only on either home or career.

Although there were times when there was a severe rift between Ruma and her mother, the height of which was when the mother strongly opposed her marriage to Adam, the mother later begins even to deny that she ever opposed it. She even begins to like him as a substitute for her own son, Ruma's younger brother, and serves him savory Indian food, and Adam appreciates these favors from his Indian mother-in-law. However, the relationship between her father and Adam remains somewhat detached, if not hostile. The father had hardly ever been communicative with Ruma or her mother, either. This tendency on the part of the husband did not make his wife content with life in America. Her mother is consistently depicted in the story as a confined, dissatisfied, conventional Indian wife and mother. She is not portrayed as having adjusted to American suburban life, let alone appreciating the novel experience of having moved to America, but as a wife who has been uprooted from Indian tradition solely for marriage. However, close analysis of her characterization enables readers to discern quite an active, open-minded, and outgoing side of her, which eventually lets her be closer to Ruma. Her daughter was born on American soil. English is her native language, and she marries a Euro-American, but the mother eventually accepts him and introduces him to elements of Indian culture.

Moreover, later in her life, the mother begins to develop new, active interests in Europe. In the eyes of her family, she always seems to have regarded it only as a way station between the U.S. and India. She suddenly grows animated when she begins to practice French and to learn about places she could visit in Europe. The reaction of

Ruma's father to this new side that his wife begins to exhibit is one of sheer surprise. However, a feminist and socio-ethnic analysis of the characterization of the first-generation female immigrants could focus on the more flexible, extroverted side of a seemingly conventional first-generation female, though they could stereotypically be portrayed only as a depressed, introverted female who only mourns for what is lost and lacking in her adopted country away from her home country. Ruma's mother may have been "raised" to confine herself to the household and care for her family and may have been dragged away from a familiar environment to the unfriendly, unfamiliar American suburbs. However, it may have been only such external factors that rendered her constrained and demanding.

It is ironic that her husband hardly appreciated her devotion to home and caring of their family and, all the more, mostly felt dissatisfaction from his wife toward him. He came to know a different side of her only in the very last phase of her life. It is also doubly ironic that the husband meets a new female friend, Mrs. Bagchi, portrayed as the opposite of his late wife, almost immediately after her death. He thinks he likes this new friend because of her independence, the life she has led as a prematurely widowed woman with an American college degree and a career as an American university professor. If only given similar opportunities and external circumstances, Ruma's mother also could have developed her potential more outside the sphere of home and Indian tradition while not entirely neglecting and abandoning them, in the same way as Mrs. Bagchi, who retains her Bengali culture as well and has synthesized her Indian and American lives. Needless to say, it is the ultimate, tragic irony that the mother abruptly passes away during gallstone surgery after being assured by the doctor that in less than six weeks she can travel to Europe. If she had survived the surgery, she could have bloomed. She would have gone to Europe as planned and her relationship with her husband might have grown to be similar to that between him and the new female friend, spiced by trips to Europe away from their mundane life in suburban America. He had already retired with sufficient savings and finally had more free time, with the children having already grown independent—that is, his familial and professional demands had been taken care of. Until the twilight of their lives, neither the father nor the mother could afford the time, money, or physical energy to appreciate one another and enrich their relationship with each other, let

alone broadening their cultural sphere and outside associations.

So far Ruma has not been able to form any substantial ties outside her family, either. She feels distanced from the acquaintances she associated with back in Brooklyn, NY, from where she and Adam recently moved for Adam's new job in Seattle. She cannot connect with new acquaintances in her new environment, either. She lacks the physical and psychological stamina to take the trouble to make contact with one or to develop new relationships with the other. She is not able to feel rooted in either her former or her present site of residence.

Language Issue across Generations

In many of the studies on Lahiri's short stories and novella, the role of Indian cultural elements has been examined and discussed, especially the role Indian food plays in thematic construction.¹⁾ Original aspects of cultures such as food and clothing are always essential in the immigration-related issues, particularly to the extent of passing on the original culture to younger generations born in the host country. In "Unaccustomed Earth" the theme of the choice of language, one of the most important cultural components, constitutes a core motif and serves as a thematic thread that at various times severs and connects characters. As far as this particular novella and its motif of language are concerned, part of the observation by Minus that Lahiri writes less on politics, religion, and language than on clothing and food appears quite untrue. In "Unaccustomed Earth" the factor of language is especially prominent in the ever-changing relationship between Ruma and her surrounding family members.

