

Memory and forgetting: an analysis of “Unaccustomed Earth”, by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Resumo:

Este artigo visa à análise do conto “Unaccustomed Earth”, de Jhumpa Lahiri, de modo a demonstrar como a relação dialética entre memória e esquecimento se entrelaça à questão da identidade cultural do imigrante.

Palavras-chave: memória, esquecimento, migração

Abstract:

This paper aims at analysis of the short story “Unaccustomed Earth”, by Jhumpa Lahiri, in order to show the way the dialectic relationship between memory and forgetting intertwines with the issue of the migrant’s cultural identity.

Key words: memory, forgetting, migration

My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far
as their fortunes may be within my control, shall
strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.

Nathaniel Hawthorne

1. Introduction

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche analyzes the social conditions that generated memory. The author sustains the hypothesis that memory is not an individual attribute or isolated capacity, but a social construction. The construction of memory is due to social pressures, since man at first acts out of the spontaneous and impulsive forces of forgetting.

According to Nietzsche, forgetting is a positive power that enables a kind of relaxation of consciousness and allows the rise of the new.

The need of living in group and getting its protection made man inhibit his capacity of forgetting, developing memory, in order to become committed with the collective interest. It is that commitment which gives man his sense of belonging.

An immigrant's life is marked by the traits of memory. The experience of living in a foreign country is always a history of a divided self: on one hand there is the need to keep the links to tradition, homeland and memories, and on the other one the sweet taste of freedom the contact with a different culture gives.

Since her first book, Pulitzer Prize winning author Jhumpa Lahiri has been dealing with the experience of a life with two separate cultures, and how people cope with one and the other.

This paper aims at analyzing her short story "Unaccustomed Earth" in order to demonstrate how the internal relations between recalling and forgetting operate in the text, and how this dynamic becomes problematic in light of events that once were present but then became past.

2. From where does the voice come?

Some years ago, with the *boom* of postcolonial literature, the critical discourse started to deal with the binary opposition colonist/colonized. The literary studies evolved into an investigation of the traces of that opposition in the migrant writers' works, which in majority were reports of the clash between cultures as well as of the process of assimilation.

However, the works written by immigrants' children tend to focus on the complexity of relationships between the generation who lived the diaspora and their children, born in foreign lands, who, differently from their parents, had neither a native land to remember, nor traditions to be kept alive.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, the preservation of memories is responsible for the perpetuation of a sense of identity, and it is in society that people normally acquire, recall, recognize, and localize their memories (1992, 38). Thus, he argued that it is impossible for individuals to remember in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of their group contexts.

An individual is part a construct of his own experiences and part a product of a social set of rules, internalized by means of the operation of a collective memory. As well as group membership provide the materials for memory and prod the individual

into recalling particular events and into forgetting others, groups can even produce memories in individuals of events that they never experienced in any direct sense.

The immigrants' children experience that borrowed memory in a more acute way, due to the fact that they have never had a true contact with their parents' lands.

Being an immigrants' child, born in England and raised in the U.S.A., Jhumpa Lahiri is the true example of a "translated" individual, term used by Salman Rushdie to refer to people to whom the experience of migration conferred a cosmopolitan view, which is above the strict meaning of belonging.

3. Roots into unaccustomed earth

"Unaccustomed Earth", the title story, contains the narrative of the inner conflict of an Indian-American woman, Ruma, who is married and is about to have her second child, when she is visited by her father, an Indian retiree, in her new home in Seattle. The visit brings about a myriad of feelings, bringing back old resentments and a deep reflection on her relationship with her past.

As in her previous books, Jhumpa Lahiri's characters tend to be immigrants from India and their American-reared children, exiles who straddle two countries, two cultures, and belong to neither; people who are too used to freedom to accept the rituals and conventions of home, and yet too steeped in tradition to embrace American mores fully.

The story begins with a retrospective of Ruma's father's latest activities: his travelling in Europe, after his retirement from a pharmaceutical company. It also reveals Ruma's discomfort before her father's succinct communication, as well as her resentment for his being so emotionally distant from her.

The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had ever received from her father. In her thirty-eight years he'd never had any reason to write to her. It was a one-sided correspondence; his trips were brief enough so that there was no time for Ruma to write back, and besides, he was not in a position to receive mail on his end (...) The cards were addressed to Ruma; her father never included Adam's

name, or mentioned Akash. It was only in his closing that he acknowledged any personal connection with them. “Be happy, love Baba”, he signed them, as if the attainment of happiness were as simple as that. (LAHIRI,2008,4).

As a young girl, Ruma had thought extremely difficult to live according to the Indian mores. To her parents’ displeasure, she and her brother Romi, were excessively attracted to American way of life.

When Ruma and Adam, her husband, started to date, she kept it in secret until the day the engagement was officially announced. Her parents interpreted her choice as shame of her own roots, as a refusal of her origins.

