

Women's Roles in Negotiating Diasporic Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Only Goodness*

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Abstract

Today diaspora becomes highlighted issue when people become parts of global world. The term of diaspore cannot be separated from old world/new world, past/present, or rooted/uprooted. In a diasporic position, people usually face a condition of in-betweenness, the situation between the homeland where they come from and that of the new land where they have to live today. By using Vertovec's ideas which suggests diaspora as type of consciousness, this paper intends to discuss women's roles in diasporic world experienced by the Asian-Indian female characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Only Goodness*. As one of the diasporic ethnic groups in the world, Asian Indian women encounter paradoxical nature, the situation in which they have to adapt to the new environment but on the other side they still maintain their old habits. Languages, beliefs, traditions, costumes, and foods become the apparatuses that the women use as the negotiation tools between old world and new world. By focusing on these women's roles, this paper depicts how these female characters still maintain the Indian values yet on the occasion also adopt the American's. On each generation, the in-betweenness situation is different. The efforts of maintaining old world tradition may react the resistance from the latter generation. However, in both short stories, Lahiri reveals the importance of maintaining the old world. In her ways, she appreciates the maintaining old world values among the Americans'.

Keywords : diaspora, identity, old world, new world

A. Background

Diaspora studies now is running into the wider meaning, not only confined to the movement of people but it comes into many definitions. As one of fields of study in postcolonial, diaspora emerges in other disciplines, including literature. Some writers who experienced in diasporic life create their works of literature based on their experience. Jhumpa Lahiri, one of Indian-American writers, created one of her masterpieces, *Unaccustomed Earth*, as collection of her short story. Her masterpiece, *Interpreter of Maladies* which led her to receive 2000 Pulitzer Price for fiction. Born in London as daughter of Asian Indian immigrant, Lahiri passes through her personal experiences in most of her works, especially on her works, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Only Goodness*.

B. Diaspora

The word 'diaspora' comes from the Greek—*dia*, which means through, and *speirein* which means 'to scatter'. According to Webster's Dictionary it refers to 'dispersion from, therefore it concerns *as a notion of a center, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs* (Brah, 1996: 178). It was used to describe the Jews dispersion after Babylonian exile, the Greek, and Armenian experiences. Today, it has wider meaning which the focus is on the 'dispersion' in various forms such as expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, and ethnic community (Tololian in Clifford, 1994: 303)

Cohen then proposes five typologies of diaspora, namely those of victim, labor, trade, imperial, and cultural. Victim diaspora can be seen in the examples of Jews, African, and Armenian. The labor one is usually attached to Asian Indian; trading diaspora is exemplified in Chinese and Lebanese; the British represents imperial diaspora, and Caribbean exemplifies cultural diaspora. However, these boundaries are not rigid, it is flexible, and some ethnic group may be categorized into two or more types of diaspora (Bhatia, 2007:78).

Brah discusses diaspora as about going somewhere and putting down roots (2007: 79). Diaspora is not only confined simply on who travels, but it also scrutinizes on when, how, and under what circumstances. Socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions influence the one's journey which that later determines the formation of diaspora (Brah, 1996: 179).

Vertovec (1999) proposes three definitions of diaspora, namely: 1) diaspora as social form; 2) diaspora as type of consciousness; and 3) diaspora as mode of cultural production. This paper discusses diaspora as the type of consciousness as proposed by Steven Vertovec. This second type evolves into 'here' and 'there', 'past' and 'present', old and new, and other forms of dualism (Gilroy qtd.in Vertovec 1999:8). Old world refers to the homeland, the place where people originate. It is usually identified with 'the past', where people used to conduct their old traditions, customs, and other elements of culture which are different from those of they experienced at present. New world signifies the land where people live nowadays, connected to what is called as 'the present'. Both old world and new world are important, hence one cannot choose one of them. This may lead into double consciousness, a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois. New world, inevitably is the land where one must survive, therefore he must adapt to the land, the new environment including its all social system. Old world becomes the land of nostalgia, where people may be remembering their traditions and customs and even try to reinvent old land in the new land. The diaspora cultures then mediate between the two, it passes through the process of negotiation between past and present, between old and new world.

C. Women's Roles as Carriers of Culture

Asian Indian diaspora in the United States began in the turn of twentieth century which was filled with mostly young farmers and soldiers. They were mostly Punjab Sikh who worked in railroads, lumbering, and agriculture industries. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act changed the Asian Indian's pattern of immigration. Since that time, the immigrants who came to the US were mostly skilled labors, such as medical doctors, engineers, scientists, university professors, and doctoral and postdoctoral students. Today, Asian Indian becomes one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the US and their existences are recognized throughout the country ((Bhatia, 2007: 14).

Migration and settlement process in diaspora involves the engagement of both men and women. Gendered idea on diaspora and how values in old and new world values are executed

emerged as the reality that ...”*women become both the creators of the ties that bind as well as the carriers of culture*” (Kalra, Kalthon, and Hutynuk, 2005:52). One aspect of formation in diaspora is on gender division when women act as the vessels of culture (2005: 52). Hence, it is women who play important roles in the process of diaspora, whether it is negotiating, transforming, or contesting.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* tells about the stories of Indian family living in the US. Ruma, the main character, a thirty-eight year Asian Indian woman who married to Adam, an American man and living in Seattle, one day is visited by her father who lives in Pennsylvania. The story then recalls the recollection of Ruma about her family especially of her mother who died of heart failure on gallstone surgery. After having her own family and losing her mother, Ruma realizes the importance of a mother’s presence. Ruma’s mother, as other Asian Indian immigrants went to the US for the sake of her marriage to Ruma’s father and spent the life by taking care of family. In this case, Ruma’s mother conducts negotiation process in the new world by living in the US, subjugates to the laws of the country and in some points follows the customs of the US life. In the second story, *Only Goodness*, Lahiri tells about an Asian Indian family which later is ruined because of alcohol, the object coming from new world. The parents’ roles especially mother’s is regarded as important as preserving the old world’s values though she also keeps doing negotiation in her life.

