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REPRESENTATIONS OF DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE THROUGH SPACE AND PLACE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH*

A b s t r a c t. The aim of the article is to investigate the experience of Indian diaspora presented in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Unaccustomed Earth*. Through the imagery connected with space and place Lahiri indicates differences between the experience of the first and second generation immigrants. Although the boundary between the categories of place and space is fluid (Tuan) it is possible to see a tendency to present the experience of the first generation mainly through imagery connected with space (movement, journey, dislocation, uprootedness) while the experience of the second generation is associated with place (motherhood, building a home, an attempt to grow roots), which therefore indicates a distinct character of each generation. The process of "growing roots" in a new place is time-consuming and does not happen within one generation lifespan. Interestingly, as the story shows, it can be more problematic for the second generation of diaspora than for the first. The representation of diasporic experience in the story frequently reflects scholars' ideas on diaspora (Safran, Clifford, Brah).

In her works of fiction Jhumpa Lahiri is interested in the presentation of the first and second generation of Indian immigrants, with a slightly stronger focus on the latter. She is herself a representative of this generation. Born in London to Bengali parents, she was raised on Rhode Island, and her experience is close to the experience of an "ABCD" — American-Born Confused Desi, a name that has been given to the children of Indian immigrants to the United States, and which is said to aptly capture their ambiguous and sometimes problematic situation. The author is preoccupied with the second generation's problems with identity and belonging, which are strictly connected with the questions of location and dislocation. In her fictions she explores their mental, emotional and social confusion

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which is a result of a life lived between the two places, India and America, and between two cultures, traditions, languages and sets of values. Lahiri does not, however, overlook the first generation's situation. Its presentation may seem to form only the background of the story but, in fact, it is crucial for the understanding of the experience of the children, e.g. in her novel *The Namesake* (2004).[1]

The title of Lahiri's second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* immediately directs the reader's attention to the problems of dislocation, travel, and building a new home. It denotes a new, strange land, a place that has been reached only after some journey. It also creates visions of a territory with a certain potential – unaccustomed earth can become accustomed in the future. An element that may generate even more positive associations in the reader's mind is a fragment from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Custom House*,[2] chosen as the epigraph for the collection. The excerpt from Hawthorne's novel presents the foundational story of America and proclaims a positive aspect of growth and development of man through the not necessarily positive experience of dislocation, migration, and the struggle to create a new home.

In this paper I would like to argue that through her use of space and place in the story "Unaccustomed Earth" Lahiri draws the reader's attention to the problem of the changing character of an Indian diaspora. Lahiri differentiates her presentations of the first and the second generation: while the former is shown mainly in terms of space by means of physical movement, the description of the second generation concentrates on images of being in *a place*, attempts to build a home and grow roots. Interestingly, physical mobility does not exclude a sense of belonging and an ability for attachment, although neither seems to be associated with a geographical place. Moreover, the presentation of the second generation through the images of home and place does not immediately indicate that the roots will successfully be grown in the place. Such a portrayal suggests that the process of growing roots in the new land is difficult and time-consuming, and the second generation may still not feel comfortable and completely settled.

[1] In *The Namesake* an Indian immigrant to America, Ashoke, decides to name his American-born son Gogol, after a famous Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. He is Ashoke's favourite and, what is more, Ashoke believes that it was the book by Gogol that saved his life in a train accident. Many people died when the train derailed, while Ashoke could not move because of the broken back. Fortunately, he was spotted and rescued thanks to the page of the book he was clutching in his hand. Ashoke does not explain his traumatic experience to his son. Unaware of the significance of his name (and also of his father's past), the boy feels vulnerable, starts to hate the name, and eventually legally changes it.

[2] "Human nature will not flourish, any more 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."

