CHAPTER III

NEW GENERATION REALISM IN JHUMPA LAHIRI’S SHORT FICTION

The New Generation Realism may be described as the truthful treatment of material. Vigorous advocates may further state that the Realism means little until the realists’ concepts of truth and their selection of material are designated. Generally, realists are believers in Pragmatism, and the truth they seek to find and express its relativistic truth, associated with discernible consequences and verifiable by experience. Jhumpa Lahiri as a new age realist believes in democracy and the materials that she elects to describe are the common, the average, the everyday. Furthermore, Realism in her works can be seen as the ultimate of middle-class art, and she finds her subject in middle class life and manners. New Generation Realism is a literary method; a philosophical and political attitude, and a particular kind of subject matter which is dominated in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri in form of Diaspora. Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual to find the scientific laws which control its actions, Realists like Jhumpa Lahiri center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action and the verifiable consequence.
‘Interpreter of Maladies’ and ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ are two collections of short fiction authored by Jhumpa Lahiri. The first one was published in the year 2000 and won name and fame for the author. ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ won the Pulitzer Prize and Hemingway Foundation /PEN Award for fiction. It was also chosen as ‘The New Yorker’s best debut of the year. The stories are about the hard realistic lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are caught between the culture that they have inherited and the new world they now find themselves in. ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ is a collection of short fiction which reflects the lives of some ordinary Indian diasporas, struggling to live in the world unfamiliar to them. The term diaspora is derived from the greek ‘Diasperien’, meaning ‘dispersal or scattering of seeds’. A typical example of Diaspora is given by new Webster’s dictionary and thesaurus of English Language. ‘The dispersal Jews after Babylonian captivity; their dispersion.’ currently, the term diaspora and diasporic community are taken as metaphoric reference of several groups such as expatriates, expellees, refugees, alien residents, immigrants etc. In every diaspora, however, there is a notion of movement and displacement which embodies social, culture and political consequences and implication of such diaspora community specific secrets have the positive and negative impact on the characters. Fiction like ‘A Temporary Matter’, ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, ‘Sexy’ particularly deal with the feeling
of uneasiness to keep the secrets inside their own personal relationship. This is, more or less, the same kind of uneasiness that one experiences while watching or going through the plays of Girish Karnad like ‘Hayavadan’ and ‘Nag Mandal’. The marked feature of these plays like the diasporic sentiments, is in completeness that’s why these plays are called the complete play about incompleteness.

‘A Temporary Matter’ is the first story of collection of nine short fiction consolidated under the title ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. Although this story is set in Boston, it could take place anywhere because of its universal appeal. The story is about detachment, grief and lost love. It takes five days for this story to unfold. At the very first day; a young wife Shoba comes home from her editing job and is informed that the power will be out for one hour each evening for approximately five days.

“The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight p.m.”

The title of every short fiction in this collection is very appropriate and appealing. ‘A temporary matter’ proves to be the uprooter of the most permanent latent sentiments of the couple in this story. Although the story covers only a five day period it actually had begun six months earlier when their child was stillborn. A lot of unspoken pain and grief
prevails their lives. They are fighting their depression in different ways, but not together. After the death of their child, Shukumar took time off his teaching duties to work on his dissertation for his doctorate. Instead he lies sleepless in bed until late in the morning, when he gets bored and reads a novel when he should be typing. He goes out when he must and returns quickly. He no longer shows or even brushes his teeth daily.

“They weren’t like this before.”

The narrator reveals that although Shukmar is a mediocre student he had been diligent in his studies. And he cannot focus on his work at all. Shoba, once was capable and organized but now she is distracted. Her clothes are lying around in the pantry that once was efficiently stocked is now bare; she once enjoyed cooking and now she no longer cooks.

“She wasn’t this way before. She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and paid bill as soon as they came. Now she treated the house as if it were a hotel. The fact that the yellow chintz armchair in the living room clashed with the blue and maroon. Turkish carpet no longer bothered her.”

The depression of both the characters is the most dominating mood of the story. They had stopped being together, eating their meals at different locations in the house. They have developed an attitude of avoiding each
other in their bed-room. They seem to have reached a stage in their grief where they prefer the loneliness and isolation to facing each other. They were afraid to see their own pain reflected back at them in the eyes of their spouse. The power outrage for a certain time in attempt to silence the quietness of awkward kind; they begin to play a game of confessions. This game leads to mixed messages; which lead to several painful revelations. Momentarily it appears that all hope for the survival of their marriage is over. Yet in the end they are finally able to grieve together.

“The author very poignantly and realistically creates an atmosphere for the reader to feel the loneliness and isolation of the couple. The more distant Shoba seems to become; the more depressed Shukumar is. They hadn’t celebrated Christmas and they systematically avoided friends. Presented in narrative voice the story is passionately written with remarkable insight to its characters. The world is pictured through the eyes of Shukumar for maximum part in the story, yet the author skillfully lapses into omniscience and back again. The author gives a glimpse to what is going on in the psyche of Shukumar but Shoba’s direct quotation of mind is not given a pass. The story suggests that Shoba seems to be the only reason for Shukumar to get up. The only thing that he consistently does each day is cooking. He begins to look forward to their game at night and spends his day deliberating what he will share. He becomes
anxious about what Shoba will share. The words he fears hearing reveal his feelings of guilt and insecurities. In a very simplistic manner; Lahiri creates layers of complexity in the relationship of husband and wife. Through symbolism the author shares the traumatic effect of their loss on their marriage and each other. Instead of devoting his time to study, Shukumar thinks of how they deliberately spent time on separate floors; how he no longer looked forward to the weekends when he would watch her work for hours and they would go to market together every other Saturday. Shukumar deliberately chose the nursery for his study because he knew that Shoba would avoid it, but more because he found solace there. In a quiet unpretentious voice, the author reveals the unbearable grief. In a very subtle effort, she raises the hope that under the grief; love may still be alive. When the cook book is used by Shukumar, he note that his wife Shoba dated each recipe with the date they first ate each dish together.

