Chapter V

*The Unaccustomed Earth*

Jhumpa Lahiri’s second collection of short stories published in the year 2008 is *The Unaccustomed Earth*. It has two parts: the first part with five short stories and the second part with three. The first five short stories are: “The Unaccustomed Earth,” “Hell Heaven,” “A Choice of Accommodation,” “Only Goodness” and “Nobody’s Business.” The second part has the following three stories: “Once in Lifetime,” “Year’s End” and “Going Ashore.” The stories of the first part are thematically related. They are about the immigrant experiences of a Bengali family. The central characters appear in the first part also appear in the second part.

The title story “The Unaccustomed Earth” is about the central character, Ruma, living a hectic life and turning to taking care of her son after the impact of her mother’s death on her. “Hell Heaven” is a story narrated by a daughter about her mother’s love and marriage. “A choice of Accommodation” is a frank presentation of the relationship between a husband and a wife. “Only Goodness” is a poignant story centring around a sister, Sudha, and a brother, Rahul. Sudha introduces her brother the habit of drinking, and it
takes him to alcoholism, which finally makes Sudha lose her little son. “Nobody’s Business” is about the love of an American, Paul, for an Indian girl, Sang. “Hema and Kaushik” is the title of the second part of the stories: “Once in Lifetime,” “Year’s End” and “Going Ashore” This second part is about a triangular love affair of Hema, Kaushik and Navin, ending in the death of Kaushik.

Jhumpa Lahiri borrows this title from The Scarlet Letter in “The Customs House” by Nathaniel Hawthorn:

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 their roots into unaccustomed earth. (qtd. in Agarwal 13)

Apt to the quotes, Lahiri in her collection of short stories “The Unaccustomed Earth” takes up a broader perspective and exhorts diasporic people to make an effort to locate themselves in an alien land and the results will certainly be favorable. Lahiri seems to suggest that human nature may atrophy if people continue to toil in the same worn out soil. There is a need for a change in the perspective of diasporic community towards the host
culture. The adoption and acculturation can solve many problems of these people. The alien soil is not only a way for the materialistic progress, it can also nurture them mentally and they can find “kinship and beauty in unexpected places” (Agarwal 173) as well.

This collection of short stories paints a powerful picture of life in the Indian American diaspora. She describes the lives of the first and second generations of Indian immigrants who have settled in America, most of her protagonists being second generation characters. These characters face the opportunities and challenges of belonging to two different cultures, and must continuously negotiate an intermediate position within and between two cultures. They occupy a middle ground which could easily turn into a battle ground between the Indian and the American parts of their identities, but the characters in the collection strive to maintain ties to both cultures, identifying themselves as Indian Americans. Thus, no matter how predominantly Indian or American they feel, Lahiri’s characters still retain a sense of self as Indian Americans. The continuous renegotiation of their identities lies at the core of The Unaccustomed Earth, offering an interesting perspective on the stories. The Indian American community that Lahiri describes consists almost
exclusively of Bengali characters. Bengalis are one of the numerous peoples of India, but they were singled out for Anglicization and trusted with positions within the colonial bureaucracy by the English colonizers, who referred to them as “the respectable classes in Bengal” (Anderson 91). This emblem of respectability and privilege seems to have been transported to America, and the Bengali characters of Lahiri’s short stories all come from highly educated and financially secure backgrounds.

In the collection Jhumpa Lahiri takes up the universal theme of human relationship between father and daughter, brother and sister, husband and wife, grandmother and grand-daughter very sensitively. She talks about the problems of the second generation diaspora after their assimilation in the host culture. Very succinctly and elaborately Jhumpa Lahiri has discussed the dilemmas, conflicts and confusions which have cropped up in the minds of these young people about their adjustments, adaptations and assimilations in the new country. The different cultural perspective towards life brings chasms in their relationship with their parents and other relatives. Sometimes there is a desire to bridge the gaps and to arrive at certain
compromises. This act of assimilation and adaptation has given rise to a hybrid culture where new hopes, new cultures, new identities have emerged out of this cultural interaction.

