“Language, identity, place, and home: these are all of a piece - just different elements of belonging and not-belonging.”

- Jhumpa Lahiri

Abstract:
Quest for identity is a predominant theme in the post-colonial literature and it is a saga in every stage of their life; as people are scattered to different directions and had to assimilate “foreign land” as their “own land.” “Identity” is a non-descript term. Quest for identity arises when individuals do not find themselves in a fortunate position to satisfy their needs and fails to play consistent role in the society they dwell. People are displaced under various reasons such as partition, world wars, natural calamities or forced migration in search of better employability. Migration is a never ending story of human life. It has resulted in a sense of belonging “everywhere” and finally “nowhere”. Displaced people faced a lot many hiccups to adjust themselves, to recover from the mental effects and to familiarize to the place where they belong. The consequence of displacement was the emergence of Diasporic literature, a new branch of literature. In Diasporic literature, the writers outpoured their inner psyche and found a panacea for their existed problem. Diasporic literature deals with the persistent problem of identity crisis. Eminent writers like VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri are the products of this agonizing experience. The main study of this paper presents how Lahiri’s characters handle with the themes of identity, isolation, conflict and existence and the way they confront against all these perennial problems in order to establish their identity in the foreign land contemplating their motherland left behind is depicted explicitly from her collection of stories in her novel “Unaccustomed Earth.”
Introduction

Identity is a term that has various meanings which is derived from the Latin word *idem*, meaning *the same*. People’s identity is determined through the elements of their appearance, character, society, the culture they follow, language use and their homeland. The quest for identity refers to the spiritual odyssey of the modern man who has lost his social and spiritual moorings.

Migration

“What is the best thing about migrant people...? I think their hopefulness ... and what is the worst thing? It’s the emptiness of one’s luggage ... We’ve come unstruck, from more than one land. We’re floated upward from history, from memory from time.” (Salman Rushdie, 1983: 87). Migration is a defining feature of globalization and it is a continuous journey in the life of human beings. If they have not adapted themselves to the new environment over time, resulted in some elements of incorporation.

Displacement

There are several reasons for displacement to take place. Partition was one of the reasons especially with Pakistan and Bangladesh. Especially after the Second World War, there has been frequent displacements across borders; an association with one’s native land is something that formed a part of the individuality of the displaced. Displaced people quest for identity continued at every stage of their survival. Voutira explores: “The way in which displacement no longer merely refers to people moving across borders but of borders moving across people.” (Dawn Chatty, 2010:32)

Diasporic Literature

The consequence of displacement was the emergence of Diasporic literature as a special branch of literature. The term “Diaspora” applied to an image of psycho-logical alienation, emotional suffering, and physical uprooting. Etymologically “Diaspora” was used for the dispersal of the Jews, when they were forced into exile to Babylonia. Diasporic writing had brought
into limelight various aspects: suffering of the experience of alienation, marginalization and identity crisis were the important concerns of Diaspora literature. “The term Diaspora was used to describe people disposed, displaced, and dispersed generally, but not always, by force.”(Dawn Chatty, 2010:13)

Jhumpa Lahiri poignantly depicted the “Quest for Identity” and how they handled it in her novels through the lens of her characters.

Brief Profile of Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri (1967): Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, is born in London to Bengali parents. Lahiri moved to the United States with her family at the age of three and persuaded her studies there. Lahiri was given the Pulitzer Prize for Interpreter of Maladies (1999) and PEN/ Hemingway Award. Lahiri at many times expressed in the interviews about her sense of belonging and identity as: “I feel partly American, but I have an ambiguous relation with both America and India, the only two countries I really know. I never feel fully one way or the other.” (brainyquote.com/quotes/jhumpa_lahiri_759721).

The oeuvre of Jhumpa Lahiri consists of the following:

1) Interpreter of Maladies (1999)  
3) Unaccustomed Earth (2008)  
4) The Lowland (2013)

Current study on Unaccustomed Earth

Jhumpa Lahiri’s third work Unaccustomed Earth (2008) is the second collection of her short stories.

