

**PAST IN PRESENT: DIASPORIC STUDY OF UNACCUSTOMED EARTH BY
JHUMPA LAHIRI AS A NOSTALGIC DISCOURSE****Voice of Research**
Volume 3 Issue 2
September 2014
ISSN No. 2277-7733**Dipti Patel**

Assistant Professor in English

Prof. V. B. Shah Institute of Management & R. V. Patel College of Commerce, Amroli.

Abstract

Nostalgia has remained unexplainably a contemporary concept. It can be defined as a longing or craving for a home that no more subsists or has never subsisted. In the 17th century, nostalgia was believed to be a remediable disease and often considered to be a negative word by the historians. The nostalgic study does not coincide with any particular field or discipline but it is frequently narrated in the numerous tales of Immigrants. With the help of Unaccustomed Earth by Jhumpa Lahiri, this research paper endeavours to bring forth the fact that though at the core of nostalgia is a sense of loss that is both mourned and accepted, it can also be an essential means on the bases of which one might draw to maintain, enhance and imbibe true meaning of life.

Key words : *Nostalgia, diaspora*

Utopia welcomed the twentieth century and it was ended with nostalgia. The belief of optimistic future became old-fashioned, while nostalgia, out of concern if for better or worse, never went outmoded and remained unexplainably contemporary. The term nostalgia was coined by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in his medical dissertation in 1688, using two Greek words, nostos, meaning home, and algia, meaning 'pain or sorrow or longing', to denote a pathological yearning for one's home country. One would define the term nostalgia as a longing or craving for a home that no more subsists or has never subsisted. As Svetlana Boym utters,

"Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface." (xiii-xiv)

Despite the word 'nostalgia' comes from two Greek roots, it did not derive from ancient Greece. It is contrary to our intuition, came from medicine, not from poetry or politics. In the 17th century, nostalgia was believed to be a remediable disease, similar to a severe common cold. Leeches, opium and an expedition of the Swiss Alps were believed to be the remedy for nostalgic symptoms by Swiss doctors. In the century diverse displaced people - freedom-loving students from the Republic of Berne studying in Basel, domestic help and servants working in France and Germany, and Swiss soldiers fighting abroad (Boym 3) - were believed to be the initial victims of this newly diagnosed disease.

"Nostalgia" is often considered to be a negative word by the historians. "Nostalgia is to longing as kitsch is to art," writes Charles Maier (273). The word is frequently used dismissively. "Nostalgia...is essentially history without guilt. Heritage is something that suffuses us with pride rather than shame," writes Michael Kammen (688). Nostalgia is perceived as an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure (Boym xiv). In this context, nostalgia generates biased visualizations of problematic

imagination that is likely to colonize the realm of politics, history, and everyday perception.

Nostalgia introduced as a historical emotion during the time of Romanticism and contemporized with the birth of mass civilization. In the mid of 19th century, nostalgia systemized in national and regional museums, heritage foundations, and urban memorials. Contextually the past became "heritage." This notion became prominent due to the industrial and modern rapidity, which cause increase in the intensity of people's longing for the slower rhythms of the past, for social consistency and tradition. As Pierre Nora has suggested, memorial sites, or "lieux de mémoire," are established institutionally when the environments of memory, the milieux de mémoire, fade. It is as if the ritual of commemoration could help to patch up the irreversibility of time. (7-24)

The nostalgic study does not coincide with any particular field or discipline; it tends to frustrate sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, literary theorists—even computer scientists who thought they had escaped from it until they too acquired shelter in their home pages and the cyber-pastoral terminology of the universal village. In the 21st century millions of people were uprooted from their place of birth, finding their livelihood in voluntary or involuntary exile. Nostalgia is frequently narrated in the numerous tales of Immigrants - not only because they undergo through, but also because they confront nostalgia. Immigrants recognize the confines of nostalgia and the tenderness of "diasporic intimacy," which cherishes non-native, elective affinities. Diasporic intimacy is not opposed to displacement, uprootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it (Boym 252). For an exile soul, daily practices of life, expressions or activities in new surroundings unavoidably occur against the memory of these things in other surroundings. Thus both new and old surroundings and environments are vibrant, genuine, occurring together contrapuntally. For uprooted and dispersed individuals, searching for diasporic associations and a tactile sense of home can be as uncertain as it is positive since the foreign aromas usually connected with diasporic cuisines, bring up feelings of immigrant shame as well as nostalgia.