Even before her marriage, her relationship with her parents had been difficult and later it resulted in a cold distant tie, turned longer when she moved to Seattle.

The proximity of her father’s visit brings her back to conflict. Intimately, she fears that, with the end of his trips, he might come to her home to stay, making her recall old habits she is no more used to, and resuscitating the past she had once buried.

Adam’s constant work trips make her double exile, from her roots and from New York, even lonelier, what makes the threat her father’s visit represents more serious.

According to Indian tradition, it is the daughter who cares for the father in his old age, but Ruma does not feel prepared for that. She knows that the visit will take place between two of her father’s trips and that the next stop will be the city of Prague.

From the beginning it is clear for the reader the ambiguity of Ruma’s feelings, for at the same time she watches the news when he is scheduled to fly, to make sure there have not been any plane crash, she still keeps inside a series of motives to support her own attitudes.

After her mother’s death, she assumed the duty of communicating with him every evening. As the time passed by, the phone calls had become a unique weekly conversation, usually on Sundays afternoons.

Differently from her mother, who would have simply told her the date and timing of her arrival, if she had wanted to visit her, her father phoned asking her to. This fact make clear how different was the relationship she had with them.

Ruma had been engaged in a successful career in a law firm, but after the two weeks for bereavement due to her mother's death in an unsuccessful surgery she decided to quit her job and stay home, taking care of her child. In fact, her renounce started even earlier, when she asked for a part-time schedule after Akash was born.

Unconsciously, Ruma left behind a condition that gave her independence as an individual to devote herself to household, repeating her mother's social role.

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, 2008, p.11)

Her solitude arises when she sees her father getting off a rental car on his arrival. Seeing him, she becomes aware of her having left behind the old connections, the contacts she had made along those years.

Her father is surprisingly old, in western clothes, looking more American than Indian. He had a cosmopolitan look, without traces of origin. Were she alive, her mother would come in colored saris. That thought makes her understand how different they had been.

She herself had tried to keep one foot in past, teaching Akash a few words in Bengali, but when her son became a bit older, she did not have enough discipline to teach him. In fact, her world was divided into two languages: Bengali, in childhood, and English, in her adult life.

By now Akash had forgotten the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when He was little. 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. (LAHIRI, 2008, p. 12)

Her mother, as other first generation immigrants, refused to speak English in family. Her father was more flexible, facilitating assimilation to the new culture. As well as her parents' language, other old habits had been left behind, as, for instance, removing shoes before entering the house.

Little by little, other images come to her memory: her mother's displeasure before her preference for western clothes; her prediction that all her clothes would go to strange hands after her death; the realization of her prediction, when Ruma decided to keep only three of the two hundred and eighteen saris her mother had, asking her mother's friends to divide up the rest.

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, 2008, p.17)

Gradually, things she has never thought before start to appear in her mind: the perfectibility of her mother running her household; the excellence of her ability as a cook, which had never been praised by her husband; her devotedness to family, without recognition.

Her loneliness and the childbirth proximity make her remember how much her mother's presence had been important when Akash was born, giving her a feeling of safeness and comfort. Her mother, in all her traditionalism, her linkage to roots, was her true homeland.

The word "homeland" is used here with the meaning attributed by Rushdie in *Imaginary homelands* (1991): the locus where identity is anchored. Given its mythical nature, it assumes idealized, unreal characteristics.

In "Reflections on exile", Edward Said(2000) argues that albeit expatriates, who voluntarily live in an alien country, may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, some of them take benefit of their ambiguous status whereas others seem to adhere to an

everlasting feeling of homelessness, trying to reproduce in the new land the principles that guided their lives in their native land.

To the reader is not imperceptible the fact that, along the years, Ruma had built a paradoxical relationship with her mother. At the same time she recognized in her mother attributes she herself would never have, she rejected submission to tradition.

The essence of that relationship was the conflict Ruma had faced all her life: her difficulty to understand who she actually was and to what world she belonged.

That ambivalence is also true for Ruma's father. By means of an alternance in focalization, the narrator reveals another version of happenings. On the father's perspective, the reader is before a seventy-old man, to whom the loss of his wife, his daughter's marriage and his son's departure had only given the basic certainty of being alive.

On making the trip Ruma and her mother had planned before that fatal surgery which changed their lives, he started to give his existence a meaning. The ties had been broken. In one of the trips that followed the first one, he had found a woman who called his attention: Mrs. Bagchi. As well as Ruma did some years before, he omits that relationship. Perhaps due to the same reason: not to hurt anybody.

