

Silence, Displacement and Transnational Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*: A Diasporic Feminist Reading

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Abstract

Displacement, the creation of identity, intergenerational tensions, and the emotional ramifications of migration are all recurrent themes in Jhumpa Lahiri's novels. Although much of the critical discussion of Lahiri foregrounds issues of cultural hybridity and immigrant identity, silence as a constitutive mechanism of diasporic subjectivity in *Unaccustomed Earth* has received very little attention. This paper reads Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* through the lenses of feminist diaspora theory, postcolonial criticism, and transnational literary studies to analyse the themes of silence, displacement, and transnational identity construction. Drawing on theoretical interventions by Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Stuart Hall and Sara Ahmed, the paper argues that silence is not just an absence of speech, but an emotional and cultural framework that constructs identity negotiation in immigrant lives. Lahiri's characters navigate belonging through disjointed recollections, intergenerational tensions, self-censorship and global migration. This study, through a rigorous textual analysis, shows how Lahiri reconfigures immigrant subjectivity beyond conventional binaries of homeland and host nation. This study contributes to current scholarship by re-framing silence as an active cultural force in diasporic experience and emotional heritage.

Keywords: Diaspora; Silence; Transnational Identity; Emotional Inheritance; Jhumpa Lahiri; Feminist Diaspora Studies; Postcolonial Subjectivity

Introduction

Lahiri is one of the leading writers in contemporary Indian diasporic literature, whose works address the complex issues of migration, identity, emotional dislocation and intergenerational connections. Her literature pushes past the typical immigrant stories to explore the delicate emotional agreements that form transnational lives. Critics often note that Lahiri favours emotional interiority over overt political speech, emphasising individual human experiences within larger frames of migration and globalisation. Critic Susan Koshy thinks that Lahiri's literature examines "the psychic dimensions of diasporic belonging" (Koshy 592). Lahiri's continuous preoccupation with cultural memory, displacement and identity creation is evident in collections like *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *Roman Stories* (2023).

Diaspora study is increasingly concerned with migration not just as geographical movement but psychological alteration. Cultural identity, as Stuart Hall too would argue, is "a matter of becoming as well as of being" (225).



Similarly, Avtar Brah sees diaspora as “a historically variable form of relationality” where identity is negotiated rather than fixed (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 183). Such conversations in immigrant families are generally played out in quiet, emotional reserve, and inter-generational isolation. Sara Ahmed contends that emotions are cultural activities that “shape the surfaces of collective bodies” (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 1). Lahiri's fiction consistently emphasises that silence is not only absent of communication but also generative of emotion.

Critical conversations around *Unaccustomed Earth* have largely focused on questions of immigrant identity, hybridity, and intergenerational conflict. Critics like Rocío Davis see Lahiri's works as explorations of “diasporic negotiations between cultural inheritance and individual autonomy” (Davis 72). Similarly, Judith Caesar says that Lahiri foregrounds immigrant adaptation and emotional alienation. However, there is relatively little work on silence as constitutive of international subjectivity. Much of the previous work on silence has focused on it as a symptom rather than as an active emotional structure. This paper fills that crucial gap by exploring silence as an emotive and cultural process in the shaping of identity formation in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Based on diaspora theory, feminist critique and postcolonial frameworks, the paper contends that Lahiri transforms silence into a narrative method by which emotional inheritance, displacement and belonging are negotiated within immigrant lives.

Silence as Emotional Inheritance

One of the most powerful literary interventions Jhumpa Lahiri makes in *Unaccustomed Earth* is her rendering of silence not only as a communication absence, but as an inherited emotional structure that shapes diasporic subjectivity. “Silence is a language of culture, passed down, with consequences for family dynamics, identity and emotional expression throughout the stories. Lahiri's immigrant families often have intimate emotional relationships and yet cannot express their innermost fears. The silence that organises these partnerships is not emotional absence but a history of migration, cultural displacement, and passing modalities of existence. As Susan Koshy argues, diasporic narratives tend to foreground “psychic negotiations of displacement” rather than overt cultural disputes (592). Lahiri extends this bargaining inward, showing how silence itself becomes a strategy for the emotional organization of immigrant identities.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the relationship between Ruma and her bereaved father is an example of inherited emotional reserve. Father and daughter try to create emotional transparency after her mother's death, yet they love each other. “She understood that her father had never really talked to her as an adult” (Lahiri 11). The comment illustrates not only generational difference but a broader diasporic emotional inheritance in which closeness often goes unacknowledged. Her father is a first-generation immigrant whose identity was forged in sacrifice, adaption and emotional discipline. Emotional reserve becomes a key aspect of male immigrant survival. Lahiri also writes, “He had never been one to share his thoughts” (15). The sentence exemplifies what Avtar Brah calls diaspora's “multi-axial relationality,” in which emotional identities are constituted through crossing histories of migration, memory, and displacement (183).