The distinction between space and place is not always clear. Although Yi-Fu Tuan, one of the precursors of "human geography", attempts to draw a line between the two, he admits that "the meaning of space often merges with that of place. . . . What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (6). The border between the two can sometimes be fluid, in order to define one of the concepts we need to use the other. The meanings that can be attached to space are movement, openness, freedom but also threat. Place means a pause in movement, a state of rest, and also intimacy, stability, security and rootedness. A sense of place may be evoked in various forms and on different scales. Not only a locality but also human relationships can constitute a place (TUAN 136-148). When it comes to the scale, different sizes of the place have to be considered: "At one extreme a favorite armchair is a place, at the other extreme the whole earth" (TUAN 149), between them there is a possibly infinite number of other sizes, including, for example, a building, city, region, country.

The question of spaces and places occupies a vital position within diaspora studies. According to anthropologist James Clifford, the experience shared by many diasporas, which is a constitutive element of their formation, is encapsulated in the homonymous pair *roots-routes*: "Diaspora cultures, thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (*Routes* 255). The first element of the pair – "roots" — refers to the memory of the land and culture of origin, the place for some reason abandoned, whereas "routes" refers to the enforced or voluntary movement: migrations and relocations. Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora* expands the understanding of "roots": "Paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about putting roots 'elsewhere'" (182). Thus, diasporas are involved in a struggle between place and movement, dislocation and dwelling, travel and home. These experiences are often accompanied by contradictory feelings, on the one hand those connected with the loss of homeland and necessity of exile, such as suffering and unhappiness, on the other hand feelings linked to the arrival at the new place: relief, hope, excitement and enjoyment.

As various scholars show, the term "diaspora" is problematic. Its definition is constantly changing (SAFRAN; CLIFFORD "Diasporas") because the discourse itself is "traveling" and "hybridizing in new global conditions" ("Diasporas" 306). Originally, "diaspora" used to describe the dispersion of the Jews and for some theorists the experiences of the Jewish diaspora serve as a normative experience.[3]

[3] For example William Safran's definition of diasporas treats the Jewish diaspora as the "ideal type." Safran accentuates six features of a diaspora: dispersion, cherishing memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return, maintaining ties with the homeland,

Presently, the term *diaspora* is opening up. Khachig Tölölian's often quoted definition of diasporas which are "the exemplary communities of the transnational moment" (5) marks the shift from a national paradigm towards a transnational. That the definition changes and adapts to new contexts is a natural course of events in the global history of migrations. Diasporas change due to different geo-historical conditions that shape them. Clifford explains this phenomenon:

> [D]iaspora discourse is being widely appropriated. It is loose in the world, for reasons having to do with decolonization, increased immigration, global communications, and transport – a whole range of phenomena that encourage multi-locale attachments, dwelling, and travelling within and across nations. . . . Whatever the working list of diasporic features, no society can be expected to qualify on all counts, throughout its history. And the discourse of diaspora will necessarily be modified as it is translated and adopted. ("Diasporas" 306)

Brah also indicates that it is difficult to homogenize the experiences of diaspora. In *Cartographies of Diaspora* she clarifies that the differentiation occurs not only from other diasporas but also within a single diaspora, the people of which may settle down in different countries and may be subject to various degrees of assimilation and/or resistance to the new culture. All in all, a diaspora is by no means a stable formation, and the term is constantly redefined by various diasporic communities in the world.

Lahiri's story signals that the contemporary Indian diaspora needs to be redefined because the experience of the first generation differs significantly from that of the second. The first generation immigrants leave the land of their birth, travel from India to America, and have a vivid memory of their homeland and awareness of their roots, sometimes strengthened by a wish to return, as it is the case of Ruma's mother. In the new place they initially go through a time of settling down, building a home and raising children (Ruma's parents). Nevertheless, in the present of the story they are described mainly in terms of physical movement: travelling in America or to foreign countries and lacking a sense of attachment to a physical location which could be their home. The representative of the second generation in the story, Ruma, is portrayed in the moment of creating a home, through images connected with place. Accordingly, the difference between the first and second generation is represented by the interplay of space and place images, and furthermore, it is reinforced by the alternating point

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and a collective identity of diasporans. That results, however, in a rather narrow definition, which does not embrace many historical diasporas, e.g. African American.

of view: the third person heterodiegetic narrator focalizes the story either through Ruma or her father. In this way points of divergence between father and daughter are shown.