At the core of nostalgia is a sense of a loss that is both mourned and accepted – and the social and personal conditions that are associated with the feeling. The same simultaneous sense of loss and acceptance is skillfully depicted by Jhumpa Lahiri in her one of the well-written stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*. In this story the writer has nicely portrayed the divide between immigrant parents and their American- raised children; emptiness of Ruma's relationship with her father, where in the only link was Ruma's mother, who is no more now; and the haunting memory of past, when Ruma's mother was alive, which every now and then peeps in to the present of both Ruma and her father. After her mother's death, Ruma's father retired from the pharmaceutical company and now as a planned retirement, he began travelling in Europe frequently. In near future again her father would be going away to another destination to be explored, but first he desired to spend a week at Ruma's place. When he formally asked for the permission to Ruma for a week stay, Ruma could not resist it because her mother would not have asked. In fact she would have informed Ruma, with the plane tickets already in her hand. There had been a time in her life when such presumptuousness would have angered Ruma. But she missed it now.

There has always been gap between Ruma and her father but this gap has been widened after her mother's death. After her mother's death, her father moved into a one-bedroom condominium and sold the house where Ruma and her younger brother Romi has spent their childhood, informing them only after her father and the buyer went into contract.

"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 (who informed her mother's death) had." (Lahiri 6)

But one thing Ruma was assured of. That was her father missing nothing of his old house but the garden. For as long as she could remember it had been his passion, working outdoors in the summers as soon as he came home from the office, staying out until it grew dark. Ruma memorizes that gardening was something her father had done alone, neither Romi nor she had ever been interested in helping, and their father never offered to include them. Ruma also remembered how her mother would complain, having to keep dinners waiting until nine at night but she never ate alone, trained all her life to serve her husband first.

Ruma could hardly appreciate her mother but the weeks she spent with Ruma after Akash's, Ruma's son's birth, brought her more close to her mother. She remembers how her mother keep on holding Akash in the mornings in her kaftan as Ruma slept off her postpartum fatigue. Her mother had refused to put him into the bassinet, always cradling him, for hours at a time, in her arms. Akash had no memory of her mother, but

he know sweaters she knit for him.

"There was a half-knit cardigan patterned with white stars still on its needles, one of the few items of her mother's Ruma had kept. Of the two hundred and eighteen saris, she kept only three, placing them in a quilted zippered bag at the back of her closet, telling her mother's friends to divide up the rest. And she had remembered the many times her mother had predicted this very moment, lamenting the fact that her daughter preferred pants and skirts to the clothing she wore, that there would be no one to whom to pass on her things." (Lahiri 17) Ten years ago her mother had done everything in her power to talk Ruma out of marrying Adam. She sometimes thought back to that time, remembering how bold she had had to be in order to withstand her mother's outrage, and her father's refusal to express even that, which had felt more cruel. "You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian, that is the bottom line," (Lahiri 26) her mother had told Ruma again and again. Ruma also remembered over the years her mother grew to love Adam as a son, a replacement of Romi, who had crushed them by moving abroad and maintaining only distant ties.

The sequential dimension of human life, the perception of the course of human lives in time, is particularly inconsistent in terms of what Brockmeier (2000) calls autobiographical time. This is the process by which an individual, in reflecting on and living through his or her course of life, 'constantly links the past with the present . . . in the light of present events and future expectations' (Brockmeier 55). When her father mentioned their old house, Ruma remembers the last conversations she had had with her mother, as they rode together to the hospital for her mother's minor surgery. "Don't go. It's too far away. I'll never see you again" (Lahiri 46), her mother had said from the front seat. Six hours after saying this, her mother was dead.

" . . . death too, had the power to awe, she knew this now- that a human being could be alive for years and years, thinking and breathing and eating, full of a million worries and feelings and thoughts, taking up space in the world, and then, in an instant, become absent, invisible." (Lahiri 46)

Below the surface of the romanticized memory of nostalgia there may be concealed conflicts, a point that may explain some of the 'bitter' component of bitter-sweet reminiscences. There were times when 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 she knew that this was an illusion, a mirage, and that the distance between them was now infinite, unyielding. (Lahiri 27)

"They were sentences her mother would have absorbed in an instant, sentences that proved, with more force than the funeral, more force than all the days since then, that her mother no longer existed. Where had her mother gone, when life persisted, when Ruma still needed her to explain so many things?" (Lahiri 59)

In the conventional consideration of diaspora, the concept of "home" has been identical with the diasporic country of birth or origin. Another interpretation of "home" is that it is a symbolic, at some extent physical space attached to the place the diaspora leaves behind when they migrate, constituting their close friends and relatives. A further distinct idea of "home" is joined with the locality of origin and the places where they inhabited throughout their formative period of childhood and youth. As Gaston Bachelard utters, "Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost." (87)

The identical distinctive idea of 'home' is projected in the story, in which Ruma gets upset with the freshly confirmation of the fact that,

"... she lived on a separate coast thousands of miles from where she grew up, a place where her parents knew no one, where neither of her parents, until today, has set foot. The connections her family had formed to America, her parents' circle of Bengali friends in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, her father's company, the schools Ruma and Romi had gone through, did not exist here." (Lahiri 11)

The vital characteristics of nostalgic feeling are the consideration of an experience in the past that was cherished and which will never return; go along with a mourning of loss that is less distressful than the misery of grief. There is pleasure as well as pain in this consideration, and most importantly there is an acceptance of the loss, sometimes nearly amounting to a sense that the loss was deserved. After his wife's death, Ruma's father filled with peace because now he had the ability to do as he pleased, the responsibility of his family was absent now. But still her wife's memory haunted him. Without his wife, the thought of his own death preyed on him, knowing that it might strike him just as suddenly. He had never experienced death so close; when his parents and relatives had died, he was always away, never witnessing the ugly violence of it. Technically he had not even been present, when his wife passed away. He had been reading a magazine, sipping a cup of tea from the hospital cafeteria. But that was not what caused him to feel guilty. It was the fact that they had been so full of assumptions: the assumption that the surgery would go smoothly, the assumption that she would spend one night in the hospital and then return home.

Ruma now resembled to her mother so strongly that her father could not bear to look at her directly. The first glimpse of her after many years had nearly taken her father's breath away. "Her face was older now, as his wife's had been, and the hair was beginning to turn gray at her temples in the same way, twisted with an elastic band into a loose knot. And the fea-

tures, haunting now that his wife was gone- the identical shape and shade of the eyes, the dimple on the left side when they smiled." (Lahiri 27-28)

Ruma's father was most of the times worried for her. And because she was his child he wanted to protect her, as he had tried throughout his life to protect her from many things. Like his wife, Ruma was now alone in this new place, over-whelmed, without friends, caring for a young child, all of it reminding him of the early years of his marriage, the years for which his wife had never forgiven him. He remembered his children coming home from college, impatient with him and his wife, enamored of their newfound independence, always wanting to leave. It had tormented his wife and had pained him as well. He couldn't help thinking, how he and his wife were their whole world. But eventually that need dissipated. He was worried that that loss was in store for Ruma, too; her children would become strangers, avoiding her.

Ruma's father missed working outside, the solid feeling of dirt under his knees, getting into his nails, the smell of it lingering on his skin even after he had scrubbed himself in the shower. It was the one thing he missed about the old house, and when he thought about his garden was when he missed his wife most keenly.

"For years, after the children had grown, it had just been the two of them, but she managed to use up all the vegetables, putting them into dishes he had not known how to prepare himself. In addition, when she was alive, they regularly entertained, their guests marveling that the potatoes were from their own backyard, taking away bagfuls at the evening's end." (Lahiri 49)

Those trips to India were always epic, no matter how they went and he still recalled the anxiety provoked to him, having to pack so much of luggage and getting it all to the airport, keeping documents in order and ferrying his family safely to many thousands of miles. He remembered that his wife had lived for those those journeys, and until both his parents died, a part of him lived for them, too.

"And so they had 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." (Lahiri 8)

Conclusion :

"Living in the past" is regarded as unwise in Western culture as it is believed that a past-oriented state of mind can be ambivalent, if it intrudes broadly with living in the present and planning for the upcoming life. However, the past can also be an essential means on the bases of which one might draw to maintain, enhance and imbibe true meaning of life. Ruma regrets on her mother's death and constantly endures with the sense of loss but eventually she strengthens herself and makes up her mind to subsist without her mother. Now it did not



matter to Ruma if her father had loved her mother or honoured her before turning to another woman. Past is undoubtedly haunting for both Ruma and her father, but the same sense of past gives them realization that life is an eternal course. Life had plans of future and life has plans for future. Nothing has changed. In fact the past, the sense of loss has opened new ways to lead life. Now Ruma's father didn't wish to live again in an enormous house that would only filled up with things over the years, the things he had recently gotten rid of. The sense of past has made him realize that life grew and grew until a certain point. The point he had reached now. Now nostalgia is budding up as a means of indispensable human strength, which has turned out to be the inevitable part of the day to day life and serves at least four key psychological functions. First is to generate positive effect, second is to elevate self-esteem, third is to foster social connectedness, and forth is to alleviate existential threat. In a way, nostalgia can help to find the way successfully beneath the uncertainties of daily

life. One can say that nostalgia is distinctively offering integral perceptions across such dimensions of psychology as memories, emotions, relationships, and the self.

References :

- Bachelard, Gaston. *Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon, 1994. Print.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. Print.
- Brockmeier, Jens. *Autobiographical time*. *Narrative Inquiry* 10:1 (2000): 51–73. Web. 31 May 2014.
- Kammen, Michael. *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. New York: Knopf, 1991. Print.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Unaccustomed Earth*. Noida: Random House Publishers, 2008. Print.
- Maier, Charles S. "The End of Longing? Notes toward a History of Postwar German National Longing." *The Postwar Transformation of Germany: Democracy, Prosperity, and Nationhood*. Ed. John S. Brady, Beverly Crawford, and Sarah Elise Wiliarty. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 271-285. Print.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24. Web. 27 May 2014.