“April 2, cauliflower with fennel. January 14, chicken with almonds and sultanas. He had no memory of eating those meals, and yet there they were, recorded in her neat proofreader’s hand.”

The first night of the confessions game; Shoba chose to share how she peeked in his address book when they were first dating. On the second night, she initiated washing dishes together and then spending time on the
back porch together. When Shukumar found the birthday candles, he remembers how she threw him a surprise party for his birthday and how his fingers linked with hers all night. Using routine daily details the novelist skillfully exposes how they have come to be two people sharing a roof rather than a loving married couple. The most remarkable feature of Lahiri in this story is her ability to convey each and every aspect without coming out and saying it. It is felt by the reader that Shukumar is depressed because he forgets to brush his teeth, he doesn’t get up until noon and the only productive thing that he does all day is cooking. It was the one thing that made him feel productive. At the same time it is also an attempt at feeling needed: - he knew that if it were not for him, Shoba would eat a bowl of cereal for her dinner. The doctor is portrayed as cold and uncaring through a description of his actions not by making a descriptive statement.

“The doctor explained these things happen-----smiled in the kindest way. It was possible to smile at people known only professionally------nothing to indicate she would not be able to have children in the future.”

Lahiri shifts moods without using any words of emotion. She takes her reader from empty despair to anxiety, hope, tenderness, pain, revenge and
eventually grief. The transition between two emotions is smooth and almost unnoticeable but predictable for sure.

The reader is not overwhelmed with details, though she uses them to create a kind of atmosphere that is quite believable. When Shukumar remembered the last day he saw Shoba pregnant. He remembered the red station wagon cab with blue lettering. The author uses this opportunity to help one visualize Shukumar

“Six feet tall…. with hands too big to rest comfortably in the pockets of his jeans……he felt dwarfed in the back seat.”

The irony in the story here lies in the fact that this is also the very same moment when he first fully welcomed the image of being a father and even envisioned having several children. Another master stroke of irony is when Shukumar looks at his wife he notices,

“Her beauty which had once overwhelmed him , seemed to fade. The cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to definer her.”

Here Shukumar seems looking no longer through eyes of love but through a heart of despair making the depression and despair most dominating moods of the story ‘A temporary Matter’.
The second story of Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ is ‘When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine’. In an interview when this amazing story-teller was asked which story was most difficult to write, she replied that:

“When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine, was hard. It was the first time I began to write closer to my own experience, though it is not an autobiographical story. It took several years to come to that point of view and to feel secure working from that point of view”.

The second tale is a beautiful story narrated by Cilia, an Indian American girl who is born and raised in the United States where people are sheltered from foreign affairs. The story takes place in New England, the year is 1971 and Pakistan is in the process of Civil War. Mr. Pirzada is a Pakistani man who visits Lilia’s family every night to have dinner with them and watch the news as well. Mr. Pirzada’s and Lilia’s families are from different countries and from different cultural background, but they are all the same in nature. The author paints an elegant picture about people of different culture who are greatly alike in so many ways but at the same time dissimilarities are also there. The story also underlines some examples of contrast between American and Indian subcontinent’s culture. Mr. Pirzada came from Pakistan on study leave in New England. When Lilia’s parents recognized his last names through the University
directory; they invited Mr. Pirzada to come and visit their home. Lahiri enlightens us about the kindness of Lilia’s parents to somebody they do not really know. Lilia’s family knew nothing about Mr. Pirzada but they still invited him to come and visit them after talking to him over the phone. Mr. Pirzada’s visit establishes a bond of affinity with Lilia’s parents.

“I have no memory of his first visit or his second or his third, but by the end of September, I had grown so accustomed to Mr. Pirzada’s presence in our living room that one evening, as I was dropping ice cubes into the water pitcher, I asked my mother to hand me a fourth glass from a cupboard still out of my reach.”

Mr. Pirzada came from Pakistan; whereas Lilia’s parents are from India. But both the food that they relish and their actions show that they are similar. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like Lilia’s parents, Mr. Pirzada also took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. At first the narrator Lilia thought that Mr. Pirzada was an Indian just like them but her father told them that he is no longer considered Indian. The country was divided in 1947, the same day when India got freedom the country was divided into two India and Pakistan.
'One moment we were free and then we were sliced up’. Further Lilia’s father tries to explain the difference on the basis of geography with the help of a man to Lilia.

“*As you see Lilia, it is a different country, a different color*” my father said, *Pakistan was yellow not orange. I noticed that there were two distinct parts to it, much larger than the other, separated by an expanse of Indian territory; it was as if California and Connecticut constituted a nation apart from the US*”.10

It was somewhat hard for Lilia to understand that Mr. Pirzada and her parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same joke, looked more or less the same but they were different somehow. The author also shows us how America’s people are sometimes sheltered from foreign affairs. After Lilia was caught reading a book about Pakistan, her teacher Mrs. Kenyon “lifted the book at the tip of its spine as if it were a hair clinging”11 to Lilia’s sweater. As India and Pakistan were drawing closer to War, Mr. Pirzada as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence and a single fear. Lahiri works on her theme through a 10 year old girl’s perspective that different people can always find something in common. It is amazing how people consider themselves different sometimes, on the basis of value in society, goals and dreams and even on the basis of food people eat. Lahiri shows what
the common ground is through Lilia’s eyes. It is the reasons and concerns about one and all that bring each and everyone together. Only then one can find a familiar ground. Lilia as a narrator reminds one of Lenny, in ‘Ice-Candy-Man’ by Bapsi Sidhwa, who turned eight on the day partition is announced. Lenny is a female, a Parsee, a victim of polio who bears a “truth infected tongue”.12

Born into the tiny Parsee Community, Lenny is outside the communal frenzy and follows but emotionally torn by the violence engulfing her friends. ‘When Pirzada came to Dine’ has Lilia as a marginalized narrator and ‘Ice-Candy-Man’ has Lenny as the story teller.