As a second-generation Indian-American, Ruma's mother tongue is American English, in which she converses with her husband, his relatives, and her son, all of whom are native speakers of English. As has been discussed, the relationships among them, especially those between Ruma and others, are far from simply harmonious. With her parents she seems to have mostly spoken in English, though her parents, being first-generation immigrants from Calcutta, are from a Bengali linguistic background, and were anxious to pass on that language to their American-born daughter and son. When Ruma's mother is initially against Ruma's marrying a Euro-American, she snaps at her, saying "You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian, that is the bottom line" (26). Most likely Ruma did not choose to marry Adam simply

because he is Euro-American without any Indian background, as her mother too stereotypically assumes in this line. However, either from her adolescent rebelliousness against her parents or from the embarrassment that her mother accuses her of harboring about her Indian heritage, Ruma was, quote, “irritated” when her father made mistakes in English. She would even correct his English “as if his error were a reflection of her own shortcomings” (35). Does what Ruma perceived in her youth as her own or her father’s imperfections directly reflect an aversion to her Indian legacy? Did she ever consciously regard her Indian heritage as some kind of defect to be ashamed of? Perhaps she did, at least concerning language.

As for other Indian customs, her stance has been that of an in-between, or one of indifference. Such a negative, or at best indifferent, attitude on the part of her second-generation daughter has especially pained Ruma’s mother who had continued to value her ties to India and Indian culture more than her husband, who had chosen to immigrate to America of his own volition. For instance, Ruma gave away two hundred and fifteen saris of her mother’s to her mother’s friends after her death, and hardly uses the only three that she has kept, letting them sleep in a sealed container in the back of the closet, instead wearing casual Western clothing every day.

However, as has been observed, there has been some transition from cultural clash to some measure of mutual acceptance when it comes to relationships. At first Ruma’s mother interpreted Ruma’s marriage to a Euro-American as a culmination of what she took as her second-generation child’s rebellion against or indifference to anything Indian. However, as has been mentioned, the Indian mother and the Euro-American son-in-law did not adamantly continue to refuse to accept each other. Ironically, the reciprocal cultural interaction between them abruptly ceases when Ruma’s mother unexpectedly passes away.

Readers observe that Ruma, too, although somewhat awkwardly, may be making a transition from flat rejection of and snapping at non-American elements in her surviving parent, her father, to a more subtle acquiescence that could eventually verge almost on acceptance. In the line quoted above about her youthful irritation about her father’s mistakes in English, Ruma is reminiscing that she used to behave in such a way toward any non-American characteristics or behavior on the part of her parents. Now, at the age of thirty-eight, being pregnant and caring for a three-year-old son in a

still-unfamiliar home, she feels too tired and isolated and lacks the energy to protest. She keeps reflecting on earlier times when she had failed to meet the high expectations of her father, precisely because to her, even now, the father still does not appear ready to stop pressing her even more. After putting even more demands on her in one conversation, he symbolically disappears, leaving the family no way to reach him. He seems totally inaccessible, although in actuality he just made a brief excursion to a plant nursery without carrying his cell phone.

It is after these two scenes—the one in which Ruma does not bother to correct her father's English and the other in which he symbolically disappears—that he begins to develop a bond with his grandson. In the process, Ruma begins to feel doubly isolated between the father by whom she she hardly ever feels being acknowledged and the son who has always behaved in a difficult way. She even feels a bit jealous of both of them, although their bonding and Ruma's isolation is not a gender division, their liaison not necessarily a male bonding in the way that Ruma and the mother's was a female alliance in the eyes of her father (40).

In the process of growing close to each other, Ruma's father and her son make some leaps in their use of languages—that is, English and Bengali. Their growing intimacy enables and causes them to cross the boundaries of their respective native languages of Bengali and English, to Ruma's astonishment. When she sees her father and son spending time together in the yard, she realizes that Akash, her son, has learned some Bengali vocabulary from her father, despite the fact that he has hardly ever been exposed to it. It is the mother tongue of Ruma's parents that she had never seriously considered learning at all, though her parents might have wanted to bequeath at least some of it to her and her brother. On the part of her parents, they never forced their children to learn it, either, the priority for their nuclear family having been material and social survival and, hopefully, prosperity in America.