He saw no point in upsetting them, especially Ruma now that she was expecting again. He wondered if this was how his children had felt in the past, covertly conducting relationships back when it was something he and his wife had forbidden, something that would have devastated them. (LAHIRI, 2008, p.19)

Through his eyes, the change in Ruma becomes more intense. The young rebel from the past has been turning into a woman who resembles her mother:

When he was finished he poked his head into Akash's room and found both the boy and Ruma asleep. For several minutes he stood in the doorway. Something about his daughter's appearance had changed; she now resembled her mother so strongly that he couldn't bear to look at her directly (...) 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 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, 2008, p. 28)

In his journey to Europe, he had been able to remember his first days in America; his difficulty to communicate in a foreign country whose language he did not know. He can remember now, being in Seattle, how hard life had been, how gloomy and small the apartment where he lived with his wife and children was. Ruma and Romi would only remember the big house he had bought later, when he finished his PhD in biochemistry and got a good job.

Ruma and Adam live in a house highly superior to that he was able to give to his family. That house had been sold, because there was no reason to live there alone. His friends had suggested him follow the custom and go to live with his daughter, but he knew that was impossible. Once, he had left his parents in India and parted. Not even his father's death made him go back. He had made his choice and now it was Ruma's time to make hers.

His attitudes were quite different from his wife's and that contrast becomes evident when he thinks that were he to die first, she would never thought twice about moving to her daughter's house. They had been really different: she was happy, always in need of people around her; he was serious and enjoyed solitude.

Just as his daughter, who had been some many times accused of breaking the ties that linked her to her family, he now notices he has done the same. He moved to another place: sufficiently near not to feel a foreigner again, but distant enough to part from his old life.

With the awareness that only time gives, he is able to notice that Mrs Bagchi had loved her husband of two years more than he had loved his wife of nearly forty. Through the narrator's words, it is possible to see that it is not love that impels him to Mrs Bagchi, but the habit of companionship.

The change he suffers does not render imperceptible for his daughter. Intimately, she feels that her mother's death had produced different reactions: she had endured great pain while her father seemed to have been given a new reason to live.

The man who tells her to go back to work, not to live for other people, as her mother had done, is almost an unknown man: a father who never told her how demanding her mother had been, her unwillingness to appreciate the life he had worked hard to provide; a father who was afraid that she would repeat her mother's frustration, becoming equally unhappy; a father who gave Akash the attention he had never given to his own children.

From this point on the story becomes a succession of discoveries from part to part. The waving between memories and forgetting has the status of a more complex dialectics: between sticking to roots or surrendering to change.

Some time before his leaving, her father decides to plant a garden and asks Akash to help him. As they do it, he teaches the boy the objects' names in Bengali. The relationship between them turns solid to the extent Ruma is led to think that, for the first time in his life, her father had found the meaning of loving someone else.

His certainty that he will not be able to see the boy into adulthood makes him sad and it is reinforced by the experience of a man who had seen his own children go away, who had once been a son and done the same, without looking behind.

Before that so different and sensitive man, Ruma decides to ask him to stay. Despite the temptation that his grandson represents, he refuses. Staying would be part of another story, re-build ties that had been solved, and, after all, the boy who was the core of his doubts would forget him soon, as his own children had done.

On his leaving, he leaves an envelope— written in Bengali and addressed to Mrs Bagchi— he had not mailed. Being unable to read with her poor knowledge of the language, Ruma guesses its content. That has a bitter savor for her. All the time her father stayed with her she wanted to ask him if he had actually loved her mother, if he missed her. That letter seems to be her mother's second death.

Her father chose forgetting in order to give way to new things. Before the battle between past and present, Ruma gives up and decides to send the letter to its addressee. At her eyes, America is exactly the place she thought it was when she was young: the land where new identities may be built; based on present and future and free from the ties of a memory that is not hers any more.

4. Conclusion

The author's view of the experience of migration updates the reflections on collective memory. For her, the place of belonging is that which permits the individual be what he effectively is, no matter where he was born, no matter the traditions he was exposed to.

The dialectical struggle between memory and forgetting accompanies the migrant man who flounders between past and present. However, being a second-generation migrant, Lahiri gives to that dialectics a particular nuance. "Unaccustomed earth" neither focuses on tradition nor on the process of acculturation. It is a narrative that exposes the conflicts inherent to a hybrid identity, resulted from the negotiation between different cultures.

The social and cultural collective memory of diasporic peoples consists of ties with an idealized and distant homeland. Jhumpa Lahiri grants herself the privilege of building those ties differently. Her narrative style, due to transculturation, transpires the fluidity of alternative identities.

Hers is the double view of one who effectively lives in the third space described by Homi Bhabha. From that point of view she narrates her stories.

The introducing epigraph, a quotation from Hawthorne, suggests that men's destiny can be changed, when they sow their seeds in new soil. That soil is exactly the place where new bonds of belonging can be built; no more based on the culture of homeland, not even based on the culture of a new country, but on the belief that we belong to the place where we want to stay.

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