

**Presence in Absence: Eulogizing mother country through motherhood in
Jhumpa Lahiri's narratives 'Unaccustomed Earth'
and 'Hema and Kaushik'**

V. Meenakshi, Ph.D. Scholar,
Reva University, Bangalore, India.

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories and novels abound mainly on all the aspects of the diasporic characteristics namely identity, culture, language, race which in turn leads to so many allied issues in the lives of the diasporas. Jhumpa has taken her readers to an extent that apart from rapid changes taking place in the cultural front; there is an underlying national identity which captures the eyes of the western readers. She has added a zing by praising her country of origin, India in some of her narratives. The technique she has employed is through motherhood- a metaphorical allusion to mother country.

Key Words:- Diasporic characteristics, national identity, zing, metaphoric allusion.

Introduction

It is universal practice to denote any country as 'she' in praise of mother and motherhood. Jhumpa has given such a perspective in her second short collection 'Unaccustomed Earth' in some of her narratives. Her protagonists Ruma in the title story and Kaushik in the trilogy 'Hema and Kaushik' feel the absence of their departed mothers to a great extent. While Ruma's mother is totally absent in the narrative due to her demise, kaushik's mother is alive in one part of the narrative but she departs shortly due to her terminal disease. This article would highlight how both Ruma and Kaushik miss their absent mothers throughout the narrative.

Recalling the absent mother in 'Unaccustomed Earth'

In the presence of her father, now a widower, Ruma deeply longs for her dead mother now and then. Her father's formal behaviour as though he is a somebody makes her compare her mother's informal nature. Her father's phone calls only on Sunday afternoons and informing his arrival in Seattle immediately brings her mother in Ruma's mind's eye in the following way: "We're coming to see you in July." (Lahiri *Unaccustomed Earth* 3)

Ruma's mother feels free with her and doesn't ask whether it is convenient time is the inference. She takes a right with her daughter and feels free to visit at any time.

Expecting a second child is Ruma's predicament throughout the narrative. Her first child Akash is three, a very demanding child that burdens Ruma. Most of the time she lives alone as Adam, her husband keeps touring not able to give a helping hand to baby-sit. His work demands leaves Ruma attend to Akash with no help. Again, this brings her mother to Ruma's mind's eye who has always been shouldering the family burden. Ruma compares her position with that of her mother's. Jhumpa puts it in the following way: "Growing up, her mother's example- moving to a foreign for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household- had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now." (Lahiri *Unaccustomed Earth* 11)

In her trail of thoughts Ruma recalls her mother's resistance when she decides to marry Adam but by and by, she reconciles to the idea of accepting and even befriending Adam. She even puts him in the place of her son Rumi who marries an American girl and leaves home. Ruma cherishes safeguarding her mother's sarees though she wears western dress, at the back of her closet. Her lingering memories of her mother languishing that she isn't able to pass on her sarees to the next generation as per tradition. Though Ruma has a touch of the Indian tradition at heart she being a product of America feels at home in her western attire. In her

mother's death Ruma felt closer to her. To put it in Jhumpa's words, "There were times Ruma felt closer to her mother in death than she had in life, an intimacy born simply of thinking of her so often, of missing her But knew that this was an illusion, a mirage, and that the distance between them was now infinite, unyielding".(Lahiri *Unaccustomed Earth* 27)

The powerful terms like 'infinite' and 'unyielding' denote the inevitability of Ruma's mother's death and the void it has created in her life.

Absent mother and haunting memories

In the trilogy 'Hema and Kaushik' there is a recurrence of the dead mother brought alive by way of the protagonist, Kaushik. The first part of the trilogy 'Once in a Lifetime' Kaushik's mother is alive but with the deadline of her terminal disease. But in the second part 'Year's End' his mother is dead and in the due course his father marries again to a widow from Calcutta. Kaushik is mighty upset on his father's decision but is helpless; he refuses to accept his step mother and his step sisters.

Kaushik undergoes a lot of psychological trauma in the bargain and even shouts at his step sisters when they stealthily look at the hidden photographs of his dead mother. He even goes to the extent of being rude to his step sisters in the following manner: "How much prettier and more sophisticated than yours. Your mother is nothing in comparison. Just a servant to wash my father's clothes and cook his meals. That's the only reason she's here, the only reason both of you are here."(Lahiri *Unaccustomed Earth* 186-187) Such was his depth of attachment for his mother; also his memories haunt him deeply. Kaushik is unable to reconcile the loss of his dead mother.

In the third part of the trilogy, 'Going Ashore' Kaushik drifts away from home and family to move around from place to place as a journalist photographer. He is totally shattered lost in his brooding thoughts of his dead mother and possessed by those haunting memories. To a

certain extent he loses his mental balance, buries his mother's photographs in the seashore sand; perhaps symbolic of burying his mother's haunting memories. Jhumpa changes the tone of the narrative from meditative to elegiac through the character Kaushik. She highlights the sentiment of motherhood and in turn her ancestral mother country, India in the eyes of the western readers.

Conclusion

In both the narratives the main focus is on the mothers of the characters Ruma and Kaushik. In the case of Ruma her father acts as a foil to her dead mother, not showing much attachment towards his daughter. His wander-lust takes over after his wife's demise. He feels a sense of freedom in his wife's death in being mobile and a globe-trotter. There is a total contrast brought in the attitudes of Ruma's father and mother. Jhumpa puts Indian motherhood in a pedestal and glorifies the role of a mother through the eyes of Ruma.

In the trilogy, 'Hema and Kaushik' the tone is intensified from that of meditative to that of elegiac thus eulogizing motherhood to a greater extent. The protagonist, Kaushik deeply wishes his mother to be buried rather than burned though a Hindu. When his father gets married to Chitra, a widow with two daughters; it was next to impossible to accept them. This in turn becomes animosity, he even rants his step-sisters when they stealthily see his mother's photographs. Kaushik is portrayed as one being possessed by his mother's spirits. Kaushik starts wandering around as a vagabond with no purpose or hold in his life.

In the words of Jhumpa Lahiri 'On motherhood', "I have two young children, and I will say that motherhood is its own peak, just like in the process of writing: one climbs and is continuously moving with each book. Becoming a mother is the greatest connection I've ever felt to being spiritual."

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