CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Reading Jhumpa Lahiri is like ‘watching time-lapse nature videos’ wherein the audience gets the feeling that they have been exposed to more than what they can actually accommodate in their common frame of mind (Schillinger 2008). She is not an ambitious writer but she charms her readers with her exotic and impressively artistic language and style. She carefully sows the seeds of unusual plants which, in turn, break through the soil spreading enormous branches bearing flowers and fruits, giving shade and food to the tired trespassers of different continents. Her multifarious continental experience makes her feel the pressure of being loyal to ‘the old world and fluent in the new’. She builds up a powerful emotional charge by a constant vision and revision of the heartrending conflicts inflicted on the life of an immigrant. Her accumulated observations of the Indian immigrants and her own family’s distanced life in the United States make it easier for assigning roles to the first and second generation immigrant characters. Her experience as an expatriate Indian in America imparts into her the knowledge of conflicting ideologies encountered between native visions and alien voices. Through her protagonists, she reinvents her native vision and makes it interact with the voice of the alien nation. The first generation immigrants keep on going with their native visions giving less opportunity to interact with alien voices whereas the second generation immigrants adopt only the alien voices unmindful of their parental generations’ sentiments with their native vision.
Ashima and Ashake, in *The Namesake*, begin their life in an alien land amidst strangers but with no intention to slip away from their native vision. At the turn of every event, they never forget to remember the conventions of the homeland. They celebrate Gogol and Sonia’s rice ceremony in a perfect Bengali way by inviting all their Bengali friends in the US and preparing and serving Indian dishes. They are content with the habits cultivated in their homeland. ‘They drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans’. Whenever there is a get-together with other Bengalis, they all ‘sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazurul and Tagore’ and ‘argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray’ (NS 38).

Ashima has crossed the borders of her homeland and lives in America as a reluctant immigrant by marriage but mere physical crossing does not raise in her the attitude to accept the conventions and habits of the settled land. She always wears sari, applies vermilion on her forehead, performs Saraswathy and Durga pujos and keeps with her the ‘tattered copy of *Desh* magazine’ brought from Calcutta as it means ‘a perfect comfort to her’ (6). She never calls her husband by his name and the continental change has no effect on her because ‘It’s not the type of things Bengali wives do’ (2). Ashima’s continuous longing for home and homeland makes even the joyful moments of her life more painful. Gogol’s birth ‘without a single grandparent or parent of uncle or aunt at her side’ makes her feel ‘somehow haphazard, only half true’ (25). Ashima feels that being a foreigner in an alien land ‘is a sort of lifelong pregnancy’ (49).

A metaphoric shift is observed from Ashima in other aspects of her life for social adaptability. In her Boston apartment when she runs out of white rice, she walks out of her house to buy it in the absence of Ashake. This is her first attempt ventured courageously to face the alien world and to learn
its voice. When she leaves the house with Gogol, she encounters the warmth of strangers who smile at her, interact with her and express interest in Gogol. She practises certain cultural aspects belonging to the settled world for the sake of her children who grow up in the familiar American way along with their American peers. She becomes more accustomed to celebrations like Christmas and Halloween than Hindu religious ceremonies since the children show much interest in them. These celebrations are ‘an accident of circumstance’ and they are ‘not really meant to be’ (286). She establishes a relationship with the families other than Bengalis who are either neighbours or families of professors who are working with Ashoke. Though hesitant initially, she accepts second-hand things bought from yard sales. She also accepts a bag full of old baby clothes and a pram for Gogol from her neighbours Alan and Judy and they are the ones who first come forward to share her sorrow when her father dies. They respond in time ‘to Ashima’s sobs, then hearing the news from Ashoke, leave a vase filled with flowers by the door’ (46). Once when the children have grown up, she takes up a job in a public library. Her negotiated attitude to American life brings her out of the house and after years of life as a wife and mother, she finds a work at the library to pass the time. In the library she becomes ‘friendly with the other women who work at the library’ and ‘they are the first American friends she has made in her life’ (163). She accepts Sonia’s American fiancé Ben and understands her children better. When Ashoke suddenly dies, contrary to every one’s expectation, she decides to stay in the settled land. ‘For the first time in her life’, she ‘has no desire to escape to Calcutta’ (183). She has learnt to live alone in ‘solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know’ (161). At the end of the novel, it is observed that her ability to balance the vision and voice of both the native and the settled countries leaves her to hang ‘without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere’ (276). Ashima’s oscillating decision is the outcome of Lahiri’s personal experience
which states her ‘struggle to come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here’ (About.Com 2012).

