Appendix III. A Review of Jhumpa Lahiri’s Unaccustomed Earth

Jhumpa Lahiri’s new collection of short stories, titled Unaccustomed Earth, has the span and thematic breadth of a novel, and yet each story is distinct and self-contained. Lahiri’s study of displaced lives that started with her first collection of short stories, Interpreter of Maladies, continues, but undoubtedly, in a deeper and somber tone. In this book Lahiri, like in her novel, The Namesake, delves into darker territories of family life in dislocated existence. Here her focus is mainly on the second generation of migrants where hybridity is personified in the number of cross-cultural relationships like those of Ruma-Adam, Pranab-Deborah, Amit-Megan, Sudha-Roger, and so on. Lahiri’s eye for detailing the immigrant experience, seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary, is moving. In fact movement is the quintessence of all the stories. In the first story, which gives the name to the collection, Ruma’s father, as a world tourist in his old age, decides not to stay put in a place and in the last story the very earth itself is found to move diabolically.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one has five stand-alone stories whereas part two, subtitled “Hema and Kaushik”, has three interconnected stories. The story “Hell-Heaven” from part one is the shortest of the collection. Usha, a second-generation migrant, narrates about the visits of a family friend, Pranab “Kaku”, to her home when she was a child. It depicts the friendship between Pranab and Usha’s mother, Aparna, Pranab’s eventual marriage with an American named Deborah, and Aparna’s disapproval of the match. The story shows the strain in the relationship between Usha and Aparna because of their differing lifestyles as American and Indian respectively. Aparna sustains herself in the strong belief that Deborah will one day leave Pranab. Years later, it is Pranab who leaves, divorcing Deborah when he falls in love with a married Bengali
woman. Deborah surprises Aparna by revealing to her that all the years of her marriage she had been secretly jealous of her because Aparna knew a part of her husband's life from which she had been shut out by Pranab. But a still darker confession comes to the fore – the confession of Aparna's jealousy, not made to Deborah but to her daughter, Usha. The horror of it shows the depth of Aparna's desires and her intense angst, something that brings the story into a new perspective. It sets the mood for the volume.

Secrets and surprises loom at every corner and yet nothing is apparent. Unexpectedly, Ruma discovers through a misplaced letter the secret of her father's new love interest after the death of her mother in the short story "Unaccustomed Earth." Unexpectedly, a couple rediscover their love for each other in a dorm room at an old friend's wedding in the short story "A Choice of Accommodations." Amit and Megan's marriage has almost "disappeared" as they have transformed themselves into just parents of two growing girls and yet they surprise themselves in the weekend off from parenting. In the short story "Only Goodness", Lahiri explores sibling relationship in diasporic life in such a resonant way that even in a brief space she can be dense in the intricacies of depiction. Sudha finds herself helpless as she watches her brother, Rahul, succumb to alcoholism and the gulf between him and their parents increasingly widens. She is reluctant and incapable to tackle the situation, and takes an escapist view of it. But some years later when Rahul comes to London to visit his newborn nephew, she sees signs of his redemption. And yet again Rahul betrays her belief leaving her no choice but to reject him finally. In the last story of part one, "Nobody's Business", Paul, an American housemate of Sang/Sangeeta, finds himself getting involved in the sticky web of love-relationships of Sang, her
Egyptian boyfriend Farouk, and Diedre. Paul is a confidante of both Sang and Diedre, and unwittingly becomes Farouk's rival.

The first story of part two, "Once in a Lifetime", is narrated by Hema, whereas the second story, "Year's End", has Kaushik as the narrator. "Once in a Lifetime" deals with the tragic death of Kaushik's mother due to cancer. When Kaushik's family moves back to America from India, they stay with Hema's family for sometime until they get the new house. Hema, when six years old, had not liked Kaushik, but now as a thirteen year old, she is infatuated by him. She also learns to appreciate the sophistication of Kaushik's mother. Then one day Kaushik confides to her about his mother's illness, revealing the pain that hides behind the glamour of their life. The next story, "Year's End", is about Kaushik's coming to terms with the presence of his step-mother, Chitra, who is nearer his age than his father's, and lacks all the elegance that his own mother possessed. More intriguing is Kaushik's growth of affection for his kid step-sisters, Rupa and Piu, until the girls retrieve from its hiding place the taped box that concealed Kaushik's mother's photographs purposely banished from sight. The girls' mischief enrages Kaushik. All affection drains out of him and he acts emotionally and rather cruelly to abandon the girls alone in the house. Far away he digs the earth and buries the box.