Ruma herself reproduces inherited quiet in her domestic life, unwittingly. She is more socially mobile and more culturally assimilated than her parents, yet she is not able to speak about emotional weakness freely. Identity, writes Stuart Hall, “is a matter of becoming as well as of being” (225). Lahiri shows how becoming continues to be shaped by inherited emotional practices. Transgenerational transmission of Lahiri's storytelling method is further illuminated by Sara Ahmed's notion of affective circulation. Ahmed believes that emotions “do things” socially; they circulate between bodies and structures, rather than being contained within individuals (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 119). Silence in *Unaccustomed Earth* also works relationally. Emotional control is a culturally transmitted behaviour that structures intimacy itself. The father's secret companionship with Mrs. Bagchi, too,



shows how silence is not a breakdown of communication but an emotional protection. There were things his children would never understand,” writes Lahiri (Lahiri 52).

Silence protects your emotional independence. Lahiri emphasises emotional privacy as a crucial condition for the creation of subjectivity in immigrant life, not just as a symptom of suppression. As Rocío Davis notes, Lahiri’s literature often portrays the negotiation of identity through “subtle emotional transactions instead of overt ideological conflict” (74). Silence becomes just that kind of emotional transaction. The collection continually implies that migration changes not just geography, but emotional language itself. Silence as the inherent emotional architecture of diasporic closeness across generations

Diasporic Displacement and Fragmented Belonging

Displacement in *Unaccustomed Earth* is not only physical migration but also emotional instability and fractured belonging. Lahiri challenges the common immigrant story to show that geographical movement creates a permanent emotional dislocation rather than a cultural resolution. Her characters exist in liminal spaces between inherited cultural memory and current transnational realities. An important foundation for comprehending Lahiri’s description of diasporic identity is Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of hybridity. Bhabha says that migrant identities are produced in “in-between spaces” where meaning is always in negotiation (*The Location of Culture* 56). That’s just the sort of liminal space Lahiri’s characters occupy. They are at the same time members of several cultural worlds and at home in none. Ruma is an extreme example of this fragmentation. She is socially assimilated into American life, but remains emotionally uncertain about her cultural identity. Lahiri writes: “She knew that her own life was diverging from her mother’s” (Lahiri 18).

The divide signals a cultural change laden with emotional ambivalence. Ruma rejects and reproduces inherited expectations of Bengali. Stuart Hall maintains that cultural identity is not a stable essence but a continuous production, which is formed by historical placement (226). Lahiri foregrounds such instability time and again. Cultural belonging is not inherited but negotiated. Psychologically, displacement is also shown in loneliness and emotional alienation. The immigrant condition produces what Sara Ahmed calls “affective economies” in which emotions organise sensations of belonging and exclusion (Ahmed 45). Lahiri’s characters often live in such emotional economies. One of the most notable articulations of migrant subjectivity in Lahiri’s fiction may be found in *The Namesake*, though it reverberates conceptually throughout her work: “Being a foreigner was a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait” (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 49).

The metaphor conveys migration as an emotional suspension. Similarly, *Unaccustomed Earth* does not treat displacement as a completed change but as a continuing psychological condition, though this is addressed elsewhere. Avtar Brah contends that diaspora involves “the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put” (16). Lahiri’s characters are emblematic of this entanglement, staying emotionally rooted to lost homelands while establishing modern lives elsewhere. Then, diasporic belonging in the *Unaccustomed Earth* is essentially fractured. Material adjustment does not erase emotional disorientation.

Feminine Subjectivity and Intergenerational Conflict

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* offers a model of feminine subjectivity as a process of becoming that is affected by the forces of migration, cultural inheritance, home expectations, and emotional negotiations across generations. Lahiri defines female identity not in static binaries of tradition and modernity but as a perpetually dynamic site of tension where personal autonomy clashes with familial obligation. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that universalised feminist theories ignore historically unique female experiences and that women’s



identities cannot be separated from material and cultural circumstances (“Under Western Eyes” 338). Lahiri’s women characters are an instance of this, as they are specific in that their emotional worlds are based on diasporic histories and transnational social realities.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma portrays the archetype of a second-generation immigrant woman, attempting to navigate the landscape of motherhood with inherited expectations of caregiving and domestic obligation. Although she has assimilated into American life, she is psychologically uncomfortable with the life she has built. “She had quit her job when Akash was born,” writes Lahiri (20). It is deceptively simple-sounding but hints at a greater fear about selfhood and maternal identity. Unlike her mother, whose life is focused on domestic sacrifice, Ruma is acutely aware of the potential of losing herself to caregiving duties. Her concern touches upon broader feminist arguments about motherhood and women’s independence. Adrienne Rich claims that motherhood is often institutionalised in patriarchal countries in ways that reduce women’s subjective ambitions (*Of Woman Born* 42). Ruma’s emotional ambivalence perfectly mirrors such contradictions between society expectations and individual agency.

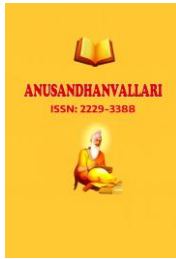
Intergenerational interactions bring another dimension to feminine subjectivity in Lahiri’s diasporic society. Ruma’s notion of womanhood is very different from her mother’s immigration experience. The previous generation accepted sacrifice and emotional constraint as fundamental aspects of family responsibility. Second-generation women increasingly negotiate autonomy amid inherited cultural ideals. As Susan Koshy writes, “the emotional consequences of transnational belonging” are continually foregrounded in Lahiri’s novels (594). These effects are most evident in female relationships because migration creates unequal gender expectations across generations. Ruma rejects and reproduces inherited maternal behaviours, exposing what Judith Butler theorises as gender performativity. Butler contends that gender identity is formed through repetitive cultural practices rather than essential biological truths (*Gender Trouble* 33).

Lahiri complicates this theoretical framework by showing how immigrant femininity becomes doubly performative, as women confront the demands that spring forth simultaneously from cultural inheritance and present social reality. Ruma’s relationship with her father also exposes emotional conflicts that shape feminine subjectivity. She is aware of the sacrifices her mother made, and she feels guilty for not meeting the cultural expectations she inherited. “She wondered if she was disappointing her mother in ways she had never understood” (Lahiri 29), writes Lahiri. Thus, memory and gender overlap in the production of emotional conflict. Ultimately Lahiri portrays female subjectivity as a process of negotiation, rather than a fixed identity constructed via migration, pregnancy, family obligation and emotional heritage.

Memory, Loss, and Transnational Identity

Memory sits at the heart of *Unaccustomed Earth*, not only as remembrance but as a living mechanism through which diasporic identities are built and preserved. Lahiri frequently makes the case that migration alters both place and emotional time. Characters occupy several temporal regions at once, negotiating contemporary realities through recalled past and inherited absences. Stuart Hall believes that cultural identity is still “a matter of becoming as well as being” and is always constructed through historical recollection, rather than a permanent cultural core (225). Lahiri’s characters are deeply representative of this state. Their international identities are not, in a definitive sense, cultural, but negotiated in the ongoing dialectic of memory and adaptation.

This complexity is especially portrayed in the character of Ruma’s father, especially after the death of his wife. Widowed deepens his interaction with memories, as regular home routines become cues for emotional loss. Lahiri writes “For years he had lived with the routines of her mother” (26). The sentence indicates memory functioning through quotidian repetition, not sentimental idealisation. Sara Ahmed contends that emotions



generate ties between bodies, histories, and social places, producing what she refers to as “affective economies” (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 29). Such an emotional circulation is exemplified in Lahiri’s fiction. Objects, rituals and home customs are reservoirs of memories shaping emotional identity long after the physical separation. Ruma’s father’s emotional distance is originally read as indifference, but eventually, Ruma learns to see memory working silently in his quotidian life.