Gogol, as a child and teenager utterly, lacks native vision. As a child born in America, he thinks only America as his homeland and his vision is purely American. For him what his parents consider native is alien. In order to be immersed in the American dream, he cuts all his ties with his family, changes his name and dates many American girls. He enters the Yale University with his new name, Nikhil, which brings him romantic relationships and feels at home only in his room which he calls ‘home’. The new name gives him confidence and wins him relationships first with Ruth and then with Maxine. He fancies the lifestyles of the Ratliffs, however, during his courtship with Maxine, ‘he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine’s family is a betrayal of his own’ (141). Only after his father’s death, he understands the importance of his native tradition and the tradition-bound life led by his parents. His symbolic return to native from alien, as he was once afraid, distances him from his romantic affairs. His marriage with Moushumi is an effort to regain his native consciousness but his conflicting identity makes him feel out of place with her. At least in his thirties, he longs for a family and a child to name.

Moushumi Mazoomdar, a woman born to Bengali parents, is not interested in her own culture. Neither does she fulfil the expectations of her parents nor lives up to the ethical codes of the society. She feels at home neither in India nor in America. She is obsessed with the European life and by studying French, she flies to France. The bookish and reserved girl begins a passionate life in Europe where she finds herself free. After a broken affair, she finds a union with Gogol and wants to be a Bengali housewife and make a family like her mother but the choice of life she once decided does not allow
her to return to her native senses. She could only feel sorry for having been unfaithful to her husband.

Lahiri’s stories, in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, bring forth similar negotiation between the native vision and alien voices. Shoba, in *A Temporary Matter*, lacks native vision and, thereby, decides to live a separated life from her husband unwilling to share the burden of the loss of her still-born child. She can only think through the familiar alien culture which has taught her nothing except parenting together. Sharing emotions and feelings is extremely foreign to Shoba. When she raises her voice to say that she was looking for an apartment and has found one, her newly-found independence geared up by the acquired culture does not mind the psychic condition of her husband.

The second story, in the collection *When Mr.Pirzada Came to Dine*, analyses, through the little Lilia’s voice, the vision of her parents and their guest, Mr.Pirzada. Mr.Pirzada has no other thought except that of reuniting with his family in his home town Dacca. Always carrying a watch with Dacca local time in his pocket during his stay in the US shows his everlasting thirst to return to his native. He is curious about American customs but has no intention to learn them. He visits Lilia’s house on an invitation, shares their food prepared in Indian flavour and watches television for Indian news. Lilia’s parents are conscious of their tradition brought from Calcutta and they want Lilia to know about India but feel proud that she was born in America. Like Ashima they also encourage their daughter to be familiar with American traditions while maintaining native traditions at home. Though Lilia learns American history in school, her father encourages her to learn about India.

Through Mr.Kapasi, the interpreter in *Interpreter of Maladies*, the alienated aspects of an Indian-American family are brought to light. Mr. and Mrs.Das willingly discard themselves from their homeland, India, and feel
delighted to say they are born and brought up in America. Mrs.Das has no love towards her husband and children but it is a fact that she is bound to the tradition of her native land which makes her continue her life with Mr.Das. Influenced by cultural disharmony, she commits adultery for which she grieves for eight years. Outwardly, no vision of native is brought out by the protagonists in this story but beyond the surface, chained by the tradition-bound morality, both Mr.Kapasi and Mrs.Das live with their spouses.

A young American woman Miranda’s fascinating sensibilities towards an Indian man, Dev, and Indian aspects of life are figured out in the story Sexy. As a citizen of America, she has a vision of life similar to that of other American individuals. What is fascinating is her efforts to understand Indian way of life and trying to learn a few Bengali letters. Like the immigrants who try to assimilate into the adopted culture, Miranda’s mission is to assimilate into a foreign culture while living in her native country. Despite being immoral as an Indian, Dev never loses his Indian vision and does not think of Miranda as anything more than a mistress.

Like Miranda, the little American boy, Eliot, gets an insight into the Indian vision of life through his caretaker, Mrs.Sen, in the story Mrs.Sen’s. He compares the emptiness of his own mother’s isolated American life with that of Mrs.Sen’s fertile Indian life. Contrary to many other first generation immigrant characters, Mrs.Sen is resistant to accept the inevitability of the alien voices (literally voiceless). Her struggle is due to her reluctance and the strict adherence to her native practices. Apart from being a perfect Indian woman in the US, she considers only India as her home.

