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Research Article:

Two Mothers: A Study of Motherhood, Domicile and  
Memory in Select Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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## Two Mothers: A Study of Motherhood, Domicile and Memory in Select Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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And though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road she knows that this is home nevertheless—the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her, needing to be packed up, given away, thrown out bit by bit.

—Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*

The above quotation from Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) aptly conjures up the diasporic condition of an immigrant mother Ashima Ganguly and the spatial and cultural negotiations she has done for the sake her family far away from her homeland. Very interestingly, Ashima's spatial dilemma and consequent compromises represent the collective attitude of Ruma in her title short story "Unaccustomed Earth." Incidentally, the protagonists in these texts are housewives. Both of them are somehow alienated from their husbands and struggle to negotiate their conflicting diasporic experiences, intrinsically associated with their identity crises, moulded and shaped by their experiences of motherhood.

Incidentally, the term "domicile" refers to "geographies of home, settlement and residence" (Blunt 5) which are essentially tied to identity formation of the diasporic communities. The trajectory of diasporic experiences especially of the female subjects are "shaped, articulated and contested through geographies of home on scales from the domestic to the diasporic" (ibid). In diasporic literature female migrants are often represented as passive or excessively dependent on their male counterparts. Women's contributions in the cultural blueprints of national and ethnic enterprises are often viewed in terms of their appropriated gender roles in relation to their families. They are also viewed as passive reproducers and transmitters of

national and ethnic culture. According to Anthias and Yuval-Davis women have been historically positioned in the nationalist discourse as biological reproducers, transmitters of culture, reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic groups, participants in national, political, economic and military struggles and finally as signifiers of ethnic differences (7). Needless to say in a diasporic context too the gender hierarchy continues to prevail. Brah in his celebrated *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) observes: "The majority of the mothers and many girls colluded with this ideology of domesticity, with one white girl saying, 'I like a man to be a man' – wouldn't like him to be running around with a duster" (76). The ideologies of femininity are often found to legitimise the domestic responsibilities of women. Besides, "fear of racial attack was also cited as a factor affecting women's participation in activities outside the home, particularly in the evenings" (60).

Lahiri's *The Namesake* opens with Ashima Ganguly's culinary romance with "Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl in which she adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper [...]" (1). Her spicy romance with the bowl minutely detailed by Lahiri evidently secures her subject position within a conventional gender role. Frightened to discover a solid streak of brown blood on her underpants she called her husband but surprisingly not by his name: 'Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. And so, instead of saying Ashoke's name, she utters the interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as "Are you listening to me?"(7). Women's experiences of social dislocation from parental to marital homes after marriage in most of countries in Asia remain unchanged even in transnational displacement. The immigrant women are found to cope with the spatial trauma of dislocation as well as the care of maintaining the home. In most cases the male immigrants are found to support the family financially transferring the greater share of household duties on the shoulder of the women. Lahiri delineates both the premarital and post marital conditions of Ashima: "It was only after the betrothal that she'd learned his name. One week later the invitations were printed, and two weeks after that she was adorned and adjusted by countless aunts, countless cousins hovering around her. These were her last moments as Ashima Bhaduri, before becoming Ashima Ganguli" (13). But even after her marriage and immigration the gender hierarchy continues to dominate her: "Eight thousand miles away in Cambridge, she has come to know him. In the evenings she cooks for him, hoping to please, with the unrationed, remarkably unblemished sugar, flour, rice, and salt she had written about to her mother in her very first letter

home" (13). She learnt to adjust herself within the new environment. She learnt how to keep her husband happy.

Interestingly enough *The Namesake* opens with a direct and unambiguous reference to Ashima's pregnancy. Lahiri perhaps intends to focus on Ashima's motherhood—a new role which she has already stepped in. The birth of Gogol is also a re-birth of Ashima and Ashoke:

When he looks back to the child, the eyes are open, staring up at him, unblinking, as dark as the hair on its head. The face is transformed; Ashoke has never seen a more perfect thing. He imagines himself as a dark, grainy, blurry presence. As a father to his son. Again he thinks of the night he was nearly killed, the memory of those hours that have forever marked him flickering and fading in his mind. Being rescued from that shattered train had been the first miracle of his life. But here, now, reposing in his arms, weighing next to nothing but changing everything, is the second (23).