The title story “The Unaccustomed Earth” presents the shades of complexity in the relationship of a retired father and his daughter Ruma. Ruma is living in Seattle with her American husband and son Akash. After her mother’s death, her father retires. In order to do away with isolation, he travels distant places of Europe, where he had never been. Before his next visit to Prague, Ruma’s father visits her in Seattle. The whole story revolves round his visit to Seattle where the inner workings of both of the characters are minutely depicted. Ruma and her father are the two central characters who live their lives in their own ways and do not want any interference. The complexity in the relationship between Ruma and her father is depicted through a psychological analysis. Ruma’s father sells the large house that he shared with his wife and shifts to a condominium. On one European trip, he meets Mrs. Bagchi, a Bengali woman who was a young widow at the age of twenty six. He establishes propinquity and hides this new relationship from Ruma.
Ruma’s relationship with her father has not been harmonious. It has been a biological relationship between father and daughter, void of emotional closeness. The only mediator between her and her father was her mother who is dead now. Ruma is deeply moved by the news of the sale of her parental house to which her childhood memories were attached. Ruma, during her pre-marital life was disposed to the western way of life and did not want any meddling from her father while selecting either her subjects of study or her life partner. Notwithstanding a persistent disapproval of her parents, she got married to an American boy, Adam. Her father’s authoritative attitude filled her with aversion towards him.

Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she’d created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child that would come in January, conceived just before the move. (UE 7)

Ruma’s assumptions about her father are based on her sense of individualism, an essential feature of western life. Though her father is well aware of Ruma’s attitude, her independence and
individualism, he regards it as retribution of time since he left behind his parents in India. Lahiri presents the predicament of immigrants through Ruma’s father, who leave their relatives back in India in the pursuit of better future prospects. But in this pursuit, the next generation delinks from its values and culture, as conspicuous through the attitude of his off springs.

The story begins with a retrospective reflection 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 comments, as well as her resentment for his being so emotionally distant from her. Lahiri depicts this lack of communication between father and daughter in these words:

The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had ever received from her father. In her thirty-eight years had 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 at 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. (UE-4)

During her father’s visit, Ruma perceives changes. He establishes proximity with Ruma’s son Akash, cultivates her desolate garden and plants hydrangea in the memory of his late wife. Ruma now offers a permanent home to him but he declines. He wishes to visit when the baby is born. After his departure Ruma comes to know about Mrs. Bagchi through a lost picture post card, addressed to Mrs. Bagchi written by her father. She comes to know “the reason for her father’s trips, the reasons for his good spirits, the reason [why] he did not want to live in Seattle”(UE 58.) Ruma is mortified with grief and astonished and wants to tear the postcard into pieces but eventually she inhibits herself and posts the card to Mrs. Bagchi. Ruma is delineated as an educated and enlightened lady. Her attitude towards her father’s secret love affair is sympathetic as she finally understands the isolation that her father is experiencing after her mother’s death.
Notwithstanding Ruma’s independent life, free from the control of her parents, she is connected to her Bengali roots through her mother. Her concern over Akash’s upbringing reflects her cultural ties to the land of her parents:

In spite of her efforts he was turning into the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother: imperious, afraid of eating things. (UE-23)

Akash’s refusal of Indian food symbolizes his growing refusal of imbibing Indian culture. Ruma’s decision to rear her own children is also in defiance of bearing the double responsibilities of household and job simultaneously. Hence Ruma’s decision inverts a stereotype of housewife. Ruma’s mother is presented as a conformist to the patriarchal niche of a wife. She marries Ruma’s father and migrates to America mutely. Her mother is a quintessence of Bengali culture as she sticks to traditional clothes, speaks Bengali and wants to instill cultural values in Ruma.

The three important women of the short story, Ruma, Bagchi and Ruma’s mother represent different key aspects of Indian diasporic womanism. In the characterization of Ruma, all three key aspects can be found: feminism, womanhood and motherhood.
She revolts against her father and finds her own way in deciding her studies and future. The tension between husband and wife is not at all highlighted. Her role as mother in bringing up her children exhibits all the shades of motherhood. Ruma’s mother accepts the patriarchal anarchy as the default of her life and passively suffers without any complaint. Bagchi’s relationship with Ruma’s father attests the kind of womanhood she represents. Bagchi does not yield to any ideological, social and psychic pressures. Both Ruma and Bagchi play the role of a free woman but they are in total contrast to each other.