The romantic and optimistic Twinkle encounters a realistic husband Sanjeev in This Blessed House. Every childlike delight expressed by her dreads him and he wonders whether he truly loves her. Twinkle, deeply rooted in American vision, is unable to come back to her native vision. Being
new to the adopted country, Sanjeev is possessive about his own national and religious conventions. Twinkle’s vision and voice are simply alien and she is not interested or inclined to the details and behaviour expected from her. Sanjeev destined his life with Twinkle and develops tolerance and a positive attitude to life though it means accepting the cultural integration, a special characteristic of the American Nation.

The narrator in *The Third and Final Continent* travels through three continents, Asia, Europe and America. His continental drift does not bring in any change in his attitude to his motherland. He remains Indian with the vision carried from India. His wife, Mala, joins him in America as a newly-married woman and follows the customs of her native land as they are the source of her stability even decades after living in America. In the process of assimilation they are willing to adjust to the changed atmosphere in the unknown land. They inhale the native vision but converse through alien voices. They perceive that their son can have only the alien vision as he lacks the knowledge of his native vision.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s second collection of short stories, entitled *Unaccustomed Earth*, considers the lives of the immigrant Indian characters whose vision of life negotiates with the culturally-conflicted society. The first generation immigrants dare to settle in an unaccustomed earth fighting against rough winds, alien weather and customs unknown to them and mourning the loss of the real home. Ruma, in the story *Unaccustomed Earth*, represents the conflicted second generation immigrants. Her actions are American but inwardly she suffers to overcome her native vision acquired from her mother. She feels guilty for not being able to take care of her father after her mother’s death and is also afraid to have him permanently in her house. Her native vision lets her lose her job and her alien acceptance helps her drop the habits learnt from her parents.
Ruma’s father, though a first generation immigrant, is accustomed to the settled land and he can be mistaken for a naturalised American in his old age with his grey hair and fair skin. He also acts as an example of American individualism after his wife’s death by preparing his own meal and hopping around the world with his newly-found companion, Mrs. Bagchi. Though outwardly a naturalised American, he cannot substitute the woman he dates to his wife. It is evident that his vision is native but he lives with the alien voice for a harmonious survival.

Aparna’s experience in *Hell-Heaven* is doubly-complicated when she ventures into the alien world with a loveless husband. Circumstances favour her to fall in love with an Indian, Pranab, who visits her house very often longing for food and Indian acquaintances. When he announces his marriage with an American woman, Deborah, she becomes possessive and goes to the extent of committing suicide. Aparna’s daughter, Usha, realises her mother’s love in later years and recalls that ‘He brought to my mother the first, and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt’ (HH 67). Desperately in need of love and affection, her attempt to love Pranab is an unwitting act. However, she does not claim any justice for her unacknowledged love. Bound to a culture where marriages are only arranged, Aparna is destined to live with a stranger in an alien land. She necessarily has to speak through alien voices like Ruma’s father, to live a blissful life and she does it only when years go by and Usha becomes a young woman.

Sudha, in *Only Goodness*, is an altered version of Ruma in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Having been born and brought up in the United States, they both decide their life partners against their parents’ wish. Deciding to settle with non-Bengali husbands, they enter family life forgetting the importance of individual liberty entrusted upon everyone in the settled land. They forget the American dream and surrender themselves into the hands of
their husbands and begin to play the role of a housewife and mother like any other first generation immigrant mother. As children and young women, they seem to be worried about identity as Indians or Bengalis in the land where their lives are destined but once they get married, they strive hard to establish their identities as Indian mothers to their children. It is only Sudha’s brother, Rahul, who has no vision of his parents’ past and the culture left behind. He takes to alcoholism and spoils his life. He is projected as a slip who will never return to his native senses.

The inter-connected stories in the second part of *Hema and Kaushik* once again deal with the connections of the native land and the conflicts with the settled land through the crystal-clear portrayal of the lives of the protagonists, Hema and Kaushik. The first story, *Once in a Lifetime*, introduces two Bengali families in the United States. Kaushik’s family meets Hema’s family again after seven years of life in Bombay. When they first left the States, every Indian immigrant wondered about the courage the Kaushiks had, to return to India after years of life in America. Their return to their native is remarkable for their attitude towards their motherland. But their re-entry into the once-left land is a mystery to the Hemas. On their return, Hema’s mother observes that ‘Bombay had made them more American than Cambridge had’ (HAK 235). Kaushik has been brought up in Bombay like an American teenager. Hema’s family continues to uphold the values of their native even in an alien land whereas Kaushik’s family has lived a foreign life in their own native. As a visionary Lahiri has visualised the striking difference between the two families and here, in their cases, she makes it clear that affluence and societal status decide the vision and voice one has to adopt in the settled land.