The stories in Unaccustomed Earth, presents various themes mostly in the negative shade; a cry for identity and its crisis is differently handled by the characters. The first story “Unaccustomed Earth” begins with the narration of the death of Ruma’s mother. Ruma is the main character and she lives in a state of “in-betweeness.” (Homi Bhabha, 1994:2) Ruma attempts to identify herself ather own space after the sudden loss of her mother and tries to negotiate her roles as mother, wife and daughter. Ruma’s father displays his quest to get an identity from Mrs. Bagchi, not for love or compassion, but to fill the vacuum arose by the death of his wife and to have good “companionship” (Jhumpa Lahiri, 2009:30) with her. Now and then Ruma and her father exchange Indianized habits to stick to their roots. Mixing Indian tea with American biscuits stands for their hybrid identity. “Upstairs, Ruma was serving tea … in the bottom of his cup.” (Jhumpa Lahiri, 2009:18). Lahiri’s father, by
using Bengali words to his grandson, Akash tries to present Bengali identity of his homeland.

“Hell-Heaven” is the second story of the book and centers on Aparna who tries to build an identity to keep herself away from loneliness and melancholic life. Her infatuation with Pranab, an identification of her homeland is only to fill her displacement. Pranab expresses his quest to identify the roots of Aparna based on her appearance. Aparna’s child, Usha is caught in-between being an Indian-American adult. The new comer in Pranab’s life Deborah extends him with a stable identity.

“A Choice of Accommodation” is the third story in the collection. It deals with extreme alienation between generations where they negotiate their identities. Amit and Megan strive to give a special identity of their married life and try to revive the waning warmth of their married life by going on a trip. As a student at Langford, Amit wishes to be identified by Pam, a beautiful girl. The affinity of their names also was a happy coincidence by giving a special identity: the last two letters of her name “am” are the first two letters of his name “Am,” “a silly thing he never mentioned to her but caused him to believe that they were bound together.” (JhumpaLahiri, 2009:99)

In the story “Only Goodness” the identity crisis is handled by the parents who impose strict discipline on their children aspiring that they would absorb only the positive aspects of American culture. Sudhaurges her parents to identify her on par with her brother, Rahul, who was allowed to wear shorts in summer, and the same is considered inappropriate for a girl by his mother. In spite of the strict brought up, Rahul’s addiction to alcohol leaves him in a bad identity. Finally, he is stranded between these two worlds: Indian and American. Rahul’s mistake in handling Sudha’s kid completely erases the identity as a brother and he is totally alienated from her.

“Nobody’s Business” is the next story in the book. Indian-American Sangeeta Biswas is eager to receive an identity from janus faced person, Farouk, called Freddy, which reveals the reader of his fake identity. Paul exhibits his quest to be identified by Sang and enters into her private space. Paul’s disclosing the true identity of Farouck’s with Sang ends the story.

The last three stories in Unaccustomed Earth form a trilogy titled on “Hema and Kaushik yearn to identify themselves with their Indian roots. Due to the extravaganza ways of spending money Kaushik’s parents are identified as “stylish” by Shibani, Hema’s mother.
The second story in the trio is “Year’s End,” narrated by Kaushik. Kaushik wanders in search of his identity when his mother is no more. Kaushik is engulfed to live with his father due to the entry of his step-mother, a Bengali, who “wore vermilion in her hair, a traditional practice my mother had shunned, the powdery red stain the strongest element of her appearance”. (JhumpaLahiri, 2009:260). Kaushik leaves the house and moves out taking his belongings and suffers from the pangs of “In-between space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.” (HomiBhabha, 1994:7).

“Going Ashore” is the final story of this triology and is narrated through Hema. When Hemameets Kaushik after a long duration, Kaushik explains her how he becomes popular when he clicks the “dead” photo at the time of war. Here two contrast situations takesplace: one death -- of his mother -- makes Kaushik lose his identity at home; and, the other death -- picture helps him to build his identity. Hema confesses to Kaushik that she is getting married to Navinand both depart to two different directions. Kaushik lands in Thailand, and he fails to come to “ashore” as he was caught in the terrible Tsunami in 2004. In his death he lost his complete identity.

**Conclusion**

Lahiri succeeds in depicting the quest for identity in the above stories in a succinct manner. As the title suggests, the people are not accustomed to that earth that is the faraway to their homeland, the “other” land that can be considered as their “mother” and one letter “m” makes all the difference in their lives. They are caught in the web of their “aspirations,” “choices,” “selection” and “rejection.” HomiBhabha describes this state of mind as “the twilight existence of aesthetic image.” Lahiri, with her innate sense of human nature occupies an important place in expatriate Diaspora.

**References**

2. ibid. P.7
3. ibid. P.15
5. ibid. P. 13.
7. [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/jhumpa_lahiri_759652](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/jhumpa_lahiri_759652)
11. ibid. P. 260.