In two of the stories set in India, Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the plight of the people from the lower strata of the society. The author depicts the lower classes as having an integral function when making decisions, and creating, within themselves smaller hierarchies. The function of class and community and their impact have been depicted in ‘A Real Durwan’ and ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ uncared for by her own relatives, Bibi Haldar feels alienated.

“All through her, Lahiri depicts that people can be isolated in their native places if their own people became indifferent to them.”13
The opinion and generalization made by the community in ‘A Real Durwan’ have a great effect on how Boori Ma acts and interprets her own identity and class status. Much of her eccentric behavior is excused because of her age.

“Boori Ma’s mouth is full of ashes, but she is the victim of changing time” was the refrain of Mr. Chatterjee. He had neither strayed from his balcony nor opened a newspaper since independence, but in spite of this fact, or may be because of it, his opinions were always highly esteemed.”

The communication gap resulting from generation gap and the fictionalization of previous lifestyle are underlined in this story. Boori Ma is the product of the changing times that effectively explains her fictionalizations in the story. The function of class and community in regards to Boori Ma has been depicted by the author with the touch of Realism. The existence of Boori Ma is the result of the changing time.

“Boori Ma’s mouth is full of ashes, but this is nothing new. What is new is the face of this building. What building like this needs is a real durwan.”

The treatment of the people towards an aged creature like Boori Ma is heartening. She belongs to no one and no one belongs to her is the
complete story of Boori Ma. She was offered leftover food from the residents of the building but it was not selfless offering. People expect something from her. They expect the safety of their household by assigning the task of durwan ‘the gate keeper’ to Boori Ma. The description of Boori Ma is so gloomy and so vivid that one can easily locate one such Boori Ma in one’s neighbourhood. One can feel that Jhumpa Lahiri prefer the familiar to the outcastes, as she does in ‘A Real Durwan’. As a Realist she sees her characters as pieces of trembling humanity and she seems to love them very much before she seeks to put them into her piece of composition.

The treatment of Bibi Haldar is the next story in her collection that depicts the function of class and community while detailing the helpless character of Bibi Haldar. The treatment of Bibi Haldar tells the story of a young woman with an unexplainable disease. The story begins with the description of Bibi Haldar’s everlasting plight.

“For the greater number of her twenty-nine years, Bibi Haldar suffered from an ailment that baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters; gem therapists members of our town brought her holy water from seven rivers.”

With useless antidotes offered to her a direct connection can be made between Bibi’s illness and the way she is treated by her family and
community as well as the doctors. Treatment offered by the doctors only made matters worse. Allopathic, homeopathy, ayurvedic …..over time all branches of medical arts had been consulted.(NIGHT OF SCORPION)

Their advice was endless. After X-rays, probes, auscultations and injections, some merely advised Bibi to gain weight, others to lose it. If one forbade her to sleep beyond dawn, another insisted she should remain in bed till noon. This one told her to perform headstands and that one to chant Vedic verses at specified intervals throughout the day. Shuttled from one specialist to another Bibi Halder had been prescribed strange methods to get rid of her ailments like to shun garlic, consume disproportionate quantities of bitters, meditate, drink green coconut water and swallow raw duck’s eggs beaten in milk. In short Bibi’s life was an encounter with one fruitless antidote to another. ‘The treatment of Bibi Halder’ has much to expound about the idea of sexuality and specifically one’s own agency in establishing it. It is once determined that Bibi, an older woman with seemingly incurable disease that causes fits of seizures should marry in an attempt at a cure. The people around see her as a sexual object for the first time after doctors make this suggestion.

“They say it’s the only hope. A case of over excitement. They say it.”_____ and here we paused, blushing _____ “relations will calm her blood”.17
Irony plays pivotal role in the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri as the same device helps in highlighting social issues and sentiments in her fictional works.

The image of sustained girlhood has been beautifully painted by Jhumpa Lahiri in her story ‘This Blessed House’. According to the generalizations set forth by the author the people in India expect women to be docile homemakers, especially in case of marital relationships, as Twinkle in the story ‘This Blessed House’ attempts to be. Her girlish charm is not, however, a quality Sanjeev, an Indian husband in diaspora in America, admires or even tolerates in his wife. This of course has something to say about gender stereotypes and more specifically husband–wife roles within diaspora cultures. Twinkle the wife, is characterized as excited and delighted by little things, crossing her fingers before any remotely unpredictable event, like tasting an ice cream with a new flavor or dropping a letter in the mailbox. It was a quality her husband Sanjeev did not understand. It made him feel stupid; as if the world contained hidden wonders he could not anticipate or see. He could not appreciate the small wonders. He appears to be vacillating between accepting things as if everything is a miracle or nothing is a miracle.

“Nicknamed after a nursery rhyme, she had yet to shed a childhood endearment.”

"sd8
When she enters her new house in America she gets very excited by the effigies scattered all over and she ironically described herself as “a good little Hindu”. Her excitement coupled with her lethargy and apathy in all other things say a lot about the way she views herself within her marriage in America. She is unintentionally trying to redefine her gender role or knowingly she is trying to break out boundaries. The title of the story ‘This Blessed House’ is very symbolic, as Blessed House is a treasure Chest of objects related to Christianity, which is found by a Hindu couple who are the new owners of the house. The heroine is agog about the significance of the treasure and gives them a place of importance on her mantelpiece above the fireplace. The hero is somewhat distracted and confused about how his colleagues will react to them showing an interest in Christianity and may think that they have converted. This story is very well narrated and the contrasting natures of characters and their feelings and associating irony make it a very impressive tale that appeals to one and all.