The father’s association with Mrs. Bagchi confuses transnational identity further by showing that emotional rebirth is possible without forsaking historical attachment. Lahiri writes, “There were things his children would never understand” (52). The sentence evokes the emotional worlds that are unreachable beyond generational barriers. Migration causes not only cultural displacement but individual emotional history that will not fully articulate themselves. Avtar Brah conceptualises diaspora as “multi-locationality within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries” (16). Such multi-locational existence is clearly depicted in Lahiri. Her characters are emotionally attached to geographies that are absent, while building current lives elsewhere. Thus, memory is not a nostalgic retreat or an emotional paralysis, but an active force in constructing the international consciousness. In Lahiri’s fictional universe, loss resists closure equally. Death, migration and geographical relocation do not break emotional continuity. Identity is multiple, incomplete, and always in the process of being through remembered connection. Lahiri therefore converts memory from a thematic concern into a structural principle organising diasporic experience itself.

Silence as Resistance and Transnational Subject Formation

One of Lahiri’s most creative literary interventions in *Unaccustomed Earth* is her reconfiguration of silence from a site of communicative absence to one of emotional activity and international subject construction. In Lahiri’s fiction, silence is sometimes a protective emotional construction rather than suppression or interpersonal failure. Characters avoid language not due to a lack of emotional depth, but because silence allows them to manage competing identities and to maintain kinds of autonomy that language sometimes threatens to expose. Sara Ahmed says that emotions do not stay private internal experiences but actively alter social and political connections (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 11). In a similar way, Lahiri uncovers silence as relational, an emotional discipline that organises immigrant life.

Ruma’s father is the archetype of this interaction in the entire collection. More than generational masculinity, his refusal to show emotional fragility around widowhood, loneliness or his connection with Mrs Bagchi is revealed. “He likes to keep certain things to himself” (Lahiri 48). Silence is self-preservation, not a lack of emotion. My father is from a generation forged by migration, hardship and cultural dislocation, where emotional reserve was traditionally a survival tool. His silence maintains the nascent autonomy of late adulthood and safeguards emotional experiences from interpretative reduction. Rocío Davis argues that Lahiri’s novels often gives pride of place to “emotional negotiations taking place below the surface of everyday domestic encounters” (74). One such negotiation is silence.

The importance of quiet goes beyond individual psychology to bigger issues of international identity. Homi Bhabha says that migrant identities are formed in liminal places where cultural meaning is in the process of being perpetually redefined (*The Location of Culture* 56). Lahiri creates a liminal area out of stillness and this is what she does. Characters exist in emotional uncertainty without needing total cultural synthesis or psychological resolve. The silence permits multiple identities to coexist without the need for a singular coherence. Ruma herself inherited emotional restraint, even as she recognises its limitations. Through family histories, Lahiri therefore exposes the transgenerational work of silence that makes up a diasporic subjectivity. Rather than thinking of immigrant identity in terms of assimilation or cultural reconciliation, Lahiri foregrounds incompleteness as an



inherent migrant condition. Silence preserves the incompleteness. Transnational belonging is always emotionally fragile, always negotiated, and never quite finished. Ultimately, Lahiri shows that subjectivity is not the outcome of resolution but a constant negotiation between displacement, memory, emotional inheritance, and silence. Silence is not absence, but possibility, a space where immigrant identities continue to evolve across generations and geographies.

Conclusion

Unaccustomed Earth is a continuation of Jhumpa Lahiri's exploration of migration, displacement and emotional heritage. The novel foregrounds silence as constitutive diasporic experience. Lahiri, instead of presenting immigrant identity through simple assimilation stories, shows transnational subjectivity as emotionally divided and in a state of continuous negotiation. The study uses feminist diaspora theory and postcolonial frameworks to show that silence is not only a lack of communication, but an emotional inheritance that affects belonging, identity formation and intergenerational relationships. Ultimately, Lahiri's narrative demonstrates how migration alters not only landscape, but emotional life itself. By re-placing silence as cultural and affective structure, this work contributes to modern scholarship on diaspora studies and transnational feminist literary criticism.

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