The thread does not end here. A chance meeting in Rome, when Hema and Kaushik are in their late thirties, ignites an ephemeral but passionate relationship. The last story, "Going Ashore", is an excess – an excess that shows Lahiri's power of imagination, an excess that consummates the theme, an excess that would have been too sweet had it not been tragic, an excess that has the air of inevitability. Hema and Kaushik's union comes at a time when they are on the verge of settling down – Hema in marriage with Navin,
and Kaushik in his new job in Hong Kong. They separate. Hema goes to India and Kaushik, on a holiday, to Khao Lak in Thailand. But now it is the turn of the continental plates of the earth to shift. The last few pages lead excruciatingly to the inevitability of the tsunami. Thereafter, the narration reverts from third person to the first person of Hema, bringing the story and the book towards its closure. Lahiri revels in the craft of story telling. The book is a tour-de-force and a document of the age and time seen through the human experience and how!

Publication details:

Appendix IV. The Namesake: The Book and the Film

Mira Nair’s film *The Namesake*, based on the novel of the same name by Jhumpa Lahiri, is a faithful representation of the book. The novel and the movie are two very different media and when a literary work is put successfully on celluloid, cinematic considerations have to be made. No doubt, the novel has the advantage of keeping the readers involved for a considerable period of time whereas the film has only about a couple of hours’ span to keep the viewers engrossed. On the other hand the film has visuals and music that impact the mind and stay in memory for a long time. That is why it is not an easy task to say which of the two – the book or the film – is better. Since the media are different the judgment is on different parameters and hence a book and a movie cannot be objectively compared.

Subjectively, the book and the film deal with the same topic of displacement and the creation of identity. The film is more or less true to the narrative of the novel. It is only incidental that in the film Ashoke and Ashima come to New York instead of Boston as in the novel. Moreover, cinematically the Howrah bridge over the Hooghly in Calcutta and the 59th Street bridge over the East River in New York connect the two cities and help in the comparison of two different cultures. The film opens with Ashoke Ganguli’s train accident and progresses with Ashoke’s arranged marriage with Ashima, their migration to the US. The book though differs slightly and opens with the impending birth of Gogol and then goes back in time to narrate about Ashoke’s train accident and his marriage. The book informs the readers about how Ashoke was miraculously rescued from the accident site even though Gogol comes to know about it much later. Interestingly the film keeps not only Gogol but the viewers too in the dark for a length of time about how Ashoke was
rescued. The episode of Ashoke’s rescue is reserved for flashback. Thus when Ashoke, looking at his newly born child, remarks that being rescued from the shattered train was the first miracle of his life and Gogol’s birth is the second miracle, it does not cause as much impact as the written words of the book do. But the movie has the advantage of showing over time Ashoke’s slight limp due to this accident that the book cannot reiterate through words.

The book *The Namesake* is dense in details and all incidents that occur in the book naturally do not find place in the film. The film does not mention the Montgomerys, the owner of the place where Ashoke and Ashima initially live and whose washing machine they share. This omission in the film occasions Ashima’s visit to a seamy launderette and her realization that woolens shrink on being washed in a washing machine. This leads to an endearing scene between Ashoke and Ashima depicting how the newly weds find each other’s company comforting in an alien land. But this gain in insight comes at the cost of the incidents where Ashima mistakenly assumes that the Montgomerys are Christians, though they are Buddhists, and where Judy Montgomery mistakenly assumes that the Gangulis, being Indians, are vegetarians, though they are not so.