The second story “Hell–Heaven” is narrated by a small girl, Usha, with adult hindsight. The narrator describes her mother’s migration to America and her mother’s crush on Pranab Kaku, a fellow immigrant. The narrator lives with her mother, Aparna and her father. Aparna’s marriage to Shyamal is arranged and void of emotions, and understanding. Aparna’s romance with Pranab is ensued by her husband’s indifference and lukewarm response to Aparna’s emotions. The narrator subtly comments upon her father’s peculiar attitude towards his mother:

He had married my mother to placate his parents; they were willing to accept his desertion as long as he
had a wife. He was wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate. Conversation was a chore for him; it required an effort he preferred to expand at the lab.

(UE-65)

Pranab Kaku comes as an oasis in the arid life of Aparna. Despite her adherence to cultural norms, Aparna is compelled to defy the norms of society by committing sexual deviance. Her non-conformist act of romance with Pranab is due to her patriarchal oppression and is attributed to her assertion of female sexuality. Her desolate marital life shatters the false euphoria of marriage. But her romance with Pranab ends with the advent of Deborah in the life of Pranab. Aparna is upset and hopes that sooner or later, Deborah will leave Pranab. But Deborah gets married to Pranab. With the passage of time Pranab becomes secluded and rarely visits the parties among his Bengali acquaintance. People assume that Deborah is the root cause of Pranab’s seclusion from his acquaintance. But after twenty three years of marriage, Pranab and Deborah divorce due to Pranab’s love affair with a married Bengali woman.
Deborah shares her grief with Aparna on phone and reveals that it was Pranab himself who cut off all the ties with his Bengali acquaintances. Deborah was falsely accused of doing so. Through the portrayal of two broken hearted women, Aparna and Deborah, Lahiri poses that women, Indian or American, are susceptible to the patriarchal oppression. She also projects that women bond easily and stand by each other. Irrespective of their different cultural background, both Aparna and Deborah unite, due to the shared experiences of the oppressive patriarchy. Apart from feminism, Lahiri has also presented cultural clash in the story. Aparna wants to instill Bengali culture and tradition in the narrator whereas the narrator’s aversion to the restrictions laid down upon her, initiates cultural clash. Being an emblem of Bengali culture, initially Aparna wants to keep her family space uncontaminated from the western culture. Her exhortations to the narrator to remain aloof from the boys of her age, is a conspicuous example of Aparna’s endeavours to keep intact her cultural heritage. Conversely, the narrator’s propinquity with Deborah in her childhood foreshadows the narrator’s impulse to imbibe the host culture in her youth. Aparna’s restraints on the narrator, in her youth, made Aparna more secluded owing to her adherence to Bengali culture, which opens a rift between her and the narrator.
Aparna already was aloof from her husband, due to his devotion to work. The only companion in the family was the narrator, who began to evade her, in order to enjoy her life on her own.

I began to pity my mother; the older I got, the more I saw what a desolate life she led. She had never worked; enduring the day she watched soap operas to pass the time. Her only job, everyday, was to clean and cook for my father and me. We rarely went to restaurant, my father always pointing out, even in cheap ones, how expensive they were compared with eating at home. When my mother complained to him about how much she hated life in the suburbs and how lonely she felt, he said nothing to placate her.

(UE 76)

Eventually Aparna realizes that the narrator is not only her daughter “but a child of America as well” (UE 82) and hence the process of acculturation is inevitable; it cannot be curbed by her restraints, and her effort to check the acculturation of the narrator makes herself secluded and aloof. By this time, she and her husband grow old and establish a proximity that had been absent throughout their lives.
The third short story is “A Choice of Accomodation” which deals with the staleness in the marital life of Amit, a Bengali migrant and his American wife, Megan. Amit is an editor of a medical journal who comes to his alma mater Langford, accompanying his wife, in order to attend Pam Borden’s wedding. Amit’s visit to Langford, as described by the narrator, is not to revive his memories of Langford where he had studied at the age of fifteen but to do away with rust that is pervading their relationship owing to their routine lives. Amit’s reaction is lukewarm towards the invitation of Langford alumni reunion. Amit’s life exemplifies a generational conflict. He is bewildered by his father’s decision to return to India and leave him at Langford. His parents’ decision left him unsupervised, and uncared for among the strangers.