Ruma might have viewed her marriage to a Euro-American as the culmination of a successful assimilation into mainstream American society, even at the risk of abandoning her Indian heritage; thus, as a parent in the mixed-race nuclear family she and Adam have formed, she has never considered making her son learn the language of her parents' origin. Here in the U.S., neither she nor her son, let alone her husband, has ever faced any practical need to learn it, not to mention use it. Her parents also

had sufficient command of English to function in American society and suburban daily life and to converse with their American-born daughter and son, son-in-law, and finally grandson. When Ruma and Adam met, he did not try to win her heart by showing an interest in Indian culture or Bengali language, because she acted, spoke, and dressed in an American way, never purposefully exhibiting her Bengali or Indian background. So he even Americanized her Bengali name, Ruma, either calling her “Rum” or misspelling her name as “Room” (24), possibly his way of wholly welcoming her into Euro-American society by affectionately calling her by a nickname simulating American English.

Shortly after her father’s arrival at their new house in Seattle and before he begins to form an intimacy with his mixed-race grandson, Ruma reads stories to the boy, and it is clear to readers that they are in English. In this way, both in her parent’s nuclear family as a daughter and in her mixed-race family as a mother, Ruma has always been distanced from Bengali culture and language, even if not on purpose. When she spots her son so rejoicingly and even correctly producing Bengali vocabulary corresponding to cues given by his grandfather in English, she is rendered speechless. Readers may also be surprised, because the section in which this linguistic incident takes place ends abruptly with Akash spontaneously and excitedly uttering yet another Bengali word, this time without any prompting: “‘And *neel!*’ Akash cried out, pointing to the sky” (45). Ruma is left just to marvel at what the development of the affection between grandfather and grandson has evoked linguistically from the boy, who is still small enough to be receptive to any language. Ruma’s father never either forced her and her brother to use the Bengali language or tried to teach them Bengali, possibly because of the resistance he might have anticipated from them or from his own concern about their need to fare well in American society. However, he can now afford to do away with the kind of reservations he felt in raising his children and in seeing them become so quickly Americanized. When he meets his three-year-old grandson, he feels free to playfully pass on some Bengali language and to engage the boy within the cultural realm of horticulture and Bengali heritage, unshackled from material and social needs and responsibilities. The bond between Ruma’s father and her son thereby being enhanced by their use of Bengali language alienates Ruma all the more, because she neither learned it from her parents nor has taught any of it to her son.

How, then, does she react to this new bond between her first-generation father and her third-generation son, as a member of the second generation in-between? She is suddenly lost in the chasm between two people close to her whose ages are far apart while she, as the daughter of one and the mother of the other, could have been closer to either of them than they are to each other. How does she deal with the bond that is consolidated by playing with the language which she could have easily accessed and possibly have even acquired in her younger days, if only she had been willing and tried? In retrospect, what prevented her from being exposed to it, learning it, or acquiring it? Was she not perceptive and open-minded enough, even though she may have been exposed to at least some of it? Will she now interfere to prevent her father and her son from growing so close that they could neglect her, the daughter of one and the mother of the other? Would it be possible for her to prevent their intimacy from developing further? And would it benefit anybody, including herself, even if she somehow managed to obstruct their relationship?

Just as in the aforementioned situation, in which she no longer bothers to correct her father's mistakes in the English language, Ruma's reaction to the unexpected linguistic bond between her father and her son is one of acquiescence rather than interference. She may instinctively sense that any attempt on her part to intercede will only be met with resistance, only to have the opposite of her desired effect, perhaps even making them cling more to each other against her. While Ruma reads stories to Akash in English, their native language, her father does likewise in his imperfect English, but Ruma quietly restrains herself from interfering. By the time in the story when her father and Akash are close to each other to the point of sharing the grandfather's native tongue from a place Akash has never been, the grandson insists on sleeping with the grandfather and having bedtime stories read by him, instead of his mother. So her father reads a classic American children's book by Dr. Seuss, in English that is somewhat flawed in Ruma's eyes—she could recite the book by heart non-stop with an immaculate American accent. "He read awkwardly, pausing between the sentences, his voice oddly animated as it was not in ordinary speech" (48). In this scene, Ruma has at least one legitimate reason to intervene—it is past the child's bedtime. Besides that, however, her father's English is not as perfectly American as hers. However, their growing closeness seems to transcend the practical need for the