‘The Third and Final Continent’ is a first person story of an Indian immigrant who looks back at his first few weeks in America, thirty years ago. Lahiri said about ‘The Third and Final Continent’ a story which bounds in the experiences of diaspora, that there was the added challenge of writing something based in real life. Since it was based on her father’s
past there was the challenge of working with “Real facts and preserving truth yet having to disguise them to make it fiction.”

In the late 1960’s at the age of 36, he arrives to work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, after having studied for four years in London, which was his second continent. Just before coming to America, he takes a trip to Calcutta to “attend” his arranged marriage, staying there only a week, barely getting acquainted with his bride. She has to await her visa for six weeks before she can join him in America. Here in America, the protagonist responds to an advertisement in the paper and ends up living with an elderly woman who is hundred and three years of age. He becomes very caring and even amazed that this old woman who is so old. Because of the age of the old lady she is not accustomed to the modern times in which this story takes place. The narrator just like elderly woman is not accustomed to the times in America. So the company of another ignorant person helps the narrator to feel more comfortable in his new setting in North America, which is the melting pot of the world. A 103 year old widow, Mrs. Croft lives by herself. She is a stay-at-home eccentric mother of a 68 year old daughter who thinks it improper that her visiting daughter wears a dress high above her ankle.
“For your information mother, it is 1969. What would you do if you actually left the house one day and saw a girl in a mini skirt?” Mrs. Croft sniffs: “I'd have her arrested”.  

When the narrator’s wife, Mala arrives from Calcutta, Mrs. Croft scrutinizes her from top to toe. Her red eye still searching on Mala’s feet. She might have been seen someone Sari clad for the first time in life. At last Mrs. Croft declared with equal measure of disbelief and delight:

“She is a perfect lady”.  

It is this scrutiny that first evoked the narrator’s empathy with his bride for it reminds him of his own experience as a bewildered stranger in London. In the process of introducing his wife to Mrs. Croft and his developing attachment towards old lady he also comes closer to his wife.

The ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ at 27 pages is the longest in the collection. It is a multi-layered story about a second generation Indian American couple, who along with their three children are visiting India. This story in her debut collection, like all other stories of her, is teeming with all manner of humanity; it is in turn frank and subtle, bold and understated. There is immediacy to Lahiri’s style that bridges any gulf between the more structured traditions of Indian culture and the brashness of American life. The Indian-American tourist hires a tour guide to see
the famous Sun Temple at Konark. Mr. Kapsi, whose first name has
never been mentioned in the story, becomes curious about the couple who
looks Indian, yet dress like American tourists and speaks with an
American accent he had heard many times on American TV shows. The
opening sentences of the story describe the bickering that symphonizes
the failing marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Das—the tourists.

“At the Tea Stall Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about relented when Mr.
Das pointed out that he had given the girl her bath the night before.”

Mr. Kapsi works as tour guide only on the weekends, and has another job
during the weekdays as an interpreter in a doctor’s clinic who is ignorant
of Gujarati tongue translating the Gujarati spoken by some of his patients.
Mina Das, the wife proclaimed his job as an interpreter of Maladies as
romantic. Perked up with the comment Mr. Kapsi, from whose point of
view the whole story is told and whose own marriage is fattering, looks at
her closely.

“Her sudden interest in him, an interest she did not express in either
her husband or her children, was mildly intoxicating. When Mr. Kapsi
thought once again about how she had said “romantic”. The feeling of
intoxication grew.”
He begins to fantasize a romantic relationship with her. The couple invite him to be included in the photograph they take. Mina asks him for his address so they can send copies from America. This feeds his fantasy. At the crisis point of the story, when two of them are in the car, Mina confesses to Mr. Kapsi that one of the couple’s two boys was clandestinely fathered by her friends’s Punjabi Indian friend during a brief visit. This a malady which she hopes Mr. Kapasi will provide a remedy for. However all the interpreter of Maladies can come up with is:

“It is really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?”

After all he is only a translator of native language. Jhumpa Lahiri describes the psyche of Mrs. Das from the view of Mr. Kapasi,

“A woman not yet thirty, who loved neither her husband nor her children, who had already fallen out of love with life. Her confession depressed him,”

In the closing paragraph Mr.Kapasi observes the little paper on which he had so carefully written his address slips out of Mina’s handbag.

“No one but Mr. Kapasi noticed. He watched as it rose, carried higher and higher by breeze, into the trees where the monkeys now sat solemnly observing the scene below. Mr. Kapasi observed it too,
knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind.”

This story gives the idea that some secrets are better not revealed in certain situation or any situation. On revealing her secret to Mr. Kapasi, Mrs. Das expected some remedy from the interpreter of Maladies so that she could feel better about what she had done but Mr. Kapasi didn’t. Also, he did not disclose the secret to Mr. Das so in a way the secret remains unrevealed which is the best thing for Das family. Mr. Kapasi as tour guide and interpreter of Maladies shoulders his responsibility so well that the family bond, though not very pleasant or romantic, remains intact and this is the sheer Indianness in part of Jhumpa Lahiri, a diasporic author. Apart from that the author takes the reader through the countryside of India, where heat and dust can be seen languorous or onerous and where monkeys can change in an instant from magical creatures to ominous ones. Throughout this ride to Konark, the reader is treated to the mental and emotional machinations of an underappreciated man, striving for recognition and affection. As the trip become more arduous, the family in his vehicle becomes more querulous, and the self-doubt that blossomed into hope begins to drop under the weight of reality. This, of course, is a brilliant story, infused with wisdom and tinged with, but not burdened by, the brush of intelligent cynicism.
Jhumpa Lahiri’s finely tuned ear for irony is readily apparent throughout ‘Interpreter of Maladies’.

