

**"To be or not to be": Addressing the dilemma among the diasporic subjects in  
Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*****Partha Debnath**

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**Abstract**

Indian diasporic authors have been playing a major role in establishing the diasporic essence using their oeuvre and Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most eminent names among them. Lahiri has been successfully portraying the situations faced by the diasporic subjects throughout their lives. One of the major issues faced by the diasporic subjects is the dilemma. The dilemma faced by the subjects haunts them throughout their life in every aspect of their lives.

This paper deals with the diasporic dilemma faced by the characters in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*. Lahiri, being a strong Indian diasporic writer, provides a very minute layout of the diasporic sense of dilemma using the characters in this collection. Ruma, Aparna, Usha, Amit, Sudha, Rahul, Kaushik or Hema, all face the constant dilemma of to be or not to be in the state where they are. And eventually, they come up with the truce between their past and present, their root and foreign culture and traditions to build a better future. A future where the trauma of this dilemma of being diaspora will be less effective. A future where memory and nostalgia will not be only producing trauma and horror of rootlessness and liminal but they will produce the elixir of hope through the cultural and traditional assimilation.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, dilemma, trauma, consciousness, identity

Diaspora, a very popular term these days, has been derived from the Greek word which means to be scattered. For the last five decades, the concept of diaspora has gone under several transformations though the core idea remains the same. It refers to the idea of the movement of people from their homeland to other foreign lands. Though the concept is as old as the movement of Jewish people from their homeland Jerusalem after its fall in 6th BCE, the consequence can still be experienced, not of the ancient Jewish mass movement, but of the movements of people around the world happening for the last couple of centuries due to various reasons, whether those are self-motivated actions or forced upon them by the authority.

And, for the last five to six decades the concept of diaspora has emerged as one of the most talked-about topics under the academic lens for various reasons. Among those many reasons, one of the most internalised issues faced by the diaspora is the dilemma. This concept of dilemma can be found lurking under several surfaces among the diasporic subjects. It remains to be found imprinted or as a part of the psyche of the diasporic people.

For whatever reasons, the diasporic subjects have to leave their country for, the conflict of identity they bear or conflict of their existential whereabouts, found to have remained with them forever. Their idea of in-betweenness or not belonging anywhere properly gives birth to a sense of guilt. The guilt of not being able to loyal and consistent with their roots. The sense of guilt originates among them the overprotectiveness regarding their roots. And this overprotectiveness brings in the idea of dilemma. The dilemma of doing things on the foreign lands, that according to the diasporic subjects may be disrespectful to their roots.

This sense of dilemma is recurrent in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most renowned diasporic writers and Pulitzer prize winner for her *The Namesake*. Lahiri's writing has been found to have detailed descriptions of Indian culture and tradition through her diasporic Indian characters. The crisis in terms of culture, tradition and identity is minutely conveyed through Lahiri's pen and in *Unaccustomed Earth* we find the characters are constantly under some kinds of dilemma which thwarts their psychological harmony thus creating complications in their relationships with others. The shadow of being uprooted from their culture and traditions casts in their lives constantly.

The first story or the title story talks about Ruma, a daughter, a wife and a mother who finds herself under the constant dilemma on how to perform her responsibilities to her family. This dilemma is internalised into her from her childhood days. Being a second-generation diaspora she had to undergo constant criticism regarding by her late mother regarding her practices like cooking or choosing her attire. Her late mother remains as a person to whom she constantly compares herself. From cooking proper Indian foods to taking care of the family, Ruma always finds herself falling short of her mother. The dilemma of how to do things like her mother thus not disrespecting her roots keeps chasing her.

After her mother's death, her father keeps travelling around Europe alone, occasionally sending a postcard to Ruma. But, in her postcards, he never mentions anything about Ruma's husband Adam or son Akash. Unlike her mother, her father writes very little. Ruma's connection with her father is restricted and ambiguous. Her connection with her mother was strong and decisive. Her mother was the connection between her and the Indian roots of tradition and culture. Her constant self-assessment comes from the dilemma. The dilemma that she has to face

as a second-generation diaspora. The dilemma is magnified by the trauma of her mother's death. The qualities like persistence, tolerance and hard work that her mother possessed, lacks in her. The qualities which always reminds her of her Indian root. Ruma feels constantly under pressure that lacking these qualities hindering her to perform her duties and responsibilities in a full fathom. Though she wants to acquire these qualities of her mother, she is not sure whether she can achieve them or not. The habits she has internalised on foreign land remains dominant over the qualities her mother wanted her to imbibe. And after the demise of her mother, Ruma's dilemma whether she can be a good and responsible daughter, wife and mother, turns out to be surfacing.

When Ruma's father showed his interest to visit her newly bought house she becomes alert. Informing her husband Adam about this, Adam says that it will be helpful for her as he will be away for his office work. But Ruma disagrees as she remembers:

It was her mother who would have been the helpful one, taking over the kitchen, singing songs to Akash and teaching him Bengali nursery rhymes, throwing loads of laundry into the machine. Ruma had never spent a week alone with her father. When her parents visited her in Brooklyn, after Akash was born, her father claimed an armchair in the living room, quietly combing through the Times, occasionally tucking a finger under the baby's chin but behaving as if he were waiting for the time to pass. (6)

Ruma suffers a patch of dilemma again. Being of Indian descent she is well aware of Indian culture, where staying with all the members of the family is a tradition. But being a second-generation diaspora she is imbibed with the culture of the USA. To her, the possibility of her father staying with her is a kind of a nightmare. Though she is torn between her Indian heritage

and American values. She thinks: "She knew her father did not need taking care of, and yet this very fact caused her to feel guilty; in India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her." (6) But she gets afraid.

Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child that would come in January, conceived just before the move. She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare. Still, not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse. It was a dilemma Adam didn't understand. (7)

Ruma, who had a strong connection with her mother, admires the qualities her mother had and understands that she doesn't have those qualities but at the same time, she doesn't want to be like her mother. Though she feels bad about this situation, she doesn't want to find a solution her mother would have liked her to find out. And indeed Adam doesn't understand this dilemma. It is a dilemma, particularly of the diasporic subjects. Thus she knows in her heart that she lies every time to her father when she says over the telephone, "You're always welcome here, Baba," (4)

Ruma's father feels free after his wife's death. Ruma always thinks that the relationship between her parents was full of duties and responsibilities, but her father was never a good husband. Now he travels extensively around Europe and remembers the trips they had to make to India when his parents were alive.

No matter how they went, those trips to India were always epic, and he still recalled the anxiety they provoked in him, having to pack so much luggage and getting it all to the

airport, keeping documents in order and ferrying his family safely so many thousands of miles. But his wife had lived for these journeys, and until both his parents died, a part of him lived for them, too. And so they'd gone in spite of the expense, in spite of the sadness and shame he felt each time he returned to Calcutta, in spite of the fact that the older his children grew, the less they wanted to go. (8)

But his travels these days are fascinated as he has developed a new friendship with Mrs Bagchi. He likes to keep his new endeavour a secret as he is under the dilemma of whether his daughter will like it or not for she had a strong bonding with her mother. After he reaches Ruma's house, he grows a strong bonding with his grandson Akash who is hardly three and has developed all the American traits. But, his grandfather's Indian language fascinates him and also he enjoys her grandfather's company. Ruma, who had the suspicion whether her father will be indifferent to her son, finds out to her surprise that his father and her son became very fond of each other. Eventually, Ruma finds an end in her dilemma regarding the relationship between her and her father. Her restrictions on her father dissolve to some extent. But, soon after her father left, she finds the postcard her father wrote to Mrs Bagchi and kept hiding. Ruma becomes aware of her father's newly found love and again enters the state of dilemma whether it should be posted or not. But, finally, she posts the letter to the address mentioned.

Ruma's late mother remained in the dilemma of whether her children would know and follow the Indian tradition in terms of lifestyle and perspective. Ruma's father remained in the dilemma of being in the foreign land when his part lived with his parents in India. Ruma constantly remains in the dilemma of whether she is capable of taking care of her family like her

mother used to do. To her, her mother was the source of Indian tradition she can never go back again.

The second story "Hell-Heaven" records the dilemma of a Bengali housewife based in London. The narrator Usha talks about her mother Aparna who falls in love with a man called Pranab from Calcutta, who often visited their home. Their encounter eventually turns out to be a one-sided love for Aparna. Pranab gets married to an American called Deborah. Aparna remains in the dilemma as her relationship with her husband Shyamal was not very engaging. She finds Pranab attractive and Pranab also entertains her in every possible way. Aparna's love for Pranab is also related to their diasporic identity. Aparna never believes that any foreign girl can be as loyal as any Indian, like her. Thus her dilemma regarding the survival of the conjugal life of Pranab and Deborah resurfaces again and again.

Aparna finds herself on the verge of suicide for the dilemma was far too deafening for her. The dilemma of foreign tradition winning over her Indian tradition compels her to think about suicide which can be emancipation for her out of this painful situation. But, eventually, she comes around. Her relationship with her daughter Usha, the narrator of the story begins to heal:

My mother and I had also made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well. Slowly, she accepted that I dated one American man, and then another, and then yet another, that I slept with them, and even that I lived with one though we were not married. She welcomed my boyfriends into our home and when things didn't work out she told me I would find someone better. (77)

This is not only a truce for Aparna but Usha as well for she also learns to keep the balance of both the culture she inherited.

Amit, the protagonist in the third story, "A Choice of Accommodation", is an Indian man who has been sent to the boarding school by his parents. His sense of being alienated from his parents and thus culture and tradition haunts him still. His parents never approved him for marrying an American instead of an Indian woman. "His parents had not even met her. He was aware of what an insult it was to them. For all their liberal Western ways he knew they wanted him to marry a Bengali girl, raised and educated as he had been." (101)

Amit's dilemma being a diaspora heightened not only by his parents but also his wife Megan. Amit's concern for their daughters is termed as overreaction sometimes by Megan. But, this overprotectiveness has been generated by the trauma of the dilemma he underwent not only as an Indian but also as a son. For Amit, the sense of being alone remains with him even after marrying Megan and having two daughters. His alienation from his parents, his tradition and finally himself gives birth to the diasporic dilemma of faith and identity.

The fourth story, "Only Goodness" deals with the dilemma of a Bengali couple regarding their traditional Indian culture and the foreign cultural traits their children have internalised. Sudha and Rahul, two siblings are constantly facing rough patches in the foreign land as their parents fail to heal the problems. Sudha is a careerist girl and focused on her career where her brother Rahul becomes an alcoholic. Their parents find it a very shaming situation as this becomes the topic of gossip among their relatives and know circles.

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 wiring articles for the front page of The New York Times. (143)



They became doubtful regarding Rahul's future. Their dilemma lies in the traditional and cultural layers regarding the habit their son has developed, which is very much against the root of their homeland. This dilemma forced them to stay in alignment with Sudha's plans of getting married the way she wanted and to whom.

They accepted that she and Roger planned to have a registry wedding in London, that they were willing to have only a reception in Massachusetts, that Roger had been previously married, that he and Sudha had a fourteen-year gap. They approved of his academic qualifications, his ability, thanks to his wisely invested inheritance, to buy a house for himself and Sudha in Kilburn. It helped that he'd been born in India, that he was English and not American, drinking tea, not coffee, and saying "zed" not "zee", superficial things that allowed her parents to relate to him. (146)

Rahul has a dispute with his father at his sister's wedding party and eventually, he leaves the house. After a year and a half when he gets back in touch with his sister, Sudha's son Neel is born and his parents settled back in India. Rahul says he leaves with his girlfriend now and also in rehabilitation and in the process of getting rid of his drinking habits. Rahul asks and learns that Neel called his grandparents "Dadu and Dadi" (153). He also learns about Neel's first rice ceremony that happened in Indian tradition. Rahul's dilemma remains as being in a foreign land and married to a native man, whether Sudha was able to follow the traditions and rituals of India.

But, Rahul's drinking notion resurfaces and one day when Sudha and Roger went on a movie on Rahul's insist, Rahul leaves Neel behind in a bathtub and dozes off with too much alcohol. Sudha and Roger argue over this situation and Sudha says that she lied to him regarding the drinking habit of her brother. Roger gets infuriated and stops talking to her.