For the mother’s women characters in both short stories, old world is not only a place for nostalgia and offer certain comfort, but it is the world in which they must pass through generations. As their function as child rearing, the Asian Indian mothers realizes that it is in their hands that the old world values can be preserved. Hence they try to reinvent the old world in the new world.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, it is described how Ruma’s mother plays a lot in preserving the Indian values through many ways. She is described wearing sari, having more than two hundred saris, and treating the saris carefully. She also teaches Ruma Bengali stricter than what her father does. *Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. But her father didn’t mind.* (Lahiri, 2008: 12). Even the Bengali language is also spread to the third generation, to Ruma’s son, Akash. Her mother sings songs to Akash and taught him Bengali nursery rhymes when Akash was still a baby (2008:6).

During more than 30 years of Asian Indian’s presence in the US, this ethnic group has tried to maintain the Indian culture as far as they have been able. The involvement on the new world too deeply even is regarded as a threat. *Now they face their greatest threat of cultural erasure at the hands of their relatively more “Americanized” children* (Dasgupta, 1998: 954). Ruma’s mother then becomes sad seeing the fact that the daughter prefers pants and skirts to saris; *that there would be no one to whom to pass on her things* (Lahiri, 2008: 17). The mother’s fear for not having the children to pass on the saris can be identified with the fear of losing the Indian values from her family. Ruma’s mother feels that she cannot make the daughter to wear saris but on the other side she cannot forbid Ruma from wearing pants and skirts, something that the mothers regards as apparatuses from new world.

In *Only Goodness*, as same as Ruma’s mother, the mother of Sudha, the main character, also plays important roles in transferring the Indian values. She wears sari, cooks Indian foods and prevents her children from doing some habits coming from the new world which is not in line with the values from old world. Sudha’s mother does not agree with the drinking habits that the Americans usually do, the western values that Americans have are not suit to the Asian Indian values. *“That’s the problem with this country,” her mother said. “Too many freedom, too much*

having fun. When we were young, life wasn't always about fun. “ (Lahiri, 2008:143).

In the story, it is depicted that the danger of alcohol destroys the family life : Rahul's dismissal from school that then leads him not to have prospective future, Rahul's mischief in Sudha's wedding party, Rahul's going out of family by stealing his mother's jewels, and Rahul's attitude that almost endangers Sudha's baby. The cumulative point is that all of the aspects of life in the family is destroyed. Sudha's life is then affected not only endangers the family but also the losing of her husband's trust.

Asian Indian people uphold highly the education. Success is measured on how they can accomplish study, how they can make money from prominent workplaces, and how they choose the wives or husbands. Rahul's drop out of school becomes an embarrassing black point in Sudha's parent's face. Returning to parents' home and doing some trivial things like managing a laundromat brings fear in his parents. “...now they lived in fear of the day someone they knew would see their son weighing sacks of dirty clothes on a scale. Other Bengalis gossiped about him and prayed their own children would not ruin their lives in the same way” (Lahiri, 2008:151).

As a minority, hard working is indispensable for Asian Indian values. Creating a new generation that make them proud is above all and then it becomes the parents' duties. Hence it is also the role of parents, especially mother who must prevent their children from anything decaying their future.

And so he became what all parents feared, a blot, a failure, someone who was not contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children were making across the country, as surgeons or attorneys or scientists, or writing articles for the front page of The New York Times (Lahiri, 2008: 151).

The maintaining cultures of old world may lead into resistance from the second generation, to whom the values are transferred as the ties to old world is not as tight as that to new world. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, as first generation of Indian immigrants to the US, Ruma's mother reminds her for not marrying Adam, an American man due to the fear of Adam's abandonment for finding an American girl. At first, Ruma breaks the mother's heart by keeping marrying Adam, the act that can be categorized as an act of resistance. For years, finally the negotiation comes to the mother and she makes negotiation between the old and new world, accepting presence of Adam and Ruma's son, Akash.

In *Only Goodness*, resistance of Sudha comes heavily. The influence from new world come heavier than that from old world. It is told that Sudha has to wait until entering college to disobey her parents. She starts drinking, and even asks Rahul to follow her. Sudha's marriage to Roger, a British widower is part of the acts of resistance since the parents actually would like Asian Indian to be their son-in-law. However, through negotiation process, the parents then accept the marriage.

In the end of the story, Lahiri tries to reveal the importance of keeping Asian Indian values by depicting the ruin of Rahul's life because of alcohol. All the aspects of Rahul's life is ruined, not only directly to Rahul but also to Sudha and the parents. The embarrassing expression of parents and Sudha's family predicament exemplify the situation caused by alcohol. Lahiri also elaborates Sudha's guilty feeling which is deeply embedded since she is the person who introduces Rahul with alcohol, the values from new world which she think it good but finally ruins her family.

D. Conclusion

Women play important roles in diaporic experience. In both stories, Jhumpa Lahiri reveals the negotiation process when diasporic people are faced the in betweenness situation. Both old and new world are important since the new world is the world where people must adapt to new environment and inevitably run from some social structures of it. While old world also becomes an energy since people may come to nostalgia where they come from. Negotiation processes among the characters are running fluid and differently. It is based on their historical experience, belief, education, and to what extent modernity comes to them. Immigrants rather select, shift, and modify (Buriel in Jain and Belsky, 1997) to adapt to the environment. It is the women who play a lot in the negotiation process and select values that may not be suit to old world.

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