Evidently Gogol's birth reminding Ashoke of his hellish train journey and the miraculous rescue triggers another re-birth for both as parents. It is the bond of filialness that is symbolically wrought with their memory of India, the home, the womb from which they are now cut off. Motherhood and memory have always been instrumental in tracing back the roots, severed physically due to the migration to a new country, the memory of which shapes and reshapes the present existence in the new routes. It is Ashima's motherhood that produces in her a renewed feeling of nostalgia for her roots back in Bengal and she longs to come back. Memory plays important role here in triggering Ashima's restlessness for her roots: "'I'm saying hurry up and finish your degree.'" And then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back." (33). If Ruma in Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" abhors to share her private space with her old father, Ashima longs to return to her roots. However, Ashima's urge to go back is never answered. The death of Ashoke leaves her lonely ever and she tries to cope up with the changing circumstances.

In "Unaccustomed Earth", the title story of Lahiri's second collection of short stories, Lahiri has diagnosed the psychic dilemma of the second generation immigrant Ruma who has settled with her husband in her new home in Seattle. She is pregnant for a second child. When Ruma is visited by her father in her new home, a myriad of feelings crowd her mind and bring back the latent memories of her childhood home in Calcutta and of her dead mother. A sense of loss of both the mother and motherland creates a gulf in her mind and she feels less confident to face

her father's visit. Ruma's father has retired from a pharmaceutical company and after retirement he has started to roam about various places all over the world. He has deliberately chosen the transit life—a life of flux far away from his country. He sends Ruma postcards now and then: "The post card showed the facades of churches, stone fountains, crowded piazzas, terracotta rooftops mellowed by the late afternoon sun" (3).

Evidently the variety of spatial facades borne by the postcards shows the rootlessness of Ruma's father who takes up those journeys probably for estranging himself from the memories of his dead wife very much rooted in the house where his family used to stay. The dreary postcards never bear the virtual existence of her father: "But there was never a sense of her father's presence in those places" (4). From the very start Lahiri has stressed how desperately Ruma has attempted to play the role of her dead mother in her early life trying to take care of her father from a distance that can never be killed: "After her mother's death it was Ruma who assumed the duty of speaking to her father every evening, asking how his day had gone. The calls were less frequent now, normally once a week on Sunday afternoons" (4). The gradual reduction of Ruma's phone calls indicates the fact that Ruma has been gradually estranged herself from her father and has become engrossed in her own private life. The relationship between Ruma and her father dwindle to be more formal. The formality of the father-daughter relationship reminds Ruma more of her dead mother. She thinks how things would have been different had her mother been alive: "Her mother would not have asked we're coming to see you in July; she would have informed Ruma, the plane tickets already in hand" (5).

The haunting memory of Ruma's dead mother brings back her the ghosts of childhood surrounding every brick of her home in Calcutta. She suffers from an identity crisis in the foreign land and shuts herself in within the four walls of her private space. The death of Ruma's mother on the operation table upsets the balance of her life. The sudden disappearance of her mother seems to change her worldview and she resigns from the part time job to look after her son Akash fully: "After two weeks Ruma received for bereavement, she couldn't face going back. Overseeing her clients' future, preparing their wills and refinancing their mortgages felt ridiculous to her [...]" (5).

Migration is essentially masculine as already mentioned earlier. Ruma being a mother had to undertake additional labour to look after the family and eventually steps in her mother's shoe sacrificing her job. She had to sacrifice her job, whereas

Adam feels free to continue with his former life. The memories of her home in Calcutta haunt Ruma and they bear a sense of guilt especially when her father sold the house: "Ruma knew that the house, with the rooms her mother had decorated and the bed in which she liked to sit up doing crossword puzzles and the stove on which she'd cooked was too big for her father now. Still, the news had been shocking, wiping out her mother's presence just as the surgeon had" (6).

The *mélange* of blurred memories creeps into Ruma's mind and she becomes more and more unaccustomed to her new home in Seattle. She confines herself within her private space and nurtures the glass menagerie of her shadow identity so carefully that even the prospect of her father's visit looks like an intrusion: "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 her family she'd created on her own" (7). Ruma had already moved in her private space- her own world exclusively composed of Akash, Adam and herself and her second child "that would come in January." It is her maternity that prevents her from participating in world's affair, even from sharing her own jealous space with her father. The relationship between Ruma and her father looks strained and almost broken. Ruma's father has chosen a life in flux shrugging off all responsibilities. He feels more relaxed in his new identity to become a world citizen: "How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check" (7).