Her ability to fuse the sense of irony with compassion for her characters is particularly adapt in two stories: ‘A Real Durwan’, where Boori Ma, Sweeper of the stairwell and teller of tall tales, falls victim to the greed and envy of the apartment building dwellers; and ‘Sexy’ where coincidence breeds introspection in a woman having affair with a married man. ‘Sexy’ differs from other stories in the collection because it depicts in the most outright realistic manner the blatant fetishization of India by American and other Western culture.

Dev, the Indian lover cheats on his wife while utilizing Western fetishization of Indian men to his own advantage. The actions of Miranda, the stereotypically flighty and flirty American woman, provide evidence to support the idea of a sexually fetishized India. The intended or unintended acts of Laxmi, Dev or Rohin encourage Miranda’s false notion of sexually erotized India.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an exceptional Personality. With each story she draws believable characters in both ordinary and extraordinary situations without compromising the elements of Realism by making the task seem sweetly effortless in the process. The range of her talent and imagination is very broad but she never loses focus in its execution. She displays the unique ability to paint the worlds – as they really are - of both the
immigrant and the native in miniature, allowing for accurate immersion in detail, while simultaneously placing them in a grand, sweeping perspective of Universal truth. She is one of the most realistic diasporic writers of the intercultural miscommunications and conflicts all too often experienced by Indian migrants and second generation Indian Americans. She gives an accurate portrayal of the cultural crossover in her books of short stories. The stories establish convincingly the elements of diasporic obsession with the longing for a home, where the diasporans can feel at home.

Jhumpa Lahiri as an author has achieved nearly impossible. She is one of the most respected authors in literary circle while also being one whose books top the best seller lists Chetan Bhagat enjoys only the status of being best seller author. She has made an indelible mark in arena of literature with a Pulitzer-Prize winning debut collection of short stories ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. Lahiri returns with a bang with another collection of short stories entitled ‘Unaccustomed Earth’. The stories in this collection have the stories of families from the Bengali state in India who have moved to America to pursue career and raise their children. Each story seems to feature parents who bring their children back to Calcutta (Kokatta) each summer to visit relatives; each story features children who struggle to conform to their parents’ traditional expectations.
as well as the cultural demands of an American adolescence. Loss marks the families in one of the new age realities in the descriptions of Jhumpa Lahiri. The families in the book try to cope with loss in alternately quiet and dramatic ways. The short fiction in the ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ expand upon the mood and sentiments as expressed by the author in her epigraph, which is a metaphysical passage from ‘The Custom-House’ by Nathaniel Hawthorne suggesting that transplanting people into new soil makes them hardier and more flourishing. Lahiri favors the logic of Hawthorne writes,

“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 their birth places, and so far as their fortunes maybe within my control, shall strike their roots into ‘Unaccustomed Earth’.”

It is an apt and rich metaphor for the transformations that Jhumpa Lahiri sees in the pages of ‘Unaccustomed Earth’, in which two generations of Bengali immigrants to America- the new comers and their hyphenated children-struggle to build moral and secure lives. Throughout the stories Lahiri does not so much accept Hawthorne’s notion. It is true that transplanting may support in strengthening of fortunes but other human aspects like up rootedness, sense of alienation, loss of identity and many
more appear as the unexpected but real and mixed by-product of transplanting.

Each story in ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ is exquisitely written. Lahiri’s placid prose is a pleasure to read. The very quietness of her stories can serve to lull the reader thereby creating wonderful images and atmosphere of diaspora. Five stories comprise the first part of the book, rest of the three stories featuring the same central characters comprise the second part. All eight stories, specially the first five are thematically related. They trace the lives of people from Bengal who have moved to the United States. They experience a disconnection in their new lives. Many adults struggle to hold on to what they once knew, their circles of friends being largely other Bengali expatriates who are strangers in a strange land. The children most of the time born in the United States are more attached to the states. The Bengali culture is slipping away with each succeeding generation – for parents ‘India’ is home, while children only endure those repeated trips back there. Home for children is the place where they now live, a home with a new set of moral, language, dress and relationships. There is a definite generational conflict. The children seldom read or speak Bengali. They serve as Cultural translators for their parents in this new land, a phenomenon that is happening among any number of immigrant families in schools today.
Each of the five stories in the part one of the book is self-contained. In ‘Hell-Heaven’, the assimilated Bengali-American narrator considers how little thought she once gave to her mother’s sacrifice as she reconstructs the tormenting, unrequited passion her younger mother had for a graduate student during the narrator’s childhood. In ‘Only Goodness’, an older sister learns a sharp lesson about the limits of her responsibility to a self-destructive younger brother. ‘A choice of Accommodations’ shows a shift in power dynamics between a Bengali-American husband and his workaholic Anglo wife during a weekend away from their kids- at the wedding of the husband’s pre-school crush. And the American graduate student at the center of ‘Nobody’s Business’ pines for his Bengali-American roommate, a graduate school dropout who entertains no romantic feelings for him, spurns the polite advances of prospective grooms from the global Bengali singles circuit and considers herself engaged to a selfish, foul-tempered Egyptian historian.

In the title story, ‘Unaccustomed Earth’, Ruma a Bengali-American lawyer, repeats her mother’s role when she gives up job and follows her husband to a distant city as they await the birth of their second child.

“Growing up, her mother’s example – moving to a foreign place for children and household – had served as a warning a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma’s life now.”

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The nurturing force of pregnancy shields Ruma from the sting this reflection might be expected to provoke, but it doesn’t protect her widowed father. On his visit to her daughter he asks a very American question: “Will this make her happy?” Thinking back on his wife’s unhappiness in the early years of their marriage, he realizes that he had always assumed Ruma’s life would be different. But his daughter opts a kind of life that she could have led in Calcutta, who is to say this isn’t evidence of another kind of freedom? Ruma is struck by how much “her father resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere. It was her mother who would have been practically from anywhere. It was her mother who would have stuck out in this wet Northern landscape, in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, her jewels.”