The story revolves around one major event: Ruma, a 38-year-old woman settling down with her family in their new house in Seattle, is visited for several days by her widowed father, who lives in Pennsylvania. The characters' thoughts and reminiscences play a considerable role in the text and in this way other characters are introduced, that is Ruma's mother and Mrs. Bagchi.

Ruma's father came to the US to pursue his career in education — to win a doctoral degree in biochemistry and then find a well-paid job. He was not interested in cherishing his Bengali "roots" and very quickly broke his ties with India. When he returned to his homeland it was mainly for the sake of his wife. Now, after her death, he no longer feels obliged to go there, which is liberating for him. It seems that long journeys to visit relatives in India were always a burden, a duty he gladly discards. Neither is he tied to a place in America. He did not attach any particular meaning to the house in which he and his family lived for the most part of their life. After his wife's death he sold it and moved to a small apartment. The narrator reveals the feelings of liberation upon the move, which emphasize the man's desire to be freed from the responsibilities and constraints of the place or memories which are linked to it:

> It was a relief not to have to maintain the old house, to mow and rake the lawn, to replace the storm windows with screen in summer, only to have to reverse the process a few months later. It was a relief, too, to be living in another part of the state, close enough so things were still familiar, but far enough to feel different. In the old house he was still stuck in his former life. (LAHIRI 30)

Already a pensioner, Ruma's father becomes a traveler, who regularly visits European countries on package tours. Being on the move is quite natural for him but his presence in different places is fleeting, always detached, without any emotional involvement. The postcards Ruma receives from her father are usually of one type, her father wrote

> succinct, impersonal accounts of the things he had seen and done: 'Yesterday at Uffizi Gallery. Today a walk to the other side of Arno. A trip to Siena scheduled tomorrow.' Occasionally there was a sentence about the weather. But there was *never a sense of her father's presence* in those places. (LAHIRI 4 [italics mine])

It seems that her father enjoys the very act of travelling as well as the company of his fellow traveler, Mrs. Bagchi, rather than the fact of being in or getting to

know a new place. The trip from Pennsylvania he undertakes to visit his daughter in Seattle on the west coast is no trouble for him, even though he is seventy years old. He also promises Ruma to visit her again in the future to help with the newborn baby. Nevertheless he refuses to move in with her, he wants to live his own life. It does not bother him that he lives a long distance from his daughter and her family. His relationship with Mrs. Bagchi gives him a sense of stability and at the same time allows for independence.

The presentation of Mrs. Meenakshi Bagchi, who does not participate in the action of the story but is very much present in Ruma's father's thoughts, also reveals a concentration on movement and the detachment from a particular physical location. The woman decided to move to America after the tragic death of her husband in a scooter accident. Only twenty-six years old at the time, she feared that her parents would force her to remarry, so she chose to escape. She did not care about maintaining relationships with her relatives in India and went back there only to attend her parents' funerals. Not only did she break the ties with her homeland physically, but she separated also culturally from the place of her birth as for her it was synonymous with oppression, inequality of women, and the inability to choose one's own path in life. What drew her to America was not the location itself but a certain concept of America, offering freedom, independence and self-reliance. Mrs. Bagchi is an embodiment of these values: she received a doctoral degree, rejects cultural restrictions, has a well-paid job in an American university, a house on Long Island and is able to live on her own. She has adapted to the new conditions, which is manifested by her western appearance and lifestyle. Her unwillingness to marry goes against Indian traditions, so among other Bengalis in America she is considered not only an exception but also an "anomaly" (LAHIRI 8). Last but not least, Mrs. Bagchi travels extensively, which makes her similar to Ruma's father. This is how they met, on a trip, and this is what connects them — regular trips on which they go together.

Although detached from a physical location, Mrs. Bagchi is characterized as a person who can create strong emotional ties with people. Her "place" in life is her beloved husband. Without him (just as it would have happened if he were still alive) she can live almost anywhere, tied only to the memory of him and his photo. Nevertheless, she also forms an attachment with Ruma's father. It is not as strong as that with her husband but it shows her ability to bond emotionally, irrespective of physical proximity or a specific location.

The figure of Ruma's mother is more clearly characterized by the attachment to places than her husband or Mrs. Bagchi. This may result from the fact that she is predominantly presented through Ruma's and her father's recollections of the

family's past which was the time of settling down and raising children in America. Furthermore, she cherished her Indian roots, thus showing a strong attachment to the land of her birth.

For Ruma's mother the departure from India was a spousal duty. She left for America to accompany her husband on a career path. Separated from her homeland by a sense of obligation rather than a voluntary decision, she cherished the bond with her Bengali culture. She remained the only person in the family who eagerly maintained the relations with India. Her husband recollects how she forced the rest of the family to keep the tradition of visiting their Indian relatives, and that they filled her life with meaning, that she "had lived for these journeys" (LAHIRI 8). Her emotional ties with India are in contrast with those of her husband, as he undertook his journeys to Calcutta only while his parents were alive, and yet each time felt "sadness and shame" (LAHIRI 8) on return, as well as with those of their children, who, as they grew older, were less willing to go.

Ruma's mother was never forced to adapt to the new conditions of life in America and she never showed any willingness to do so. Instead she was indeed a preserver of homeland culture in its many aspects: cooking Indian food, wearing Indian clothes (her daughter inherited the collection of 218 saris after her death), speaking Bengali with her family and in general cherishing Indian customs. She fits one category of diaspora women as described by Clifford:

> [W]omen in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a "home" culture and tradition – selectively. Fundamental values of propriety and religion, speech and social food, body, and dress protocols are preserved and adapted in a network of ongoing connections outside the host country. ("Diasporas" 314)

Mentally and emotionally she remained connected to her homeland, which was her point of reference. She recreated the Indian home in America but was not interested in growing roots in the new land. With time and to a certain extent she adapted to the conditions of American life: most importantly, she finally accepted and responded with affection to her daughter's American husband.

With the passing time, just like the other two representatives of her generation portrayed in the story, Ruma's mother developed a late desire to visit other places. The father remembers this unusual change in her attitude, which at that time did not match his: "In the year before she died, his wife had begun to remark that although she had flown over Europe dozens of times in the process of travelling from Pennsylvania to Calcutta, she had never seen the canals of Venice or the Eiffel Tower or the windmills and tulips of Holland" (LAHIRI 19). Even though her wish remained unfulfilled, it is significant that she had such a need at all.

The representative of the second generation, Ruma, is shown mainly through her connections with places. These are shown through memories of other places and indications of her attachment to them, and the imagery of her own home building. Interestingly, to a certain extent Ruma's life, just like her parents', is marked by displacement, movement from place to place. Unlike her parents, she becomes unhappy with her dislocations, which may be read as her ability to form stronger attachments to places.

Born in Pennsylvania, after the college she finds a job in New York, gives birth to her son Akash there, and finally moves to Seattle because of her husband's new job. Ruma suffers from this change of locations, and her father has a lot of understanding for her, as he can see an analogy with his wife: "Like his wife, Ruma was now alone in this new place, overwhelmed, without friends, caring for a young child, all of it reminding him, too much, of the early years of his marriage" (LAHIRI 40). Nonetheless, Ruma's displacement is not as painful as his wife's: she changes houses within the borders of one country. Therefore she does not have to struggle with an entirely different language, food, behavior or customs. And yet she suffers from feelings of abandonment and strangeness in the new place, where she has no friends like those she left in Brooklyn, who "had known the everyday details of her life" (LAHIRI 34). Also when her father visits her on the other coast she has a feeling of regret:

> The sight of her father's rental car, a compact maroon sedan, upset her, freshly confirming 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, had set foot. The connections her family 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)

Quite obviously, it is difficult for Ruma to start anew in her new place, to form attachments straight away. She feels it is not natural for a person of her age. Thus, for the time being, she is only able to exchange pleasantries with her neighbors (LAHIRI 34).

The narrative captures Ruma in a particular moment of her life: it is a moment of building a home. She is presented in a new environment: a new city, a new house, and with new duties. On the west coast she does not undertake a job but instead decides to stay home with her son Akash and, as she is pregnant again, to prepare for the birth of another child. For the most part she is presented inside the house: caring for Akash, picking up things after him, preparing food, or sorting out clothes for the new baby. Her concentration on taking care of a home is

exemplified also by her sense of duty towards her father. Since her mother is dead, she feels obliged to offer her father a place under her roof, for, according to her parents' tradition, "in India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her" (LAHIRI 6). However, she is very hesitant about making the offer; she discusses the issue repeatedly with her husband, and does not seem to know whether it would indeed be her preferred solution.

There is a link between Ruma's indecisiveness and her unhappiness. Her reservations about offering her father a place to live in her house reflect her being torn between cultures and between two different perceptions of familial duty: Indian, which focuses on a close-knit family, and the American, which stresses independence and self-reliance of a person. Ruma is suspended between the two systems of values. Although raised in America, well educated, and at the beginning of a professional career as a lawyer, she unconsciously starts to imitate her mother's example. As a result, her life reflects very traditional concepts of marriage and family with a man who is a breadwinner, and a woman who chiefly fulfills domestic duties. Ruma is suspended between two cultures, unable to agree to one and adhere to it. Choosing one way of life, she regrets rejecting the other. Accordingly, she is dissatisfied with her decisions, unhappy about what is happening in her life. Constantly negotiating her identity, she is unable to specify where she belongs, and this makes it difficult for her to settle down.

The narrative raises further doubts about Ruma's ability to grow roots in her new place. Two elements hint at this reading: Ruma's relationship with her husband Adam and her attitude towards the garden. Adam is present in the narrative only through phone calls and Ruma's thoughts, which is a reflection of his scarce presence in the life of the nuclear family. He works for a hedge fund and goes on multiple business trips. As a result, he does not participate in Ruma's daily struggles with the child and household and cannot understand her situation well. Though his absences contribute also to her feeling of loneliness, she realizes that the situation is even worse when he is at home, and that she and Adam "[are] separate people leading separate lives" (LAHIRI 26). Ruma starts to feel a "wall" between herself and Adam, which the reader may also sense in their short, inconclusive conversations that lack warmth and tenderness.

The garden, which Ruma and her husband acquire with the new house, is still uncultivated when Ruma's father visits his daughter's new place. The man eagerly starts to work in it: he waters flowers, digs the soil and plants new shrubbery. He plants his Indian wife's favorite flowers — hydrangea, tomatoes for Ruma, and he lets his American grandson plant some of his toys and garbage collection. The father wants to beautify the place, but through his work he also

transforms it from an unfamiliar, unaccustomed plot into a familiar piece of land, which will make Ruma and her family feel comfortable. There is, however, little promise that the woman will continue his work and maintain the garden in the future, for when he explains how she should take care of the plants she listens patiently but "absorb[s] little of what her father [is saying]" (LAHIRI 51). The scene shows a contrast between Ruma and her father. His fleeting presence in her place produces a considerable change — a transformed garden. The man literally grows roots in the place and creates something (e.g. the bond with his grandson Akash), but, typically of him at this moment of life, he does not want to commit himself to the location. Ruma is going to live in the place, yet it is uncertain whether she will carry on her father's project of maintaining the garden, and whether she will have a successful family life.

The garden is a symbol of America, which is an unfamiliar, foreign place for all immigrants but which with the passing time may become accustomed by the new inhabitants. Nevertheless the feeling of belonging to the place does not appear straight away, just like a seed takes time to grow and appear on the surface. Thus when Akash is impatient to see the fruits of their gardening his grandfather explains:

> "When will the plants come out?"
> "Soon."
> "Tomorrow?"
> "Not so soon. These things take time, Akash." (LAHIRI 49)

As presented in the story, the immigrants' process of adaptation and putting roots down in a place is time-consuming. It is neither the first nor the second generation of immigrants that is able to successfully settle down in the new country. The first generation has made the decision to come and live in the new country, and so they are quite willing to adapt to the new conditions and new culture. Yet, even though on the surface they adopt American lifestyle and appearance, they do not develop strong bonds with physical places, which is particularly indicated by the garden scene: the father grows various plants in the garden but he refuses to stay in the place. The narrative captures the life of perpetual migrants, moving from place to place. They put more value on creating emotional bonds with another person, who can therefore be considered a "place". This is why Ruma's father refuses to move in with Ruma and her family and decides to go back to his life on the east coast and the routine of foreign travels with Mrs. Bagchi. The representative of the second generation, Ruma, although portrayed in terms of places rather than spaces, is also unable to settle down

successfully. This is indicated most vividly by her overwhelming feeling of unhappiness. Her discomfort can be read as the second generation's problem with identity, which is caused by living between two cultures and two systems of values.

Although the story puts an emphasis on showing the experiences of the representatives of the first generation diasporans in terms of space and the experiences of the second generation in terms of place, it is impossible to draw a clear line which would separate strictly the two kinds of experience. Firstly, the boundary between the categories of space and place is often fluid, so in order to discuss the story's characters one has to refer to both categories; secondly, the characters are representatives of a diaspora, and so they constantly live the tension between movement and its lack, between space and place. This is true of every character in the story. Ruma has moved to Seattle to eventually settle down, build a home and take care of her family. Her father, having sold the family house, no longer attaches great importance to the place in which he lives but starts to travel. The important thing is that he chooses a particular person to travel with, Mrs. Bagchi. This relationship creates a sense of stability and belonging for him, in other words, a sense of place. Ruma's mother is remembered as being emotionally attached to India, despite the long physical separation from the place of her birth. This attachment is shown by her cherishing her Bengali roots and recreating an Indian home in America. Yet, when she eventually adapts to the conditions of life in America, she develops a desire to tour Europe. As it can be seen, any discussion of the characters' experience reveals their connection both with movement and with places, which can be understood quite broadly.

The presentation of the Indian diaspora in the story draws attention to its complexity. It sensitizes the reader to nuances and diversity within the Indian community. This diversity can be observed both synchronically (within a generation) and diachronically (between generations). Lahiri points out that it is difficult for one generation of diasporans to complete the entire journey from the physical displacement from their homeland and the separation from their roots to putting down roots in a new place. A process of becoming accustomed to the new earth, of changing the unfamiliar into the familiar is also a process of transforming one's own identity. As such it requires a long period of time and sometimes one generation is not enough to overcome the feelings of "strangeness" in the new land and to make a place one's permanent home.

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OBRAZOWANIE DOŚWIADCZENIA DIASPORY POPRZEZ MIEJSCE I PRZESTRZEŃ W *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH* JHUMPY LAHIRI

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie doświadczenia przedstawicieli indyjskiej diaspory, które zostało przedstawione w opowiadaniu *Unaccustomed earth* („Nieoswojona ziemia") amerykańskiej pisarki Jhumpy Lahiri. Poprzez obrazowanie związane z miejscem i przestrzenią Lahiri różnicuje doświadczenie pierwszego i drugiego pokolenia imigrantów. Mimo że granica między kategoriami miejsca i przestrzeni jest często płynna i nie jest możliwe ich ścisłe rozdzielenie (Tuan), w opowiadaniu widoczna jest tendencja do przedstawiania zróżnicowanych doświadczeń pierwszego pokolenia głównie przez obrazowanie związane z przestrzenią (ruch, podróż, dyslokacja, wykorzenienie), a drugiego – z miejscem (macierzyństwo, tworzenie domu, próba zakorzenienia). W ten sposób autorka wskazuje na zmianę dokonującą się w charakterze diaspory pomiędzy pokoleniami. Proces „wrastania" w nowe miejsce jest długotrwały i dlatego nie odbywa się w ciągu życia jednej generacji, a nawet, jak pokazuje opowiadanie, może być kłopotliwy dla drugiego pokolenia diaspory. Reprezentacja doświadczenia przedstawicieli diaspory w opowiadaniu odzwierciedla tezy badaczy na temat diaspory i doświadczenia określanego jako diasporyczne (Safran, Clifford, Brah).

Streściła Iwona Filipczak

Key words: Jhumpa Lahiri, diaspora, space, place.

Słowa kluczowe: Jhumpa Lahiri, diaspora, przestrzeń, miejsce.