Maternity in diaspora is always related to gender politics. Ruth De Souza has offered a thought provoking study on motherhood and migration in her paper "Motherhood, Migration and Methodology: Giving Voice to the 'Other'." De Souza has dealt with the "maternity experience" of the migrant women, especially of New Zealand. She focuses on the problems of motherhood faced by the immigrant women. Immigrant women, especially wives have often been subjugated, made the "other," compelled to be the angel of the house and to run the family smoothly sacrificing all sorts of freedom they otherwise ought to have. Motherhood is a trope in Lahiri's story. Ruma sometimes feels jealous to see the rested and peaceful state of Ruma's retired father. Her father looks well rested with his head full of hair, while Ruma on the contrary has sacrificed her peace for giving birth to Akash and bringing him up. The taste of freedom invigorates Ruma's father and the paucity of it makes her jealous: "He had not lost weight and the hair on his head was plentiful, more so, she feared than her own after Akash's birth, when it had fallen out in clumps on her pillow each night, the crushed strands the first thing she noticed every morning" (12). Maternity is always intertwined with the motifs of remembering and forgetting

in the story. Shirley de Souza Gomes Carreira in *“Memory and Forgetting: An Analysis of ‘Unaccustomed Earth’”*, has pointed out how convincingly Lahiri has employed the two motifs to capture the continuous vacillation of Ruma. Ruma throughout the story moves in and out the complex matrix of memory associated with her home in Calcutta. She collects and scatters the memories of her homeland sometimes to regret the absence of her mother and sometimes to rub out her former existence to reconstruct a new identity of her own. Alison Blunt in *Domicile and Diaspora: Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home* has focused on the spatial politics of home to show how the landscapes of memory revives and rubs out the desire for home: “Whereas the sites and landscapes of memory inform spatial narratives of the past and present, a nostalgic desire for home has come to represent a wider ‘desire for desire’. As an imagined point of origin and return, home becomes a temporal signifier that implies a longing for an imagined and unattainable past” (Blunt 27).

Ruma, a second generation immigrant often forgets the watermarks of her past and indulges in reconstructing a new present, a new existence in Seattle. The thought of the spatial superiority of her present home seems to give her a sense of supremacy and victory over the tortuous memories of loss and regret, as if she has defeated those delinquents that have ever disturbed her present and thwarted her happiness: “She ignored Akash’s request and showed father the home, the rooms that were larger and more gracious than the ones that had sheltered her when she was a child” (14). Ruma assumes an air of supremacy in her attitude and it is not pride but a vain attempt to rub out the memories; a sort of Oedipal spatial battle with her homeland. Even Akash, accustomed to a nuclear family, feels jealous to share his room with his “dadu” (grandfather). The initial fear about the added and unwanted responsibility Ruma anticipates for her father after getting the information of her father’s visit gradually wanes as her father emerges to be a perfect helpmate—a surrogate mother for Ruma. In the story gardening is a powerful symbol of nurturing the family. The old traveler waters delphiniums in Ruma’s garden. As Ruma’s father takes good care of the garden, the memories of Ruma’s mother come back, especially those of her love for Ruma and Akash. She laments that Akash will never know how her mother has undertaken the labour of cradling him: “He would know nothing of the weeks her mother had come to stay with Ruma after his birth, holding him in the mornings in her Kaftan as Ruma slept off her postpartum fatigue” (2008, 15).

Further in the story Akash has stated that he does not remember his “dida” (grandmother): ““I don’t remember Dida,” Akash said. He shook his head from side