Seeing his daughter Ruma’s father has the opposite reaction as he found that much similarity between her late-wife and daughter Ruma that he could not bear to look at her directly. Lahiri suggests that Ruma’s identity is affected less by her coordinates on the globe than by the internal indices of her will. She is the creature of the American soil-

“Bengali had ever been a language in which she felt like an adult”

But she carries her own emotional bearings within her. Lahiri seems to ark the real possibilities attached to a move. While ending Ruma’s
neglected garden her father shows his grandson how to sow seeds. The boy digs holes, and grandfather plants trees along with a plastic dinosaur and a wooden block with a star. Emblems of the international, the prehistoric and the celestial they are buried in one garden plot, auguries of an ideal future, a utopia that could be anywhere or nowhere. How can it grow is the indirect question Jhumpa Lahiri seems to ask.

“Secrets and surprises loom at every corner and yet nothing is apparent.”

The discovery of a misplaced letter by Ruma reveals the secret of her father’s new love interest after the death of her mother. Ruma’s American husband Adam never comes in person throughout the story. Indirect hints have been given by the author about the husband of Ruma, who is away for a week on a business trip. Ruma is disengaged with her community, with life outside her home, and her father forms a deep connection with his grandson through the planting process, Ruma tries to reconnect with her father asking him to move in with her family. But, he does not want to be the part of any family any more. For him to be the part of a family is like to be the part of a mess, the feuds, the demands and the energy of it. The wonderful writing skills of Jhumpa Lahiri keeps a reader spell bound. The juxtaposition of expected and unexpected along with the sense of detail by the economy of words makes her work a thing
of beauty. An outstanding passage like following from her short fiction ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ is a ready example in hand. The author describes fear and suspense, expectation and the final shock in form of death of Ruma’s mother:

“Then again, he had not even been present, technically, when his wife passed away. He had been reading a magazine, sipping a cup of tea from the hospital cafeteria. But that was not what caused him to feel guilty. It was the fact that they’d all been so full of assumptions: the assumption that the procedure would go smoothly, the assumption that she would spend one night in the hospital and then return home, the assumption that friends would be coming to the house two weeks later for dinner, that she would visit France a few weeks after that. The assumption that his wife’s surgery was to be a minor trial in her life and not the end of it. He remembered Ruma sobbing in his arms as if she were suddenly very young again and had fallen off a bicycle or been stung by a bee. As in those other instances he had been strong for her.”

The first story ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ introduces a minor theme of the other stories of the part first: the loss of one’s mother and its impact on the lives of those who survive. In the first tale, the father is liberated from the clutches of the responsibilities associated with family life. In ‘A
Choice of Accommodations’, Amit feels his American wife Megan to his prep school for a reunion, he tells a complete stranger that their marriage has melted into thin air. Just as they choose the place where they stay for the weekend, they make accommodations in their lives.

“Megan’s ordinary background had displaced his parents as had the fact that she was five years older than he was. He stork prettiness, her refusal to wear contact lenses, her weight had not charmed them. The fact that she was a doctor did not make up for it. If anything, it made their disappointment in Amit worse.”

Their 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.

The shortest fiction of the collection ‘Hell-Heaven’ shows the strain in the relationship between Usha and Aparna because of their unmatched life styles as one is American and another Indian respectively. 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. Aparna stands for a 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. Deoborah surprises Aparna by disclosing 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 fore in form of the confession of Aparna’s jealousy, not made to Deborah but to her daughter Usha. The horror of it displays the depth of Aparna’s desire and her intense angst, something that brings the story into a new perspective. It further sets the mood for the volume.

The sibling relationship has been explored by the author in her beautifully crafted story “Only Goodness”. In diasporic life, Sudha finds herself in a fix as she watches, helplessly, her brother Rahul succumb to alcoholism and the gulf between him and their parents increasingly widens. Sudha is reluctant and quite incapable to tackle the situation, and takes an escapist view of it. After some years when Rahul comes to London to see his newborn nephew, Sudha sees signs of his redemption. And yet again Rahul betrays her belief leaving her no choice but to reject him finally. The entire exploration in this story has been made by the author in such a resonant way that even in a brief space she can be dense in the intricacies of depiction. Ironically,

“It was Sudha who’d introduced Rahul to alcohol”

And in her part, she herself consumes alcohol.
"But she learned what here 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."

The last story of part one is ‘Nobody’s Business’ where Paul, an American housemate of Sang/Sangeeta, finds himself getting involved in the tangle 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 story describes Sangeeta as the most eligible and desirable spinster in a humorous way.

“Every so often a man called for Sang, wanting to marry her. Sang usually didn’t know these men. Sometimes she had never even heard of them. But they’d heard that she was pretty and smart and thirty and Bengali and still single”.

The involvement of many individuals in the sticky web of love-relationships with Sangeeta prepares the structure of this very interesting story.