child to acquire flawless American English in order to successfully merge into mainstream American society as he grows up into adulthood on American soil. Just as Ruma is now beginning to regret it, her son might regret having grown up without having learned or at least have been exposed to Indian language, culture, and customs. In a sense, her father is now providing her son with something she is not able to give him.

In this scene, what the father is being able to provide for Akash in place of Ruma is not simply Indian language and culture, which he can naturally do as a native of that culture; more importantly, he is also providing unreserved affection with abandon, which Ruma is failing to provide because she is overloaded and overwhelmed by the material demands of caring for the child, bearing another one, and doing the household chores all by herself in the absence of the husband in an unfamiliar setting. Thus, Ruma overlooks and even appreciates her father's awkward reading of the book in his Bengali accent; she even finds it touching her. In this way, his act even accomplishes what other resources such as videotapes and tapes recorded in American English could do to relieve an overloaded parent from constantly watching and tending to every need of her child.

Ruma has yet another potential reason to step in, an emotional one: her envy of the two, displaying her feelings as both a family member (a daughter/mother observing the growing bond between grandfather and grandchild), and a member of an immigrant family (a second-generation immigrant observing first- and third-generation members). However, the scene is pivotal in that Ruma makes a crucial decision to acquiesce and not interfere at all. "But she stopped herself, returning upstairs, briefly envious of her own son" (48). She does not step in to force her father to stop reading to Akash. Her choice of acquiescence here is finalized by her restraint from telling her father to turn out the light, letting the two of them doze off beside each other with the book lying open, with the light still on. The act of turning off the light and letting the room be filled with darkness will come to symbolize eternal severance in another scene in the story.

Further scrutiny of the following few sections reveals with even more poignancy that Ruma's isolation is intensified by her unfamiliarity with the language of her parents' origin. As has been explicated, by this part of the story, the distances between,

on the one hand, Ruma and her father and, on the other, Ruma and her son have both widened. In Ruma's view, the alienation she feels in her relationship with the father has become aggravated to the point where she ultimately feels rejected when she pleads with him to live with her family and he does not comply, as she had taken for granted that he would. For him to move in with her family is what would have been expected of her and her father anyway, according to Indian tradition. When he states clearly that he will not, she is taken aback and begins to cry, entreating him even more. He had always been demanding in her childhood and youth; now, however, in addition to being closer to her son in a way he has never been to her, he finally refuses to live with her family, though he continues to cultivate the bond with his grandson. On one of the days close to his departure, her father and Akash are together in the yard, he tending to the garden and Akash playing. He asks his grandson if he remembers what he taught him that morning. Akash surprisingly and obediently "recite[s] his numbers in Bengali from one to ten" (49). They further confirm their bond by way of the grandfather's native language, thereby excluding Ruma, who has extremely little knowledge of it.

Second Generation Facing the Ally of First Generation

By this point, it has grown to be a natural habit for the grandfather and grandson to sleep beside each other. Moreover, on one particular night, after putting Akash to sleep in his bed, he enacts what could be taken by Ruma as a final betrayal of his wife and daughter, especially the latter: he writes a postcard to his new female friend, Mrs. Bagchi. "He composed the letter in Bengali, an alphabet Ruma would not be able to decipher," though he writes the address and name in English (50). The entire narrative of "Unaccustomed Earth" until the penultimate section is fraught with the tension that the father suffers throughout, trying to hide his new developing relationship with Mrs. Bagchi. Thus, when he prepares the postcard, he finds it convenient that he can write in a language whose meaning Ruma has no clue to, although the content is rather plain and written matter-of-factly without any expression of passion except for one simple sentence about looking forward to his next trip to Europe when he will see Mrs. Bagchi again. He even mentions Ruma and Akash, without referring to Mrs. Bagchi or inquiring of her present condition, either. It has never been lost on him that Ruma

showed no interest in the language while growing up anyway; it pained his wife, but he and his wife had resigned themselves to it.

