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REMEMBRANCE AND TRANSCULTURAL RECONSTRUCTIONS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

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Abstract: *The paper examines Jhumpa Lahiri's short story* Unaccustomed Earth *in order to foreground manners of cultural remembering displayed by a South Asian American father, his daughter (Ruma) and her young son, Akash. The memories of the adult characters are triggered by a trauma, represented by the death of the mother/wife. As the dead character surfaces in the memories of her husband and daughter, she is remembered as a traditional South Asian woman who carries an interdependent model of identity. The father's, daughter's and grandson's manners of relating to the dead character illustrate different ways in which memories of culture shape the identities of three generations of South Asian American characters. On the one hand, the father manifests a strong tendency to distance himself from the Bengali cultural core symbolized by his wife and he adopts American models of autonomy. However, while interacting with his grandson, Ruma's father seeks out to prevent the third generation's loss of Bengali cultural memories, by teaching Akash certain Bengali practices. On the other hand, Ruma attempts to restore the Bengali source of cultural meanings and she suddenly reenacts a cultural model of identity that she used to reject when her mother was alive. Thus, both father and daughter rely on remembrance in order to readjust their (already) complicate positions between American and Bengali cultural norms. Considering the characters' different ways of filtering similar cultural memories, the present analysis seeks out to establish the coordinates of their new identities resulted from a re-evaluation of their pasts.*

The paper analyzes layers of memory that shape South Asian American identities across three generations. The short story focuses on the interaction between a South Asian American father, his daughter and grandson after the death of the wife/mother/grandmother. While the father visits his daughter, Ruma in Seattle, both of them remember episodes from the time when they lived as a family. This paper discusses the way in which their memories invoke specific cultural ways of conceiving the self that ultimately influence their manner of reconstructing their identities.

In order to discuss the remembrance-forgetting dialectics within cultural transformation, the paper relies on several theoretical notions. Cultural memory studies operates the distinction between individual and collective memory, the latter being further

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classified into communicative and cultural memory. While individual memory refers to neuro-mental, personal acts of remembrance, communicative memory is a form of remembrance through communication and social interaction between persons as carriers of social roles (Assmann 111). Hence, communicative memory is an informal type of collective memory preserved by everyday communication between members of a group (Caldicott and Fuchs 16). Culture can be defined as a sum of operations of remembrance and forgetting (Boyer and Wertsch 1). Cultural memory denotes the institutional level at which culture is objectified in symbolic forms and maintained by figures of memory, such as festivals, rites, epics, poems, monuments, libraries, archives (Assmann 111). These theoretical distinctions are useful for the present attempt to demonstrate that the immigrant identities discussed represent a fusion of personal and communicative memory, as their memories of Bengali traditions are preserved at the family level in the absence of the institutional frame of cultural memory.

The concepts of cultural hybridity and transculturality serve as adequate conceptual tools for analyzing the characters' cultural change. In order to discuss cultural hybridity in relation to migration, I will rely on Moslund's notion of intentional hybridity, defined by comparison with organic hybridity. Organic hybridity designates long-term cultural changes resulting in the predominance of cultural sameness/centripetal elements within a language/culture. Intentional hybridity denotes various speeds of cultural transformation generated by cultural contacts. Employing Bakhtin's theory of hybridity, Moslund suggests that intentional hybridity is an interaction of centrifugal and centripetal forces that renders "different degrees of acceleration and deceleration of cultural becoming" (93) rather than abrupt transformations.

Moslund's theoretical framework for the analysis of cultural hybridity may be coupled with a transcultural paradigm that posits the fluidity of cultural borders. According to Epstein (24), transculture envisages the openness of all cultures to other possible alternatives across ethnic and national boundaries. Conceived as a transgression of multicultural separatism, a transcultural understanding of cultures emphasizes their intrinsic transcendence that renders them open to: "differences inherent in other cultures, especially as these differences speak to gaps within the knowledges/experience base of one's own culture" (Berry 130). Thus, the main premise of transculturalism is that different cultures are incomplete systems of values that need to interact in order to get a sense of wholeness.