He was crippled with homesickness, missing his parents to the point where tears often filled his eyes, in those first months, without warning.... He learned to live without his mother and father, as every else did, shedding his daily dependence on them even though he was still a boy, and even to enjoy it. Still, he refused to forgive them. (UE 97)
During his stay at Langford, Amit suffers a sense of alienation because of the colour of his skin as other students do not recognize him as an American. Amit’s decision to drop out of medical school and his subsequent marriage with Megan are in defiance of his parents’ wishes. But his racial alienation that he suffered from at Langford still haunts him after his marriage as both of his daughters inherit the complexion of their white mother. The rustiness in the conjugal life is attributed to job commitments and familial responsibilities of both Megan and Amit. His decision to attend Pam’s wedding arouses Megan’s suspicion regarding his feelings for Pam. In order to get away from the staleness and familial responsibilities, he attends the marriage of Pam with his wife. Disabled by alcohol, he bluntly shares his ideas regarding the predicament of marital life, with a stranger, Felicia. He ends the party in between, leaving Megan behind. This makes his relations with Megan tense. But their love-making at Langford makes them realize the essence of accommodation and adjustment in conjugal life. They make love in a dorm in an unusual manner, peculiar to married people of their age as both of them have crossed forty. Through this love making, they revive passion for each other, and this is Lahiri’s bold presentation of the sexuality of a woman.
“Only Goodness,” the fourth short story, deals with the relationship between Sudha and her alcoholic brother Rahul. Through the story Lahiri sheds light on the expectations of the first generation immigrants from their American born offspring’s, as well as the cultural susceptibility of the second generation immigrants. The story highlights the twist in the relationship between the siblings. The story starts with Sudha’s imminent acculturation. Sudha is an educated character with an irrepressible urge to imbibe western ideas and ways of life. It was her errant attitude during her student life that led Rahul astray.

Both Sudha and Rahul are entangled in conflict with their parents regarding the cultural norms of their ancestral land that are too exotic and far-fetched to be practiced in the west. Sudha’s refusal to be encumbered by the cultural norms of her parents leads Rahul to opt for the same distancing from the parental culture. But Sudha’s imbibing of host culture is positive in a way as she establishes herself and does not tussle with her parents. On the other hand Rahul’s acculturation is negative as he is irresponsible towards his career, and rebels against his parents:

Sudha had waited until college to disobey her parents.

Before then she had lived according to their
expectations, her persona scholarly, her social life limited to other demure girls in her class, if only to ensure that one day she would be set free.... But she learned what her limits were. The idea of excess, of being out of control, did not appeal to Sudha. Competence: this was the trait that fundamentally defined her. (UE 129)

Her parents’ approval of her marriage with Roger evinces the capitulation of the first generation immigrants to the pressures of the host culture. But in Rahul’s case, her parents are adamant not to accept Elena as Rahul’s wife and hence their dreams for Rahul are devastated when he leaves the house. Her parents’ departure to Calcutta, presents the disenchantment of the first generation immigrants from the alien land and the culture of the west. The concluding part of the story presents Rahul’s resolve to improve himself but eventually he fails to give up his alcoholism and in an alcoholic stupor he leaves his small nephew, Neel, unsupervised in a bathtub. The gross negligence and his incapability to improve offend Roger and Sudha and finally in a state of resentment and despair, Sudha ousts him from her house.
The story explains the cultural disorientation of Sudha and Rahul as well as the cultural displacement of their parents ensued by migration in search of a happy and luxurious life. The alienation of the first generation immigrants is exasperated by their children as the second generation distances itself from the first generation in order to evade the cultural pressures and demand of excellent academic performance. The children for whom the first generation migrates do not provide any emotional solace as Rahul blatantly calls his parents’ migration purely for material gain. But Sudha’s attitude, being a woman, is sympathetic and humane for her parents as she comprehends their alienation and isolation in a far away country.

While Sudha regarded her parents’ separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer, Rahul was impermeable to that aspect of their life as well. “No one dragged them here,” he would say. “Baba left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do.” That was Rahul, always aware of the family’s weaknesses, never sparing Sudha from the things she least wanted to face. (UE 138)
Apart from cultural disorientation and displacement, the narrator points out the stigma of racism that the immigrants undergo. Sudha’s parents experience marginalization in the form of racism besides much hyped notion of equality in the western countries. Lahiri proves in the story that racism is an abominable marginalization and a notable feature of migration. From the feminist viewpoint, Lahiri has posited the characters of Sudha and Rahul with contrary features. Sudha, as a feminine figure, despite her acculturation, creates her identity as a liberated, educated woman, responsible for her familial as well as filial duties, whereas Rahul, a masculine figure, is portrayed with negative traits; truant and negligent to his academic career as well as filial duties. Even his resolve to overcome his alcoholic addiction proves to be as frail as himself in the end.