The growth of Gogol occurs at an unhurried pace in the novel but the film had to compromise on that front due to the constraint of time and thus leaves out few vital incidents of Gogol’s life. One such incident is of Ashima lifting the child Gogol high over her head and a stream of undigested milk from Gogol’s last feeding regurgitates from Gogol’s mouth into Ashima’s open mouth. It puts the mother-son relationship into a new perspective, emphasizing on unseen ties that bind a family. Another important incident missing from the film is of Gogol coming home one day from his school field
trip with the gravestone rubbings of obsolete names – probably of the first immigrants to America. Gogol’s growing-up romances with Kim and Ruth are also deleted from the film script. Similar is the case with Moushumi whose relationship and break-up with Graham is just cursorily mentioned in the film whereas the novel had the luxury of detailing the incidents and thereby garnering greater sympathy for the character. But keeping aside these exclusions the film does touch on so many incidents that sometimes it becomes preposterous to demand for more or for greater depth.

Gogol’s life in the film revolves around his romance with Maxine, Ashoke’s death, and his failed marriage with Moushumi. Ashoke’s death is pivotal in both the novel as well as the film. In the book Ashoke’s death is prefaced by the depiction of Ashima’s loneliness whereas the film prefaches it with Ashoke revealing to Gogol about his rescue from the train accident and thereby the significance in his life of the expatriate Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, his son’s namesake. The novel goes back in time after Ashoke’s death to depict the Ganguli family’s visit to Cape Cod. But the film fractures this visit of little Gogol to the seashore into two parts – one occurring in the first half of the film and the other occurring towards the end of the film. After the incident of Ashoke’s death, the film features Gogol’s break-up with Maxine instead. The break-up does seem abrupt but that is inevitably a fallout of condensing of episodes. Such abruptness is also seen in Gogol’s break-up with Moushumi, who has an affair with a man called Pierre in the movie. Moushumi’s lover’s name is changed from Dimitri in the book to Pierre in the film perhaps because the latter sounds more French, stressing on Moushumi’s French connections. But since the incident is not elaborated in the movie, it could not be shown how for the first time in Gogol’s life another man’s name upsets him more than his own.
Maybe that is why the film does not end with Gogol retrieving the book *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, gifted to him long ago by his father, and starting to read its first story “The Overcoat”. The film conjures another episode at the end and goes a step further to show Ashima back in Calcutta practicing Indian classical vocal as the credit titles roll on.

Despite all these variances with the book the film is craftily made. Like the book it faithfully renders what it set out to explore – the universal themes of migration and ambivalence of living simultaneously in two worlds. But the film is not the run of the mill cliché ridden diaspora stuff with lots of melodrama. The film is a tribute to Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, as the credit titles suggest, and so there is no doubt that it has to adhere to the aforementioned masters’ standard of filmmaking. That Mira Nair successfully negotiates such a daunting proposition is proof of her talent. The scene where Ashima looks through the pier glass window at the lonely figure of Ashoke walking through the snow to work speaks volumes for the depiction of the state of alienation in a foreign land that hundreds of words might fail to deliver. Even in a difficult-to-film scene where Ashima steps into Ashoke’s shoes and the lingering sweat of Ashoke’s feet mingles with hers causing Ashima’s heart to race, the low-angle shots of Ashima in her would-be husband’s shoes aptly display her clandestine pleasure. Often when the literary medium puts up a challenge the aid comes in music (from *Bauls* and *Bhatiali* to Bollywood and Blues) and visuals (How the narrative pauses when the Ganguli family visits the Taj Mahal!). In fact the scenes of the Howrah station, Ghosh’s voice urging Ashoke to go abroad, and Ashoke’s enigmatic presence even after his death generously compensate for any miniscule flaw. Overall it is Mira Nair’s direction accompanied by competent acting by Irrfan Khan as Ashoke, Tabu as Ashima, Kal Penn
as Gogol, Jacinda Barrett as Maxine, Zuleikha Robinson as Moushumi, and many others that make the film memorable and a grand success.

Publication details:
