



Voice of the Present: Overlapping Spaces in and around in Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth

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Abstract

In the last decade or so, many varied themes have emerged as vocal subclasses of Indian English fiction. Writers as part and parcel of society reflect in their writings the spaces in and around. Barriers in adaptations, a longing for 'Home', inability to relate to life in India owing to long absence and an enervating lack of a sense of belonging somewhere remain persistent feature of the psycho-cultural expanse that the Indian immigrant inhabits, are beautifully portrayed in the writings of many Diasporic Indian Writers.

In the above perspective, the paper would be to stimulate 'Unaccustomed Earth' a new collection of stories of Jhumpa Lahiri in the world of social transition. The central theme of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel and short stories is woman and her relation with the family and society. Family's trials and tribulations fret and fever in an uncongenial atmosphere, the tireless efforts of immigrants to make an identity in an alien society.

The paper also attempts the writer's perspective regarding hybrid conflicts, struggle to balance binary relationships and open ended solutions to closed problems.

Invisible flowers, invisible relationships both though invisible but weaves lives together permeating fragrance making life meaningful, happy and worth-living¹. Whether it is one's own land or on foreign soil, the human emotions and intricacies in relationships are perplexing and disentangled. Jhumpa Lahiri, has in her stories treated the human relationship with stark realism. She seems to write her stories with an Indian heart but with an American mind. She, through her works has beautifully portrayed the multicultural conflict and 'complex and conflicted world of Indian immigrants in the United States'².

Story telling has been as natural to Jhumpa Lahiri as leaves are to a tree. Her first person feminine gender narrative technique makes the female protagonists project their emotions and conflicts in accordance to their point of view. We can see subtle depiction of multiculturalism, political, psychological and ever

religious concerns in her stories. Lahiri's admiring reviewers in Britain and the US have most frequently compared her sensibility and approach to those of Chekov's and Tolstoy's. They have found similarities between her and the Canadian master, Alice Munro³.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winning collection of short stories '*Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal and Boston and Beyond*', they focus on the conflict of Indian immigrants between the traditions they have inherited and life they live in and the isolation they encounter. In her debut novel, '*The Namesake*' Jhumpa Lahiri tries to depict an Indian Bengali family who are assimilating themselves with the American life style. They undergo certain traumatic experiences such as nostalgia, rootless and identity crisis.⁴

Jhumpa Lahiri's recent collection of short stories '*An Unaccustomed Earth*' published in 2008 are spectacular collection of six stories which focus on the lives of Indian immigrants who assimilating and acculturating at different levels of life in a more seasoned manner. Through my paper, I wish to explore, how writer and society have human issues, relationships and compatibility through her latest collection of short stories, India is an inescapable in all of her stories. She explores Indianness in all of them. All the protagonists of Jhumpa Lahiri's stories are all Indians and are settled abroad. They suffer from alienation in and out.

In this scintillating collection of jewel like short stories, she exposes the many ironies of daily life in a society based nomenclature. The collection falls under two heads:

The first section charts the emotional journeys of protagonists seeking 'self', beyond the barriers of nature and culture. The second part of the collection is in the first person narration concerning pictorial and graphic detail of Hema and Kaushik, the main protagonists. Here, Jhumpa Lahiri also uses the stream of consciousness method to describe the thought process and inner emotional conflicts of Hema and Kaushik.

In the story titled '*An Unaccustomed Earth*' Ruma, the female protagonist confronts cultural conflict. Being an Indian and as a dutiful daughter her inner conscience directs her to make a home for her father,

she was aware her brother would never take the responsibility. But she also wanted to guard her individual life which she had recently created. “Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand... It would mean an end to the family she created at her own.” (UE-7)

Lahiri thus reveals that when the immigrants acquire new cultural traits, they confront the feeling of ‘in-betweenness’⁴. They want to be assimilated into the new society but traces of their native culture still persist. The story also highlights the dilemmas faced by people living in other countries. They suffer from a sense of rootless and alienation, ‘and his wife had lived for these journeys and until both his parents died, a part of him lived for them too’. (UE-8) and also neither can they feel oneness with the country to which they have migrated nor can they maintain the relationship with their family members whom they have left behind. “For what had he done, when his father was dying, even his mother was left behind?” (UE-29)

“Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali (in Ruma) was slipping from her.” (UE-11) The result was Ruma never insisted her son Akash to learn or speak Bengali but was elated and ashamed when she heard her father teaching common Bengali words to Akash. The sharp contrast between her previous life and present life is visible at almost every step. The story is replete with references to Indian life style. It symbolizes privilege, economic and social status. Her father, a middle aged man discovers that the death of his wife had opened up his world in an unexpected way. “In the past year he had visited France, Holland and most recently, Italy.” (UE- 3)

But back when his wife was alive he had no interest in taking such a trip around the world, he was adverse to his wife’s adventurous love and had throughout his married life, he never bothered to take a vacation together or alone. Ironically, now he is ready to claim his freedom, he wants to get away from the unsaid responsibilities of his daughter’s family and at this stage needs a grounding companionship to look forward in life.

In her second story ‘*Hell Heaven*’ Jhumpa Lahiri deals with the plight of a Bengali female immigrant who is caught up in a maze of material life and ‘an unanticipated pleasure’ of life. The narrator’s mother knew

her boundaries and that she would never cross her threshold yet wanted to enjoy pure happiness. The advent of Pranab Chakraborty and his wooing her as no other man had, even made the narrator accept: “It is clear to me now that my mother was in love with him.” (UE-67)

Later when Pranab was about to marry his girlfriend Deborah, she herself confesses: “He used to be so different. I don’t understand how a person can change so suddenly. It is just Hell-Heaven, the difference.” (UE-68)

But in the end, a visible change was perceived when she resigned to the fact that her marriage was more secure and comforting compared to the illusions she was chasing. The narrator notices: “in an odd way, as my parents approached their old age, she and my father had grown fond of each other, out of habit if nothing else” (UE-81) and also in the end: “I noticed a warmth between my parents that had not been there before, a quiet teasing, a solidarity, a concern when one of them fell ill.” (UE- 81) One can often see in Lahiri’s stories emotional turmoil often mysterious and self-administered.

In her next story ‘*A Choice of Accommodations*’, Amit, the protagonist wants to adjust between his past and his present relationships. He never wanted to revisit his past but on receiving ‘only the invitation’ from Pam Borden’s wedding his former classmate, he felt both quietly elated and solicitous, (UE-100), and reached there to attend the marriage along-with his wife Megan. The marriage takes place at Langford Academy, a boarding from where he had graduated eighteen years ago. Here, Jhumpa Lahiri explores the inner worlds of the individual with insight and intensity and the incredible power of the family and the relationship with the family members.

In other story ‘*Only Goodness*’ we see a sister trying to save her brother from alcohol subjugation, her sisterly love reinstating the trust which is shown by her brother towards her family but in the end felt deceived and cheated. She feels caught in a web where she finds herself rejecting him like all other members of their family. She before her marriage makes a mark as an eminent respectable economist, later when married to an Englishman she breaches her family’s ties. When Sudha’s son is born, she reunites

with her family “their tiny grandson plugging up the monstrous hole left behind in his wake”(UE-118)Lenora Todaro rightly said “Lahiri’s not an original stylist-no mysterious Hawthronian symbolism, or Marquezian flight of fancy-but she captures these moments with clarity and grace , a tangible knowledge of how souls twist in the wind.”²⁵ The story also projects the conventional difficulties faced by a girl after marriage and emotional upheavals of a wife and a mother.

Part two of the collection consists of three stories, ‘*Once in a lifetime; Year’s End and Going Ashore*’, which are all so delicately interwoven that there is beauty in detail narration by the protagonists in first person and there are no digressions, no diversions and we feel totally linked up with the main theme and the end leads to the culmination of feelings of the narrator Hema at the climax. The story of Hema and Kaushik whose lives overlap over the years, they fall in love hate relationship, are united, but separated and reunited forever in the end.

Thus, after examining various stories in the latest collection ‘*An Unaccustomed Earth*’ we find a spectrum of voices, the overlapping worlds of tradition and modernism, of collective responsibilities and individual preferences, subtle progress of writer’s thoughts ideas and emotions revealing through the inner core of the protagonists. We have female protagonists at the centre, analyzing, remembering, recapitulating or evaluating and relationship. Women are portrayed in all roles. They are shown fulfilling their duties as a mother, daughter, sister, wife and lover. One can see a kind of conflict in their mind.

Jhumpa Lahiri has delve minutely into the psyche of her character and present their emotions, sensibility and sensitivity. All their feelings and thoughts are laid before the reader.

References:

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- 3 “Bookest of them all” in Editorial, “Keyboard Capers” New Delhi: Hindustan Times, Sept. 11, 2008.
- 4 Daiya, Krishna. “Post-Independence Women Short Story Writers in Indian English”. New Delhi, Sarup and Sons, 2006.
- 5 Aguiar, Arun. “One on One with Jhumpa Lahiri” Pifmagazine.com. Interview. July 28, 1999. Pifmagazine, October 8, 2001 (<http://www.pifmagazine.com/vol28/i-agni.shtml>)
- 6 “Bookest of them all” in Editorial, “Keyboard Capers” New Delhi: Hindustan Times, Sept. 11, 2008.
- 7 Lahiri, Jhumpa. “An Unaccustomed Earth”, India: Random House,2008.

All the references are from this edition and marked (UE).