The next short story, “Nobody’s Business,” delineates the acculturation of a Bengali immigrant Sangeeta alias Sang and her failed love affair with Farouk, an Egyptian historian, teaching at Harvard. Sang is a Harvard dropout. She lives with two housemates, Paul and Heather. The story is unfolded by a third person narrator. Sang is offended by the continuous phone calls of her suitors from distant places expressing convoluted assumptions
about her. Sangeeta’s persistence to call herself “Sang” reflects her disorientation from her cultural roots. She wants to create an identity that is neither Indian nor American. She does not like any interference in her life and wants to live it her own way. She views these proposals as invasions on her privacy and believes that these suitors are pursuing her out of the desire to have an educated, beautiful and economically independent wife in order to maintain their social status:

These men weren’t really interested in her. They were interested in a mythical creature created by a chain of gossip, a web of wishful Indian-community thinking in which she was an aging, overlooked poster child for years of bharathanatyam classes, perfect SATs.

(UE 176)

Sang refutes these proposals because she yearns for love, but eventually is betrayed by her Egyptian boyfriend who consumes her as a sexual object. At the end of the story, Sang stands alone. Lahiri portrays her as a modern woman who no longer chases dreams and has the ability to survive by herself in the public sphere.
The last three stories are sequential and deal with the complications of the life of Hema and Kaushik. “Once in a Lifetime” presents the teenage infatuation of Hema for Kaushik, and the displacement of Kaushik and the subsequent problems of adjustment ensued by his parents’ oscillation between America and India. The return of Kaushik’s family to America is not for financial motives, but for the treatment of his mother’s fatal breast cancer and her will to die in America, in an isolated place. Their return leads the family to undergo a second migration. Kaushik stays with his parents at Hema’s house until his father buys a house. The information regarding the quotidian life of Kaushik and his parents are very secretive and deal with the predicament of the family. Kaushik’s sullen attitude towards his parents is attributed to the vacillation of his family between the countries. Born in America, he was disposed to the American culture and tradition at the time of his departure from America to India. Even in India, he stays in Bombay, a distant place from Calcutta, where he does not find the culture of his ancestors; hence, he does not belong to India.

Moreover, his mother’s fatal disease fills in him a sense of isolation and alienation. Nevertheless he wants to belong to America. As far as Kaushik’s mother is concerned, her fatal illness
fills in her hedonism. She wants to grab some pleasure out of the cruel hands of death. But her pursuit of pleasure is criticized by Hema’s parents. Hema’s mother, unaware of the predicament of the family, considers the self indulgence of Kaushik’s mother as “stylish.” She, in contrast to Kaushik’s mother, has a strong adherence to Bengali culture and tradition, and acts obsequiously as a preserver of indigenous Bengali culture that the Indian patriarchy has incurred upon her. Her efforts to keep her family space uncontaminated from the western culture are apparent in her disapproval of the American attire and the idea of a child sleeping alone in a separate room. Hema, the narrator, also reveals her emblematic attitude of the second generation immigrants towards the land and culture of their ancestors. Her negligence of Indian geography and aversion towards India as a land of geckos and cockroaches presents a nasty outlook of the second generation immigrants as well as their attitude towards the third world countries, as a land of filth, dirt and insects:

I did not betray my opinion that I found trips to India dull, that I didn’t like the geckos that clung to the walls in the evenings, poking in and out of the
fluorescent light fixtures, or the giant cockroaches that sometimes watched me as I bathed. (UE 241)

The second short story of the second part is “Year’s End,” which presents the devastation of Kaushik after his mother’s death. Kaushik returns to his home from Swarthmore after his father calls him to meet Chitra, his step mother. Chitra, a young widow, half the age of Kaushik’s father, migrates to America with her two young daughters, Usha and Piu. Kaushik accentuates the differences in living standards between Chitra and his mother by elaborately explaining his visit home:

I was unused, stepping into the house, to the heavy smell of cooking that was in the air... My mother had insisted on furnishing the house with pieces true to its Modernist architecture... She had never allowed a cloth to cover the table, but one was there now, something with an Indian print that could just as easily have been a bedspread and didn’t fully reach either end. In the centre, instead of the generous cluster of fresh fruit or flowers my mother would have arranged, there was a stainless-steel plate... jars of
pickles, hot mango and sweet lime, their lids missing, their labels stained, spoons stuck into their oils.