However, since this particular section is presented from the father's viewpoint, readers can appreciate the way the author layers the sense of isolation felt by more than one character, thus enabling them to come to a gradual and deeper grasp of the nature of, and reasons for, the isolation felt by each. And thus, in the final paragraph of this particular section, it is shown exactly why her father ultimately feels isolated. The paragraph unfolds layers of isolation, if not exactly betrayal, that can take place one after another in a family. The father is contemplating the probability that he will not be able to see his grandson grow into adulthood and that Akash also will eventually, claim independence from preceding generations, "shutting the door of his own room" (51), which, in turn, makes him remember sadly and vividly what his daughter and son had done. Ruma and her brother never showed an active interest in the Bengali language; his grandson Akash, however, has grown somewhat closer to him in part because of his childlike defiance against his mother, to the extent of picking up a little of his native language. However, even this new relationship with the grandson feels too ephemeral for him. He foresees that the way his grandson has learned a few words from him will probably never reach the level of real language acquisition, never surpassing the level of playfulness, as it is neither grounded on nor forced by necessity in American society.

Such thoughts are only intensified when he retrospectively has to admit that "he, too, had turned his back on his parents, by settling in America," though in his case, as a first-generation immigrant, he did not entirely forsake the language (51). When he looks at his grandson sleeping, he existentially realizes that the developing affection between him and Akash is already one-sided from his direction as a member of the older generation, the younger generation only focusing on physical survival. Even when the grandfather gently brushes Akash's hair and kisses him, the boy does not respond—nor does he expect it, not wanting to wake him up. So he turns off the light and lets the darkness take over, the second instance in the story in which turning off the light symbolizes resignation to final severance, as represented by darkness.

If the linguistic bond between Ruma's father and her son, formed by their fleeting and playful use of Bengali language, is only transient and frail as the father

melancholically ruminates before receding into the darkness, what influence does his use of the language in the postcard to Mrs. Bagchi have on familial ties? The author saves the answer to this question for the climactic scene of the novella. After Ruma's father leaves for Pennsylvania, her son becomes cranky again, badly missing the grandfather and not listening at all to her explanation that Adam, his father, is coming back that night. He goes out to the yard where he and his grandfather played, followed by Ruma. She is then surprised to spot a postcard "composed in Bengali and addressed in English" stuck into the area designated for Akash's use by her father, together with various other items such as pencils, sticks, and cards, all of which Akash pretends to water (58). When Ruma tries to force her son to tell her what the postcard is, asking him if Ruma's father gave it to him, he begins to cry, possibly because he feels that his mother is trying to break his ties with his grandfather. In his view, she purposely did not even tell him about his grandfather's departure, and even chides him about what she doesn't know they did together. She is even trying to take away one of the few keepsakes from his grandfather with which he is desperately trying to console himself, because he is being forced to accept that "Dadu" abruptly left without saying good-bye to him (57), as a part of some mysterious conspiracy.

All of this anguish and sulking on the part of her son naturally makes the situation rather difficult for Ruma even though her husband, Akash's father, is coming back that night. She not only is troubled by her son's attitude, but also finally realizes that her father has formed a relationship with another female so soon after her mother's death, which only adds to her difficulties. Whereas she may have at least some control over Akash, she never has had any notion that this new woman exists, let alone any right to interfere with the new developing relationship between her father and the woman. In addition to her father being so close to Akash, he has been forming one more relationship from which she is excluded, and he has even taken pains to conceal it from her all the while.

Her sense of alienation in this scene where she suddenly realizes that she is completely excluded from yet another close bond her father forms with another individual is also poignantly accentuated by the issue of language. In the earlier section narrated from her father's viewpoint, he is writing the postcard in Bengali, finding it very convenient to keep the contents from Ruma even if she accidentally

happens to see it before he safely mails it away, though he probably would have written it in that language anyway. He is presently finding his relationship with Mrs. Bagchi rather pleasant all the more because it is not an impassioned, committed one, his present preference being for a more casual companionship. Both his way of thinking at this stage of his life and that of Mrs. Bagchi are a synthesis of the American and Indian ways. They began their friendship as the only two people from a Bengali background in a cosmopolitan tour group in Europe, so confirming their commonality by using the Bengali language has seemed only natural for both of them. Meanwhile, they allow their relationship to remain at a level that does not require the colossal energy for beginning and building a new family. He has already completed the duty of going through that process, which is typically considered normal, and now feels exempted from it, the end of that phase of his life officially marked by his wife's death even if he did not wish for it. Mrs. Bagchi was exempted from Indian familial traditions much earlier in her life, likewise totally against her will, with the sudden death of a young husband she had married for love. She then escaped from her family's threats of remarriage by moving to America, where she has successfully established a very independent life. When Ruma's father comes to stay temporarily with Ruma's family, he brings gifts in accordance with both American and Indian customs, but upon returning to his solitary flat on the East Coast by choice, he does not buy anything to bring back to Mrs. Bagchi. He does not think of even a small something for his new female friend, although she would not expect or demand anything, either. The use of Bengali language in the postcard with the address and name in English symbolizes the lives of Ruma's father and Mrs. Bagchi characterized by the mixture of Indian and American locations and cultures. Neither of them has entirely abandoned Indian culture or their respective pasts. For instance, he even honors his deceased wife by planting hydrangeas, her favorite kind of flower, in the garden of the new house of his daughter and son-in-law; however, Mrs. Bagchi, who shares the experience of having lost an Indian spouse, would probably not have minded that at all.

When Ruma reproaches her son for having hoarded something enigmatically written in Bengali and for not telling her anything about it, then finally realizes that her father has also hidden something vital from her, she feels assailed by layer upon

layer of an intense sense of isolation. Her father, his new female friend of whom she has had no knowledge whatsoever, and even her son, are all suddenly unreachable, all of those barriers somehow connected to the Bengali language, even with her own son who was born and brought up in America. "Here, in a handful of sentences she could not even read" (58), she discovers what her father has been hiding from her and the surprising reason why he has not consented to move in with her and Adam in Seattle, adamantly insisting on being on his own in a small solitary flat in Pennsylvania.

The last section of the novella, narrated from Ruma's viewpoint, makes possible the interpretation that the entire story hinges on the theme of language among different generations of immigrants. While all of them have acquired American English and use it, the level depending on the material, cultural, and emotional needs of each generation, they also retain at least some of the language of their cultural origin. Even a second-generation immigrant such as Ruma, the female protagonist of this novella, who was born and brought up in America and who has perfect American English, eventually ends up facing the language she has neglected, even though she has at times scorned her father's deficiencies in English and heavy accent. Ruma is stunned to find the postcard her father deliberately wrote in Bengali so that she would not be able to understand at all, "staring at the Bengali letters her mother had once tried and failed to teach Ruma when she was a girl" (59). Her deceased mother, who was a native speaker of Bengali, would have immediately understood what is written there. What overwhelms Ruma in this very last scene is that by now, in the process of so naturally assimilating into American society and culture, she has entirely lost her knowledge of the Bengali language: even a single letter is now a cipher that shoves her away. It does not even occur to her that what her father wrote on it could be even more upsetting if she were able to understand it. Now the sheer weight of its linguistic inaccessibility is overwhelming to her, so much so that its force blocks "[h]er first impulse" "to shred it" (59), rendering her speechless and paralyzed, reducing her to simply staring at it, making the constant ache of missing her mother suddenly unbearably acute. All of a sudden she regrets that she did not take it seriously at all when her mother tried to teach her at least how to read the letters of the language. Suddenly she realizes how much such a nonchalant neglect of Bengali language and culture by her and her brother, innocent as it was, had saddened her mother. Shortly before her father leaves,

he reminisces about how he and his wife had felt about Ruma and her brother's total assimilation into American society and culture. "The more the children grew, the less they had seemed to resemble either parent—they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way" (emphasis added 54).