to side; as if denying the very fact that she was ever alive. I don't remember it. She died" (23). Grandmother, to Akash, seems to be a never existing entity; as if his Dida has ever lived as a shadow, just as Ruma's homeland is alien to him. Ruma's subconscious is tortured by the thoughts of loss-loss of her mother and her homeland, but to Akash they have never existed simply because he was born and brought up in America. In her early life when Ruma announces her engagement with Adam, her relation with her parents especially her mother becomes strained. She gets terrified at the prospect of her daughter's marriage with an American boy. Her ideological bias pollutes her mind to forbid such a relationship. She cautions Ruma about the possible post marriage hazards like divorce. Ruma remembers how boldly she has to withstand her mother's outrage. She often has felt humiliated at the unuttered allegation against her: "You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian that is the bottom line." Lahiri shows how nationalist bias narrows the perspective of Ruma's mother. She dislikes Adam only because he is an American. But after Akash's birth Ruma's mother changes her attitude. She comes to realize that Adam is a good choice for Ruma. Akash seems to tie the knot of a seemingly broken relationship: "It was after she'd had a child that Ruma's relationship with her mother harmonious; being a grandmother transformed her mother, bringing happiness and an energy Ruma had never witnessed" (27).

Ruma's father also took psychological retreat into the past often to think about his dead wife sometimes to compare and sometimes to contrast. Ruma now seems to be an absolute mirror image of her mother; whereas Mrs. Bagchi is a polar opposite to his wife. His fondness for capturing variety of experiences with his video camera is an attempt to fix the fleeting moments virtually, and to preserve them for future thought. At Ruma's home he showed Ruma and Akash his videos. He has maintained acute precautions to keep Mrs. Bagchi out of the frame: "Most of the images were captured through the window of the tour bus as a guide explained things about monuments they were passing" (39). The last words Ruma's mother spoke turned out to be true in a tragic way as her death indeed made her unable to visit Ruma. The tragedy of her death put Ruma on a vacant platform whence she could not see the future. However, she ultimately shifted to Seattle. The visit of Ruma's father made her injuries fresh and gashing. She had many times wanted to ask her father about his feelings after her mother's death; if he had wept in secret hours. But she could not dare to ask her father those embarrassing questions. Ruma's father had supinely accepted his lot and found out a means to forget his past through travelling. Underneath the primer of the so-called indifference in his attitude to his lost roots, the turbid flow of pathos was latent. While her father

moved from one place to another dreading the memories of the past, Ruma dived into her subconscious to take refuge in those memories, often creating “imaginary homelands.” Motherhood is an ideological construct in the story and Ruma learnt the lessons of motherhood from her mother after Akash was born: “Only the words her mother used were more literal, enriching the tired phrase meaning: He is made from your meat and bone” (46). She learnt to be a perfect housewife, an angel of the house remaining far away from the outer world. She sacrificed her freedom, her career only to nurture the glass menagerie of her family. The threads of Ruma’s life were dipped in the gray hue of a life of confinement. She stepped into the shoes of her mother. Gradually the strained relationship of Ruma and her father became easy. She explored many times about her father that she had never known. She did not know how helpful and self sufficient her father could be. Now she wanted her father to stay with her. Even when Adam on telephone enquired about the possibility of her father’s departure Ruma felt embarrassed and jealously took the side of her father. She mothers the family and feels mothered by her father now. Since his arrival she did not have to wash a single dish. Sometimes she felt jealous to see Akash sharing the filial space with her father that she used to share in her childhood. Ruma’s “brief envy” proves that the emotional chasm that her mother’s death had created could be filled by her father. After her father’s departure Ruma discovered an envelop written in Bengali and addressed to Mrs. Bagchi. The letter suggested her how her father had wiped out the memories of her mother and craved for another woman. The initial shock Ruma got made her confused though she gradually understood that her father learnt to forget. She posted the letter finally. The aching surprise on Ruma’s part after the accidental revelation of her father’s relation with another woman put her in an ambivalent situation. She silently accepted the truth.

Motherhood and memory are intimately tied together in these two stories. Both Ashima and Ruma are immigrant mothers who struggle earnestly to settle in their diasporic spaces – the unaccustomed earth. Instead of regretting their spatial separation from the roots they are engaged in constructing their private space in a new land. Undoubtedly this is a backlash to the diasporic romances with the roots and imaginary homelands. Motherhood plays important role in the lives of Ashima and Ruma. Both of these immigrant mothers compensate their rootlessness by constructing a diasporic domiciled space:

Both before and since Independence, and on both domestic and national scales, the home has been a politicized and contested site for claiming and

articulating an Anglo-Indian identity, culture and sense of place and belonging. For many Anglo-Indians who remained domiciled in India after Independence, a dual identification with Britain as fatherland and India as motherland has come to be recast as a dual identification as Anglo-Indian by community and Indian by nationality. (Blunt 205)

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