UE 258-259)

Lahiri has adroitly presented an age old patriarchal prejudice of a step-motherhood with which Kaushik is occupied, albeit his western outlook towards life. Chitra and her daughters undergo the stigma of step-hood as Kaushik does not want to let them touch the belongings of his mother. His emotions at the news of his father’s marriage are not outrageous, yet he never welcomes his father’s decision:

But no turbulent emotion passed through me as he spoke, only a diluted version of the nauseating sensation that had taken hold the day in Bombay that I learned my mother was dying, a sensation that had dropped anchor in me and never fully left.(UE 254)

Despite differences, Kaushik identifies himself with the girls on the basis of similar experiences of migration and loss of their father and his mother respectively. However, the efforts of Chitra and her daughters to provide Kaushik some emotional solace are shunned by him. In order to revive his memory alienated from the access of Chitra and her daughters, he wishes to eliminate every
trace of his mother from his house. His pent up revulsion is expressed at the time of his quarrel with Piu and Usha, when the duo look at the photographs of his mother. Eventually, he abandons home, and like an escapist, drifts from place to place in search of peace. Chitra and her daughters are presented as passive sufferers of the patriarchy, but the silence of Usha and Piu in the concluding part, makes Kaushik realize his guilt hence their refusal is construed as their refusal to collaborate with the oppressor and thus weaken the process of victimization.

“Going Ashore” is the last story in the collection. It presents the denouement of the previous two stories. It consists of a huge component of tragedy and is told in a calm manner, but the unhighlighted component lingers long and disturbs the readers. Hema exemplifies the same sense of unbelongingness and search for identity that Kaushik has undergone. Breaking up her affair with Julian, Hema succumbs to the pressures of life and desires to get married. Hema’s drift signifies her escapist attitude as she wants to avoid memories of her love-affair with Julian as well as the thoughts of her future married life with Navin. At first she is hopeful that Julian’s divorce is a matter of time and, sooner or later, she would settle with Julian. But she realizes that her love
affair with Julian would only diminish her status as a mistress. Her visit to Rome is her effort to create her own identity, free from the traces of her past and future. She does not have any emotional attachment to Navin except that he is her fiancé. Her decision of marriage does not reflect any enthusiasm:

Like the young smiling couple sitting affectionately on top of a shared casket, there was something dead about the marriage she was about to enter into. And though she knew it had every chance, over the years, of coming to life, on her way home, in the yellow light of evening, she was conscious only of its deadness.

(UE 301)

During her visit to Rome she meets Kaushik after a long gap. Her childhood infatuation for Kaushik flares up again, consequently despite her betrothal; she establishes sexual relations with Kaushik who works as a freelance photographer. Kaushik proposes to Hema to follow him to Hong Kong, breaking her engagement to Navin. But Hema shuns his offer, realizing that her pursuit of Kaushik, has no guarantee of better future prospects. Instead she prefers the married life, albeit she has no love for Navin. Hema’s rejection of Kaushik’s proposal can be construed as
her blow to the patriarchal anarchy. Patriarchy dictates that women follow behind men in the exterior, open-ended world. Hema’s refusal to follow Kaushik questions the idea of women’s space and disrupts conservative societal norms. By retaining her job, Hema negotiates her position in society. Hema redefines woman as a being who writes her own destiny rather than succumbing to oppressive forces. Thus Lahiri explores the space within the literary text as vehicle for organizing and understanding women’s lives.

Both Hema and Kaushik are emblematic of existential traits; they behave as isolated existence, searching for their identities in an alien universe. Both are rootless owing to their diasporic existence, and the vicissitudes of life instill in them a sense of alienation. Eventually Kaushik dies in Tsunami, leaving no trace of his existence behind. Hema also drifts into marriage that is meaningless and void of love as well as mutual understanding. She wields marriage as a tool to counter the patriarchal onslaught on an unmarried woman.

The next chapter sums up the forgoing analysis focusing on the elements connecting the works of Jhumpa Lahiri.