Kaushik and his father decide on different paths in the second story, *Year’s End*. His father marries again and Kaushik is distanced from home.
His father returns to the old way of life after his marriage with Chitra, a Bengali Indian school teacher. Like Ruma’s father, he is a self-motivated person who decides his own life unmindful of the cultural backdrop where he lives. When he lives with Parul, his first wife, his ways and means are American and once he marries Chitra, he changes his habit of drinking during meals and moves with his family to a place where there are many Bengalis living. Tormented by his mother’s memories, Kaushik, choosing photography as profession, wanders like a nomad. As a child, he detests the family’s move from America to India first and then from India to America. Now as a grown up, he dislikes being in one place and finds no place as home. Like Rahul in Only Goodness, nowhere in his life, will he find circumstances to recall his native vision.

Ruma and Sudha’s are successful love stories and they marry the men they have courted whereas Hema’s, in Going Ashore, is a failed affair. As young women, all the second generation immigrants think alike. Until their marriage, their vision is alien. Hema, at last, decides to marry an Indian – a marriage arranged in a very old fashion but rather new to the second generation immigrants. To communicate with the outer world and to be recognised by the society, immigrant characters need an alien voice but to live a contented life native vision is revered.

Jhumpa Lahiri generally sets all her works in one country and only the narration details the psychological inhabitation of the characters under national and cultural values. Her second novel, The Lowland, travels physically between India and the United States. Though it describes more about the political turmoil, it is also a conventional immigrant tale chronicling the life of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, born in Tollygunge, Calcutta. Udayan’s patriotic vision makes him stay back in Calcutta and Subhash travels to Rhode Island for his studies. However, the bond of family unites
them and Subhash receives frequent letters from Udayan. Udayan’s marriage with Gauri and his death, in a few months afterwards, fixes Gauri’s life with Subhash in Rhode Island.

Subhash lacks the revolutionary thoughts of his younger Udayan but is patient enough to withstand in the alien land slowly accumulating the vision of the settled land by strictly remembering his native conventions. When he develops an affair with an American woman, he cannot think of marrying her as his vision of life is different from that of an American. Even after his failed marriage with Gauri, he does not think about another marriage. As a dutiful father, he brings up Bela. He promises Gauri to continue her studies in Rhode Island but after the birth of Bela, like any other Indian father, he becomes conventional and forbids her from attending class telling her that Bela is more important. Though he lives in Rhode Island, he grieves for his inability to attend his aged parents in Tollygunge. Although he decides never to return to India, he does not want to sell the house at Tollygunge. He believes that the house is the only link between him and Calcutta. His assimilation is slow and alienation is within.

Gauri changes her attire and appearance and there is no change of attitude to the Western ways of life. She drinks tea and not wine. Her love for Udayan is monumental and she can appreciate the kindness of Subhash but cannot give him her heart. She is neither Sita in The Ramayana nor Savitri in The Mahabharatha but an ordinary woman with a strong will to live together with her long-dead husband even in her sixties. She is an individualist who never cares for others to lead a less responsible life. She is an exclusive Indian living as an alien both in her own country and the settled country.

Bela inherits the revolutionary spirit of her real father, Udayan. She speaks a little Bengali and keeps her hair braided. She has some concern for her father’s birthplace but does not think of going there. Her only visit during
her grandfather’s death displaces her and she does not want to experience alienation once again. Subhash, an affectionate father, leaves Bela to decide the course of her life and instructs her nothing about the traditions, conventions and cultural practices followed in India. Only for a few years after his arrival in Rhode Island, Subhash receives new dresses from his parents during Hindu religious festivals. After Udayan’s death, he receives nothing from them and slowly those practices fade away.

Basically, Lahiri explores the concepts of cultural identity, rootlessness, tradition and familial expectations under the magnificent and comprehensive arc of a generation or sometimes generations. *The Namesake*, a novel that brings the Gangulis’ world to life without exoticism, is rich with details and it is a story about identity, cultural assimilation and the burden of the past. *Interpreter of Maladies*, the stories that explore the psychological and spiritual rupture caused by cultural difference, tells elegant and touching stories which seek love beyond the barriers of culture and generations. *Unaccustomed Earth*, an explorer of the secrets at the heart of family life, examines the Indian expatriate experience in America from the viewpoints of the first generation immigrants and their children who are truly Americans but always burdened by the Indian cultural past. *The Lowland*, a family saga and the trials of living the great cultural divide, opens up the emotional elements of discord and alienation, hope and rejection, love and loss between spouses.

Life is an adventurous journey. As mortals, human beings have secrets and are prone to follies. Lahiri, as a ‘writer of uncommon elegance and poise’, is gentle enough to let those moments slip from the depth of hearts. As a chronicler, she always brings out a family saga either in a nutshell as a short story or in detail as a novel. Her characters are life-like and plots naturally follow human lives. Her characters are always starving for home, family, love and also for food. Her accurate portrayal of the cultural crossover in her
fiction convincingly establishes the elements of diasporic obsession. She has succeeded in blending the theme of immigration and human behaviour against the backdrop of geographical and psychological displacements. For her, displacement is a permanent human condition. One may have a home in one’s native land and build another in the settled land but ultimately one leaves all homes and death takes one to a different home which nobody knows. She lets her characters evolve between American and Indian identities to get a new identity, a global identity, a distinct identity. Aruti Nayar (2003) observes that Lahiri ‘brings alive the multiple selves constructed so painstakingly to make sense of the unknown world that is as much a land of opportunities as it is of conflict and confusion’.

Lahiri’s fiction can be studied under different perspectives and it has a scope for future researches. Since most of Lahiri’s protagonists are women, her works can be approached from a feministic perspective. Even a special study on Diasporic Women is possible. Communication is a recurring theme in Lahiri’s fiction. Characters suffer from loneliness though they are in the company of others. There is a lack of communication between husbands and wives, between parents and children and between the family and the society. Her works direct one towards eco-critical aspects. The environment has its own influence on the inner conflicts of the characters. Therefore, a study on Nature and Environment will be an innovative work. Religion and Tradition are the unique identity of an immigrant in the adopted land. Conventions and cultural inheritance are the underlying aspects of Lahiri’s fiction. Love, Marriage and Sacrifice are the basic elements and integral components in every piece of Lahiri’s writing. She brings in a contrasting difference in these aspects between the first and the second generation immigrants. Though these themes are a part of the cultural aspects, a separate study on these areas will enrich Lahiri’s perception. As she herself is an immigrant, she has a good understanding of both the native and the immigrant customs and the ways of life. She renders in all her works the American
attitude to Love and Sexuality, an essential characteristic which functions as a meter to measure the physical and psychic assimilation of immigrant characters in the adapted culture. Also she is considerate to the political upheaval of her homeland and its effect on the immigrants. She pictures this political turmoil which is the root cause of the sufferings of the protagonists in a few short stories and leads to a drastic turn of events in a novel. Lahiri’s style of writing fiction is fascinating but simple, straight-forward and, above all, autobiographical. An attempt to render a heart and hand to study the narrative art and the stylistic aspects of her language is a dignified job.

In great literature, there is no past. A good work of art fits all ages. Shakespeare and Milton continue to live in the hearts of the people, so also Lahiri through her naturalised fiction. Her stories represent a different type of expatriate writing as she is a descendent of the expatriate community. She writes about a young couple who has fallen out of love and is playing a bittersweet game in the dark hours of the day, about an earnest young man studying his landlady, whose habits frighten him at first and later fascinate him, about an oscillated youth whose fascination lies in the affairs of young American women and gets salvation at the death of his immigrant father, about the unacknowledged love of a mother to a young immigrant student who himself falls a prey to the alien attraction, about a widowed father’s secret affair with an elderly woman and about a loveless marriage which takes the woman to a far-off land and gives her freedom to pursue her ambitions at the cost of her daughter. But none of her characters are apprentice work. As she is representing and interpreting the changing reality of the world, she can be labelled as a world writer. Anil Padmanabhan and Ishra Bhai (2004) say that ‘the London-born, the Rhode Island-raised writer is also a global soul not entirely rooted in one firmament, partially at home everywhere’ (42). She sets her stories with unexpected twists and brings an insight into human emotions which confront both native visions and alien voices in the culturally-diversified adapted land.