However, Ruma finally makes her second crucial act of acquiescence, the second pivotal scene in the story. Having been so overwhelmed by the sight of Bengali letters which only brings home to her that she has been excluded from another relationship between two people—i.e., between her father and somebody totally unfamiliar—she is unable to yield to the urge to tear up the postcard. In the wake of being unable to destroy it, two assumptions begin to dawn on her. First, she acknowledges that her father has at least paid respects to her mother, by planting her favorite flower in her daughter's new yard, although even Ruma knows that he had not married their mother for love and they did not always get along with each other—for example, their views on immigrating to America were vastly different. Although her father now has a new female friend, he still remembers his deceased wife. Ruma also gradually begins to conclude that any attempt on her part to interfere with the relationship between her father and his new female friend will only meet with resistance on his part and will only make him distance himself even more from her and her family, even at the risk of giving up his new bond with his grandson. Instead of tearing the postcard into pieces or thinking about telling her father that she has seen it and accusing him of seeing another woman so shortly after the mother's death, she not only refrains from shredding it, but smooths it and cleans the dirt off it, and even looks at the scenic view of Seattle on the other side. Then she finally puts a stamp on it and leaves it in the box to be mailed to her father's new female friend in Long Island, far away from where her father lives in Pennsylvania.

Will she tell him what she did over the phone later or the next time he comes to stay at their place? If not, will he ever guess that his daughter found it, affixed a stamp, and mailed it? Will he ever know that his second-generation daughter, who much earlier began to speak and appear too American and who had perfectly acquired American English as her native tongue with no Bengali accent whatsoever, was so awed by the Bengali letters that she can't imagine he has used it only for the convenience of hiding the content and his new relationship? Will Ruma, then, after

this acquiescence, accept his new relationship? Will she even begin to show interest in and study the Bengali language? How then, however, could the relationship between Ruma, Adam, and Akash be changed? If Ruma, Akash, her father, with the possible addition of Mrs. Bagchi, begin to form a little Bengali community united by their use of the Bengali language, even at Ruma's and Akash's rudimentary level, how would Adam and his relatives react? Would he also begin to show some interest in the Bengali culture and language, or would he begin to feel excluded at the hands of what he might take as a Bengali alliance among his wife, son, his father-in-law, and his new female partner, who are all related by their Bengali background (albeit as different generations of immigrants, his son being half-Caucasian and half-Indian)?

Awakening to Diaspora Identity

When readers trace Ruma's actions and their psychological ramifications, in all the details that the author lavishly provides, they discern patterns of transition and growth. As has been explicated, with this particular novella, such patterns are made clearer especially when the examination focuses on and combines (1) the feminist viewpoint, (2) an analysis of the issues facing second-generation immigrants in their relationships with previous and following generations and mainstream American culture, and (3) the issue of language. On a superficial level, Ruma may be seen as a frustrated, utterly isolated female who fails to connect with anybody in her familial web, let alone acquaintances outside the family. However, closely tracing how she reacts to the Bengali language, something new to her, but—at the same time—actually and ironically not entirely new for her, enables readers to see that the crux of the entire novella, in conclusion, is about transition, growth, and even awakening. All the frustrations and isolations are processes towards them. The dilemmas and antagonism Ruma is caught in function as doorways to her awakening.

The present paper concludes that "Unaccustomed Earth" is about the diasporic awakening of its second-generation female protagonist. Before she was stranded in her multi-faceted isolation in a new environment, she was close to becoming a total assimilationist, which might have been more comfortable than the condition and familial complexities she has fallen into. As has been thoroughly explicated, in addition to being physically overburdened with her pregnancy, caring for a three-year-

old and tending to household chores all by herself partly due to her husband's frequent business trips, she is suddenly overcome with an unprecedented sense of isolation. This is accelerated because of the unexpected bonds between other family members and the new relational development outside her two nuclear families. The present paper has already pointed out that, as a second-generation immigrant, she has now fallen into one chasm between a first-generation immigrant (her father) and her direct offspring (her son), and another between the two first-generation immigrants (her father and Mrs. Bagchi). It has also closely examined how language plays a vital part in complicating these relationships for her.