Lahiri’s final three stories, grouped together as ‘Hema and Kaushik’ explores the overlapping histories of Hema and Kaushik, a girl and a boy from two Bengali immigrant families, set during significant moments of their lives. The first-story is narrated by Hema which is entitled as ‘Once
‘Once in a lifetime’ whereas the second story ‘Year’s End’ has Kaushik as the narrator. ‘Once in a lifetime’ begins in 1974 the year when Kaushik Chaudhary and his parents leave Cambridge and return to India. This story 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 some time until they get a new house. Hema when six; 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 reveals the fact related to his mother’s illness to Hema, expounding the pain that hides behind the glamour of their life. The next story in the group ‘Year’s End’ is about Kaushik 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 and sophistication his own mother possessed. Even more intriguing is Kaushik’s growth of love for his kid step-sisters, Rupa and Piu, until the girls locate from its hiding place the taped box which concealed Kaushik’s mother’s photograph methodically banished from sight. The girl’s mischief enrages Kaushik. All affection drains out of him and driven by cruel sentiments he abandons the girls alone in the house. Far away from home he digs the earth and buries the box. The Hema and Kaushik relationship does not end here. A meeting by chance in Rome further ignites an ephemeral but passionate relationship, when Hema and
Kaushik are in their late thirties. The last story of the collection ‘Going Ashore’ shows the excessive power of Jhumpa Lahiri’s imagination. This is the kind of excess that consummates the theme and excess that would have been too sweet had it not been tragic, an excessive that has the air of inevitability. Hema and Kaushik’s union takes place at the time when they are almost on the verge of settling down-Hema by marrying with parent approved Naveen and Kaushik in his new job in Hong Kong. Soon after, they separate as Hema shifts to India and Kaushik on a vacation to Khao Lak in Thailand. Now it is the turn of the continental plates of the earth to shift causing the great natural disaster Tsunami. The last few pages lead excruciatingly to the inevitability of the Tsunami.

“Oh television, in a pink sitting room with stark fluorescent light, I saw images of the Indian and Sri Lankan coastline; glimpses from Vactiorrrer’s video camera never intended to capture such a thing. I saw a massive surge of water moving so quickly that the tape seemed to be playing at an unnatural speed---- Thailand had also been hit very badly”.

Soon after the narration reverts from third person to the first person of Hema, bring the story and the book from the stages of exposition, complication, climax, denouement to its closure. The book is a tour-de-force and a document of the age and time seen through the human
experience. The final three short fiction in ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ may be the best trio of short stories that one has ever read. In just around hundred pages or so Hema and Kaushik become inextricably linked as friends and sometimes as lovers. They, of course, deserve a place in the annals of literary pairings along with Petrarch and Laura, Romeo and Juliet, Hero and Leander. One and half pages from the end, the reader of the story, suddenly may close the book overcome with emotion saying to himself, ‘I cannot finish this, I know where it is going’. It went there, offering the perfect end. ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ creates a beautiful literate journey that clearly illustrates the power of Jhumpa Lahiri’s writing skills, her sense of community, her ability to create an imagined world as real, as joyous, as painful as life. Every word fits. Nothing is wasted. Each story creates a unique, self-contained world, though there is always the all prevailing metaphor of disconnection, disengagement with life in America. And despite, a clear cut Bengali frame of reference on which each story is hung, the Universal themes like the loss of a parent or spouse, the sense of not fitting in, being ill at ease in a strange society are evoked.

To summarize, ever since the publication of ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, which fetched the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in the year 2000, Jhumpa Lahiri has shot into fame and scaled a new height of success. The book
very powerfully depicts the lives of Indians settled in America shuttling “between the strict traditions they’ve inherited and the baffling new world they must encounter everyday”.39

The first story of the collection ‘A Temporary Matter’ is about detachment, grief and lost love. The title of the story is very suggestive and a little ironical as the temporary power cut, which is the temporary matter, is going to be the uprooter of the most permanent latent negative sentiments of the couple, who were almost on the verge of separation as husband and wife. In the second story of the collection ‘When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine’ the author points an elegant picture about people of different culture who are greatly alike in so many ways but they are dissimilar too. The story very realistically underlines some examples of contrast between the culture of American and Indian subcontinent. The communication gap resulting from generation gap and fictionalization of previous life style has been underlined in the story ‘The Real Durwan’. This is the story of that territorialized moment that turns the public realm into the domestic, and in return shapes the public moments, that is through the domestic in communicability with the outside world. Boori Ma, a widow immigrant who had a luxurious life back in India, leads her life in America as a stairwell sweeper in a flat building filled with Indian residents. The fact that Boori Ma is a mentally deranged old woman who
has a daily routine of lamenting to the residents of the building about her past luxurious life style seems to justify the decision that by giving her a job with certain responsibility, she would be honored despite her poor living condition under the letter boxes--- she is a durwan not a mere sweeper. In this way Boori Ma is an elevated, it is a kind of compensation to her previous status in India, and this also reflects the sympathetic relationship among the immigrant residents of the flat building. When Boori Ma, a durwan, visits her fellow residents on certain afternoon,

“The residents, for their part assured Boori Ma that she was always welcome”.

The trauma of Boori Ma is the first moment of unhomeliness in the story; while the fellow resident find their new life in America not to unbearable, Boori Ma, on the other hand chooses to repeatedly plunge herself into the past which is lived in the present of her mind. The story teller in this story seems to hint towards the fact that the deterritorialised Indian immigrants who no longer belong to the caste system all become reterritorialised into equal, poor, second-class citizen of the first world nations. Nevertheless, the effect of this double process of territorialisation that imposes on the mental space of Boori Ma appears to be something of a personal trauma that ever her fellow Indian residents cannot understand. ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ depicts the function of class and community while
displaying the helpless character of Bibi Halder. The unexplainable disease of Bibi Haldar cannot be treated by any pathy. It is once determined that Bibi, an older woman with seemingly incurable disease that causes fits of seizures should marry to cure the ailment. Irony plays a very important role in the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri as it is seen highlighting social issues and sentiments in her fictional works. In the short story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ (Of which the title becomes the name of the collection) Jhumpa Lahiri explores the play of stereotypes through the characterization of an Indian family who live in America, the Das, and an Indian local guide, Mr. Kapsi, who also works in a clinic as an interpreter for Gujarati speaking patients. Apart from their Indian look, Mr. and Mrs. Das, who were born to Indian immigrants, raised and lived in America are not different from any American in their manners; Mr. Das needs to consult his paperback tour book to learn about places in India, the family cannot speak any Indian language and they all dress up in flashy western style compared to local people. The contrast between their actual race and their conduct in this way sets up the first tie in the triple bind irony; they physically belong to the Indian race but they learn facts about their original country from book written by Americans. The second stage in this irony lies in their act of distinguishing themselves from indigenous Indians; Mrs. Das whose second son Bobby was conceived by other man, confesses her sin that keeps haunting her for
eight years to Mr. Kapsi, ‘the interpreter’ that she has taken as a kind of spiritual psychic who can cure psychological sickness. Perceiving herself as an American, Mrs. Das has internalized the Western stereotypical view towards India as a land of mythical spirituality represented by Mr. Kapasi’s profession. Moreover, Lahiri has further complicated this stereotypical irony by placing the third tie in Mr. Kapasi’s response to Mr. Das - that he is attracted to her as a foreigner who finds his banal career ‘romantic’.