The discussion also employs the distinction between an autonomous/independent and an interdependent conception of the self characteristic to different cultures. Thus, Triandis's socio-psychological study establishes that English speaking cultures tend to focus on the individual as the basic unit of social perception, while others (African, Asian, and Latin- American) favor a more group-oriented approach to identity (164). Comparing the American and Hindu Indian morality of caring, Joan C. Miller concludes that Americans are more inclined to promote a independent view of the self, while the Hindu Indians privilege an interdependent dimension of identity (4). By blending all these theoretical notions, the paper discusses how immigrant cultural identities are conditioned by the dynamics of communicative memory and forgetting.

Memories of Ruma's mother as a carrier of Bengali traditions are permanently invoked by her husband and daughter. Ruma's personal acts of remembrance indicate her mother's attachment to Indian traditional clothing/food and her desire teach her children Bengali. The father's memories of his wife mostly refer to the negative effects of her relocation from a group-oriented tradition to a culture of solitude. Having initiated migration in the name of "ambition and accomplishment" (Lahiri 51), the husband remembers the early days of migration as "the years for which his wife had never forgiven him" (Lahiri 40). At the same time, the Indian widower has personal memories of himself as a carrier of family roles (husband and father). Rather than express nostalgia, his recollections of family life reveal the pressures created by family obligations. Invoking the early days of migration, the male figure retrieves the tension he experienced as a protector of his family:

> He had *worried* for his family's safety in that apartment complex, the surveillance cameras in the lobby making him *nervous* rather than putting him at ease, but at the time, still working on his PhD in biochemistry, it was the best he could afford. He remembered his wife making meals on the electric stove in the tiny kitchen, the rooms smelling afterward of whatever she'd prepared. (Lahiri 29) (my emphasis)

The character's revisit of the past by means of individual memory illustrates the pressure generated by the father and husband roles. The reflections triggered by his recollections suggest that the character experienced a roles-based identity as a source of personal discomfort. The same apprehension is aroused by his memories of the family's trips to India when he had to maintain his family's safety across borders:

> 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. (Lahiri8) (my emphasis)

While the mother-figure appears as a symbol of the Bengali cultural core, the father's memories denote his reluctance to accept an identity based on roles. His worries and anxiety as a young husband and father express the dissatisfaction with a cultural model perceived as restricting individual freedom. Considering the interplay between an interdependent and an autonomous conception of the self, the next part of the paper traces Ruma's and her father's reinterpretation of their cultural identities via communicative memory and forgetting.

Communicative memory is defined as a sum of social short- term memories based on social interactions, by which social groups preserve their recent past (Halbwachs qtd. in Steveker 83).Therefore, the duration of communicative memory has a limited time depth, the time span of three generations (Assmann 111). Since *Unaccustomed Earth* presents the interaction between father, daughter and grandson in relation with their Bengali inheritance, the present discussion seeks out to foreground the particular dynamics of communicative memory in relation with personal remembrance.

Most of her life, Ruma has rebelled against the traditional model of identity imposed by her mother: she earned her own money (during summer vacations and later working for a law firm) and she married an American man. Her sudden redefinition in terms of Bengali standards denotes a process of intentional hybridization, i.e. a desired and abrupt cultural change, in which Bengali values are reinserted into Ruma's American profile. For example, Ruma's focus on her housewife and mother conditions illustrates a process of forced (personal) remembrance of a forgotten cultural model. The analogy between her mother and Ruma's present status is suggested by the father's impression of a striking similarity between the two:

> Something about his daughter's appearance had changed; she now resembled his wife so strongly that he could not bear to look at her directly. [...] And the features, 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 28)

The physical similitude between Ruma and her mother is paralleled by practices that Ruma has taken over from her mother's routine. For example, Ruma's serving Nice biscuits for tea triggers her father's memories of his wife whom he "deeply" (Lahiri 18) associates with this habit. At the end of her father's visit, Ruma asks him to call her when he gets home. This gesture makes her similar to her mother since it is "something her mother would say to her children when they parted" (Lahiri 55). Ruma's getting pregnant for a second time and her decision to stay at home for the following years also foreground her loyalty to her mother's model. When her father advises her to focus on her career, she adopts her mother's definition of a working woman in terms of motherhood responsibilities: "I am working, Baba. Soon, I'll be taking care of two children, just like Ma did" (Lahiri 36).