Finally, it seems more than appropriate to assert that the unstable psychological condition she has been trapped into is triggering her to be awakened from an assimilationist ideology into a more unsettling, but perhaps more enriching, diasporic identity, both unsettling and enriching because of its fluid nature. While referring to “stress and identity conflicts” that immigrants may experience in being exposed to and having to deal with two cultures, Brah refutes such negative aspects of bi-cultural and multicultural situations. Rather, she elucidates on and emphasizes the complexities of what is labeled as “culture clash” and points to its positive sides such as “cultural interaction and fusion,” “symbiosis,” “improvisation,” “innovation,” and “cultural synthesis and transformation” (40-41).

The present paper has closely traced exactly how linguistic issues influence each character and drive the second-generation female protagonist into a diasporic awakening to the significance of the language of origin of her first-generation parents. She begins to walk—out of blind neglect of, if not disrespect for, it—and seems about to venture into the sea of her new diaspora, leaving behind the assimilationist shore. Just as the sea symbolizes both liberation and danger for the female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, in Kate Chopin's classic, *The Awakening*, so does the new realm of diaspora for Ruma. In a sense, Ruma has always been on the shore of this sea, but has mostly turned her back to it, if not on purpose. In the last scene of “Unaccustomed Earth,” she finally faces it.

The beginning of the third section of this paper, on language, refutes the somewhat condescending observation by Minus that Lahiri does not pay as much attention to politics, religion, and language as she does to clothing and food, and asserts that this

judgment is not true. As a conclusion, as far as the title story of *Unaccustomed Earth* is concerned, Minus' observation on this point is not only untrue, but actually even unjust, contrary to what he says defensively. His review, however, made a timely appearance in *Sewanee Review* in the fall of 2008, shortly after the publication of Lahiri's collection in question in the same year, and does not fail to justly evaluate what he sees as the "universal appeal" of her work. He critiques Lahiri's fiction, saying that it reflects the most recent growth of globalization and that it honestly captures the repercussions of cultural interactions that are not always free from uncomfortable and at times distressing psychological consequences. He even points out that, in the worst cases, cultural consciousness could even be "violent" in the age of global mobilization. Both the literary work by Lahiri and the review of it by Minus in 2008 attempt to truthfully grasp the reality and complexity of what has been taking place since the turn of the latest century.

Once we interpret "Unaccustomed House" as a narration of the diasporic awakening of its Indian-American second-generation female protagonist, we can more effectually refute the contention by Minus that Lahiri focuses more on clothes and food, but not so much on politics, religion, and language. Once the protagonist is taken into the enlightened terrain of bicultural diaspora by way of being awakened from her assimilationist cocoon by the weight of the mother language of her father, it is probable that her cultural and social consciousness could awaken to the realms of politics and religion as well. Readers have already been shown such a possibility in "When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine" in Lahiri's first collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*. In this earlier story, Lilia, an eleven-year-old second-generation Indian-American girl, is swept into strong family concerns about the geopolitical turbulence in South Asia where their visitor, Mr. Pirzada, is from. Her first-generation parents and Mr. Pirzada form an alliance and are glued to the television every day to keep up with the latest violent circumstances there. Being an eleven-year-old schoolgirl, Lilia is a bit of an outsider here.

Lilia's geopolitical awareness of South Asia could be judged by critics as only "personal and incidental." However, she plays her role as an in-between—for instance, at school in exhibiting her keen interest in the geography and history of Asia and South Asia, though it is coldly brushed away as irrelevant by her Euro-American

schoolteacher. “Personal and incidental” though they may seem, such interests of second-generation immigrants should not simply be passed off as such. This kind of judgment seems as reversely narrow-minded as that of Lilia’s schoolteacher, especially in this mobile, global century. Rather, readers and critics should evaluate the potential of people in-between, such as second-generation immigrants, to be awakened to and even become active in politics, religion and various other social and cultural aspects of the countries of their origin as well as of the places of birth. They could take full advantage of their bicultural and multicultural identities as assets, not as defects. Their diasporic awakening directly implies the cultural mobilization and globalization it brings about, instead of drowning in a sea, albeit one of culturally chaotic turmoil.

1) Two articles in *MELUS* journal on Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* have been on the motif of food.

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The Awakening of a Second Generation Protagonist to Diaspora Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth"

Williams, Laura Anh. "Foodways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*."

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