Sudha, in absence of their parents, tries to be family to her brother Rahul he seeks in the foreign land. Her dilemma whether she is responsible to some extent for this outcome of her brother forces her to be the family Rahul is missing. Her double-consciousness causes the dilemma in her. A double-consciousness often felt by the diasporic subjects in the foreign lands. Sudha, from the time of her relationship with Roger, tries to see her through his eyes. Thus she hides Rahul's drinking habits from Roger, because that may harm her existence which lies in her marriage with a native man.

In "Hema and Kaushik", the dilemma remains to be the constant effect in their relationship. Being family friends Hema and Kaushik encounter several times over the period at various stages of their life. Hema and Kaushik, having feelings for each other fail to stay together for various reasons. After the death of Kaushik's mother, when his father marries again, Kaushik remains under the constant dilemma of recognising his new mother as his own, as he continuously compares her with her dead mother, whom he finds beautiful and eligible in every way. This dilemma forces him to become a wanderer. On the other hand, unsuccessful relationships in which Hema got involved forced her into the dilemma of being in any more relationships. And thus she eventually agrees to marry an unknown man called Navin who lives in Calcutta. But, her encounter with Kaushik once again in Italy develops into a passionate and intimate relationship. Kaushik asks Hema not to marry Navin. But, Hema once again faces the dilemma as Kaushik wants Hema to come with him to Hong Kong where Kaushik is supposed to settle for a desk job but Navin is ready to come to Hema after marriage. But, Kaushik dies soon after in a natural calamity leaving Hema no choice to clarify the dilemma.

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward W Said comments on the suffering of exile. “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted.... The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever”. (Said ch. 17) Thus Hema's dilemma dominates over her feelings for Kaushik. She being a diaspora have a strong sense of home and unlike Kaushik, who is compelled to leave his house, doesn't want to roam around again and thus Navin, though unknown, who was ready to come over to her place to stay with her after the marriage gives her solace.

The characters undergo continuous dilemmas being diaspora and their fight to come out free becomes their constant companion. Their dilemma brings forth the underlying psychological issues diasporic subjects battle through their entire life. The pendulum of "To be or not to be", keeps dangling in their minds. This gives birth to various dilemmas like an identity crisis, inferiority complex, double-consciousness and so on.

The sense of “ To be...” in a foreign land is a compelling factor as they have to move in for various reasons. They are uprooted from their homeland and cannot get back and stay as they used to, grows the dilemma regarding their actual home among the diasporic subjects. The left out cultural and traditional practices remains to be their only thing to cling to which keeps them close to their roots. The dilemma of being assimilated with the newly found culture and tradition keeps them aloof from being one of them as well.

Thus, Ruma finds the dilemma to be like her mother, Aparna finds herself in dilemma to be in the position when an American girl wins over Pranab. Amit is tired of being alienated from

his childhood and even after his marriage and having two children, remains in the dilemma of whether he will ever be free from his loneliness. Sudha lives with the dilemma of whether she will be able to bring together her parents, her brother and her husband and son without losing her existence that is the marriage to Roger. For Kaushik, the dilemma lies in his and his mother's importance to his father and thus he becomes a wanderer and for Hema, the dilemma remains whether she choose her home over her husband or the other way around.

But, for the diasporic subjects is never possible to get back to their roots as they were and thus "...not to be" is not an option for them. Their existence in the liminal space is always stained with a dilemma. This dilemma keeps the diasporic subject move back and forth between their root and foreign culture and tradition. This dilemma makes them nostalgic and the nostalgia generates the dilemma in them whether they can protect their root through tradition and culture or not.

Lahiri, being a strong Indian diasporic writer, provides a very minute layout of the diasporic sense of dilemma using the characters in this collection. Ruma, Aparna, Usha, Amit, Sudha, Rahul, Kaushik or Hema, all face the constant dilemma of to be or not to be in the state where they are. And eventually, they come up with the truce between their past and present, their root and foreign culture and traditions to build a better future. A future where the trauma of this dilemma of being diaspora will be less effective. A future where memory and nostalgia will not be only producing trauma and horror of rootlessness and liminal but they will produce the elixir of hope through the cultural and traditional assimilation.

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