However, Ruma's desire to reconnect with the Bengali culture is presented as a halfway enterprise, given that her life as an American teenager and adult has implied an embracing of American cultural elements. Consequently, her attempts to suddenly remember Bengali standards are paralleled by the very dissolution of these norms. This aspect illustrates the effects of assimilatory forgetting, defined as "an imperative to forget the memories connected with the original identity" (Assmann 114) imposed by the need to adjust to a different culture. Therefore, Ruma's intention to operate a radical remembrance of Bengali culture is paralleled by her inability to forget the need for an independent, American self. Consequently, Ruma feels imprisoned by the housewife condition although it represents a cultural model she wants to keep alive:

> She hadn't been prepared for how much work it was, how isolating it could be. There were mornings she wished she could simply get dressed and walk out the door, like Adam. She didn't understand how her mother had done it. Growing up, her mother's example – moving to a foreign place 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 11)

Ruma's need to reconnect with Bengali norms by abrupt remembrance does not offer an easy path to self-reconstruction. Although Ruma tries to reject American values of self-reliance and independence by quitting her job, she finds it hard to apply her mother's standards: "but nothing was making her happy" (Lahiri 7). Ruma's frustration suggests that her efforts to remember Bengali values clash with the mechanisms of forgetting the very same values. According to Assmann, the durability of communicative memories is conditioned by frames, communicative genres and affective ties that bind together families, groups and generations (111). Thus, forgetting is induced by the erosion of intergenerational bonds, which becomes all the more apparent in the context of migration. In Unaccustomed Earth, the mother's death marks the dissolution of these frames that prevents Ruma from remembering Bengali values:

> 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 she knew that this was an illusion, a mirage, and that the distance between them was now infinite, unyielding. (Lahiri 27)

An indicator of the insurmountable gap between Ruma's cultural profile and her mother's norms is the daughter's gradual abandonment of certain Bengali practices. For example, she has shunned her mother's habit of cooking Indian food for her son, feeding him macaroni and cheese "from boxes" (Lahiri 23). Similarly, she does not teach Akash to eat with his fingers or remove his shoes before entering a room. Along similar lines, Ruma has not kept her mother's collection of saris, fact anticipated by her parent:

> 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 thing (Lahiri 17).

Ruma's attitude suggests her inability to completely preserve her mother's traditions as well as the parent's understanding that forgetting is an unavoidable stage of cultural adjustment. By keeping "only three saris" Ruma expresses her willingness to remember her mother's inheritance. However, by placing them at the back of her closet Ruma expresses a lack of total commitment to Bengali standards. A similar interplay of cultural remembrance and forgetting is illustrated by Ruma's dilemma regarding the possibility of her father's moving in with her. Aware that her duty as an Indian daughter entails the obligation to have her father close by, she fears that this process might interfere with the family she has created:

> 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 [...] 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 [...] Still, not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse. It was a dilemma Adam didn't understand. (Lahiri 7)

Despite her difficulty in choosing between cultural versions, Ruma eventually invites her father to move at her place. Ironically, her adoption of this Bengali norm is blocked by the parent's refusal that illustrates his desire to forget Bengali cultural memories. The most suggestive proof of Ruma's non-voluntary forgetting Bengali values is the impossibility to teach Akash Bengali:

> After he started speaking in full sentences English had taken over, and she lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali. Besides, it was one thing to coo at him in Bengali, to point to this or that and tell him the corresponding words. But it was another to be authoritative; Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her. [...] And yet this was the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life. (Lahiri12)

Ruma's relationship with her parents' language illustrates her complicated position between intersecting cultural loyalties. According to Cassirer, culture is a symbolic system and the usage of language as a symbolic form is an act of remembering cultural meaning (qtd. in Steveker 85). Since Ruma has almost forgotten the language of her childhood, her ability to remember Bengali cultural meanings generates just a partial retrieval of memories. The most illustrative example of Ruma's incapacity to restore complete cultural meanings is her failure to read her father's postcard addressed to his secret girlfriend, Mrs. Bagchi:

> Her first impulse was to shred it, but she stopped herself, staring at the Bengali letters her mother had once tried and failed to teach Ruma when she was a girl. They were sentences her mother would have absorbed in 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)

The loss of traditions suggested by Ruma's incapacity to decipher the Bengali alphabet prevents Ruma from capturing the exact content of her father's postcard to Mrs. Bagchi. However, reading the English transliteration of this name, Ruma understands that her father is involved in a relationship. This confrontation with the ultimate proof of her mother's absence points to Ruma's impossibility to preserve her mother's model. Consequently, Ruma's decision to send the postcard to Mrs. Bagchi illustrates her acceptance of the necessity to partially forget the Bengali cultural world in order to move on with her life in a different culture. Ruma's hesitancy between the American and the Bengali models indicates that she mixes memories of Bengali culture with American values, without accommodating this cultural plurality. Her general bitterness indicates the discomfort created by Ruma's abrupt transition from models of female independence to ideals of female dedication to family. Therefore, Ruma's intention to suddenly shift to the Bengali model renders her an intentional hybrid that blends cultural remembrance and forgetting without producing a balanced self.

As a widower, Ruma's father becomes an intentional hybrid who decides to forget Bengali values of interdependence and adopt American practices that prioritize individual needs. Consequently, he does not experience loneliness as a tragic condition,

but as an opportunity to consider his own desires: "[...] this was his life now, the ability to do as he pleased, the responsibility of his family absent just as all else was absent from the unmolested vision of the clouds" (Lahiri 8). The father starts travelling abroad and enters a relationship with a Bengali woman, whom he hides from Ruma. Kemper interprets the character's sense of relief as "an excited connection to stereotypical American freedom, but only at the cost of dutiful ties to his Indian family" (Kemper 21). While Kemper is right to foreground the character's voluntary forgetting of Bengali cultural forces, his caring stance as a father and grandfather foregrounds his enduring attachment to family responsibilities. The character's desire to take over individualistic norms springs from his need to transgress the limits of the Bengali model that emphasizes group rather than individual values. The character's intention to forget the burdens of a role-based identity makes him sell the house where he used to live with his wife: "In the old house he was still stuck in the former life [...] (Lahiri 30). Another element that marks the character's need for autonomy is his refusal to move in with Ruma, which suggests that fatherly duties are perceived as obstacles to an independent life: "He did not want to live in the margins of his daughter's life, in the shadow of her marriage" (Lahiri 53). At the same time, his choice to live alone is meant to make Ruma understand the necessity to forget a pattern of identity devoid of independence. Therefore, he is a promoter of assimilatory forgetting when advising Ruma to transcend her mother's housewife model:

> 'Work is important, Ruma. [...] 'Self-reliance is important, Ruma', he continued. 'Life is full of surprises. Today, you can depend on Adam, on Adam's job. Tomorrow, who knows [...] It is not for my sake, you understand. My concern is for you. I have more than enough money to last until I am dead.' (Lahiri 38)

The father's advice portrays him as a carrier of individualist norms that exclude an exclusive focus on family values. In this context, career is regarded as a useful antidote against complete dependence on children or husband.

However, the father's individualistic stance is paralleled by his ability to reenact Benagli versions of altruism and traditional practices. As a grandfather, the character displays a consistent involvement in his grandson's routine, making sure that Akash remembers Bengali values. For example, he criticizes his daughter for feeding Akash food containing"chemicals" (Lahiri 20), implying that his grandson should eat healthy Indian food. Another Indian habit preserved by him is that of removing his shoes before entering a house. As Akash climbs on his grandfather bed with his shoes on, the old man asks him to remove them, claiming that he would have nightmares otherwise.