Mrs. Das’s self-identification as American and alienation of Indians as the other is precisely the indicator of the inherent flaw of her stereotypical identity. By alienating herself from her Indian roots, she also enters the realm where there is something that ‘whiteness’ cannot offer, and in her case it is the spiritual consolation that is missing from Americanness and which she thinks when could find in India where mythical solution avails. The fact that Mrs. Das takes Mr. Kapasi’s ‘mystical’ interpreter job seriously gives emphasis to her visualization of Indian people- they are ‘the real’ that she cannot find in America- and through that scopic drive she provides herself with an active consent of the object- Mr. Kapsi as a fetish object of her fantasy. This irony comes full circle in the final stage when Mr. Kapasi, an oriental subject, becomes attracted to Mrs. Das, a pseudo-white woman who treats his career as exotic. For Mr. Kapasi, a
compliment from Mrs. Das opens a new channel through which he can identify himself with the Western romantic dream; in this case it is his dream of becoming a real interpreter between nations. He muses on the idea of writing her some letters and exchanges their secret desires:

“He hoped that Mrs. Das had understood Surya’s beauty, his power. Perhaps they would discuss it further in their letters. He would explain things to her, things about India and she would explain things to him about America. In its own way this correspondence would fulfill his dream or serving an interpreter between nations---- when he pictured her so many thousands of miles away he plummeted so much so that he had an overwhelming urge wrap has arms around her, even for an instant, in an embrace witnessed by his favorite Surya”.

‘Unaccustomed Earth’ is Jhumpa Lahiri’s second book of short stories. The phrase ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ has a sense of strange places, of unknown locations, creating tension and conflict in the book up to a five stories in part one, three stories in part two which are interconnected. The volume opens with the story of ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ which deals primarily with the loneliness of Ruma’s father (whose name is not mentioned anywhere in the story) after his wife’s death. The next story, ‘Hell-Heaven’ narrates the love affair between a housewife and a young family friend called Pranab Chakraborty. The third story ‘A choice of
Accommodations’ is all about the love of a married couple- Amit and Megan – having two daughters Maya and Monika. The succeeding story, ‘Only Goodness’ focuses on a sister named Sudha who tries to save her younger brother, Rahul, from alcoholism, but all her efforts in this direction end in a fiasco. ‘Nobody’s Business’ brings to the fore a love tangle between Sangeeta and Farouk, who is equally or even more involved with another woman called Deirdre Frain. The second part of the book contains a cluster of three stories titled ‘Once in a lifetime’, ‘Year’s End’ and ‘Going Ashore’. All these stories are about Hema and Kaushik. In every story of the collection ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ Lahiri has succeeded admirably in telling her tales, but in some of them she has unduly diluted the reader’s attention. Her art of narration, characterization and suspense-development has definitely scaled a new height, and this can be claimed that shorter fiction is her forte.

The themes that emerge most commonly from the stories are “the heart of family life and the immigrant experience”. The stories in this collection move around love and marriage, death and divorce. In some stories, the dark clouds gather in the horizon and the human relations once so sweet become embittered or shattered. This happens in story after story particularly as in ‘Hell-Heaven’ and ‘Nobody’s Business’. In
Lahiri’s scheme of things mothers are allowed to die, while fathers survive to remarry in their advanced age, as found in ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ and ‘Year’s End’. This, of course adds a realistic tragic touch to the stories. At times, two intensely loving souls are separated by the cruel hands of Destiny, as in ‘Hell-Heaven’, ‘Nobody’s Business’ and ‘Going Ashore’. In many stories the scene of nostalgia predominates, as in ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ where Ruma always remembers her mother fondly, and in ‘Year’s End’ where Kaushik is obsessed with the thought of his loved dead mother vis-à-vis. Chitra, his step-mother. Thematically speaking, there is a good deal of tension and conflict caused by loss of love, divorce and demise in this collection of short stories. From the viewpoint of form, the stories are quite interesting. They are usually packed with emotion and thought but some stories tend to be long, in fact too long to hold together the attention of the reader, such stories are ‘Unaccustomed Earth’, ‘A choice Accommodations’, ‘Only Goodness’ and ‘Nobody’s Business’. Because of their excessive length, they transgress the desired qualities of a short story-brevity, conciseness and concentration. These qualities are found in the stories of great short story writers like Maupassant O Henry, Chekov and many others. ‘A choice of Accommodation’ seems to be chaotic and purposeless and one can wonder that such a seasoned writer as Lahiri should have written it.
In all her works, Jhumpa Lahiri - who is of Bengali descent but was born in London, raised in Rhode Island and today makes her home in Brooklyn-displays that the place to which you feel the strongest attachment is not necessarily the country you are tied to by blood or birth: it is the place that allows you to become yourself. This place she very quietly indicates may not lie on any map. Geography is no guarantee of security. Lahiri shows that as people mature in new environment; they carry with them the potential for upheaval. These people may be felled at any time by swift jabs of chance, wherever they happen to live. Uncontrollable incidents may assail them-accidents of fate, health or weather. More often, they suffer less dramatic reversals: failed love affairs, alcoholism, and even simple passivity-the sort of troubles that seem avoidable to everyone except the person who succumbs to them.
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