The metaphor of gardening underscores the character's balanced stance between remembering an interdependent model of identity and adopting a self-centered perspective. Gardening has always been a personal way of relaxation performed in solitude by Ruma's father. Gardening is also pictured as" toil in an unfriendly soil" (Lahiri 16), which hints at the individualist trigger of male migration to the USA:

> She [Ruma] stood by the window and watched her father water the flowers, his head bent, his eyebrows raised. She listened to the sound of water hitting the earth in a forceful, *steady stream*. It was a sound that vaguely embarrassed her, as if he were *urinating* in her presence. (Lahiri 17) (my emphasis)

This scene presents the male character in an almost intimate connection with the new space. The act of watering the ground may be interpreted as a symbolic process of fertilization, alluding to the diasporic etymologies of scattering one's seed – *diasperein* (M. Baumann 315). In this context, the syntagm "unaccustomed earth" links migration with a positive state of male- initiated mobility that creates the adequate circumstances for individual growth:

> Human nature will not flourish, anymore than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Hawthorne qtd. in Lahiri)

Hence, one's involvement in a novel space is contrasted with the repetitive act of exhausting the possibilities of a familiar realm. Given this analogy, one may interpret the father's passion for gardening as a celebration of the individualist impulse to transcend the impositions of a familiar culture. While an emblem of adaptability to new spaces, gardening also marks the father's adherence to a model of care, since this pastime enables him to provide nature's offerings to his dear ones, especially his wife:

> He 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'd 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. She had taken that from him. For years, after the children had grown it had just been the two if them, but she managed to use up all the vegetables, putting them into dishes he did not know how to prepare himself. (Lahiri 49)

The association between gardening and longing for his spouse illustrates the character's nostalgia for his husband condition. His memories reveal that he used to express marital affection by cultivating the specific ingredients needed by his wife. Hence, the quotation illustrates the association of gardening with a sharing-oriented conception of identity implied by family-life. However, the character tries to forget this dimension, giving up gardening after his wife's death. The fact that he resumes gardening during his visit to Ruma's coincides with the reactivation of his father and grandfather conditions, i.e. his remembrance of an identity based on roles. Thus, gardening marks the character's involvement in Ruma's life by acknowledging her space in a personal manner. Ruma herself interprets his suggestion to plant flowers as a sign of fatherly interest in her life: "She felt flattered by this interest in the place where she lived, by his desire to make it more beautiful" (Lahiri 43). From the perspective of the grandfather's role, gardening expresses the man's desire to get involved in Akash's life by transmitting him bits of Bengali values. Hence, the character makes a small plot of land for his grandson and he teaches him

Bengali words while they are both digging in the ground. Their working together in the garden suggests the creation of an inter-generational bond through the sharing of cultural values. By inserting Bengali elements into Akash's education, the grandfather prevents the third generation's complete forgetting of traditional Bengali ways:

> When he [Akash] was younger, he'd eaten whatever her mother made for him. 'You used to eat Dida's cooking' she [Ruma] said. 'She used to make all these things'. 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.' (Lahiri 23)

Akash's inability to remember his grandmother illustrates the limited durability of communicative memories that begin to fade at the level of the third generation. While migration weakens the affective ties and communicative genres that maintain traditions alive, communicative memories are also threatened in the absence of the institutional framework of cultural memory. Therefore, I interpret Ruma's father's attempts to teach Akash Bengali values as a substitute for the lacking figures of memory necessary to preserve the Bengali culture in the American context.

The characters' interactions illustrate that cultural memory in the context of migration can survive only as communicative and personal memory. Moreover, the characters' suspension between remembrance and forgetting suggests a redefinition of cultural memory, as "retrospective imagining that simultaneously articulates, questions and investigates the normative self-image of a group" (Caldicott and Fuchs 18). Hence, the father's transgression of the Bengali model embodies the ethno-critical connotations of cultural memory, as the tendency to "question the group's normative assumptions about its sense of belonging" (Calidcott and Fuchs 18). At the same time, Ruma's cling to Bengali norms may express the self-reflexive side of cultural memory that illustrates "the group's preoccupation with its own social and cultural norms (Calidcott and Fuchs 18).

By acting both as a father/grandfather and an autonomous being, Ruma's father reaches a transcultural synthesis, completing the perceived lack of the Bengali model (the value of independence) with American standards of autonomy. Ruma's efforts to retrieve her mother's cultural world by forced remembrance cannot undo her assimilation of American values. Without accepting that forgetting is a necessary step in her cultural evolution, Ruma's remains an intentional hybrid whose cultural heterogeneity does not produce a transcultural synthesis. Akash's lack of substantial memories illustrates the imminent dissolution of communicative frames at the level of the third generation of South Asian Americans.

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