In Hell-Heaven, the narrator contemplates the relationship between her mother and a friend of her parents’. Pranab Chakraborty was a fellow Bengali who met the narrator’s parents when he was a graduate student at MIT. The narrator’s mother, Aparna, developed a soft corner for Pranab and would wait for those moments when he would visit them. Her own husband had given himself completely over to work. Over time, she began to feel a deep affection for him, but being a married woman, she drew the line there. Still, when Pranab falls in love with an American woman, Aparna reacts poorly, waiting for Pranab’s girlfriend to leave him. Pranab and his girlfriend however get married, leaving Aparna to nurse some deep resentment for the couple.

Despite the unsaid and unacknowledged feelings that Aparna had for Pranab, there is nothing in the story to make one uncomfortable or judgmental. Hell-Heaven is a nice character-focused story, with Aparna being the main focal point. There is not much in the way of a plot, but there is enough to move the story along and leave you feeling for the characters. The story is a typical Jhumpa Lahiri fare. There are her usual elements of loss, love, yearning and family.

Irony and symbols are two literary objects that an author can use to add depth to a story. While irony has many definitions, the three that are most interesting in the literary sense would be dramatic, tragic, and situational. Dramatic irony is when the reader knows of developments to the story that a main character or characters are unaware of. Tragic irony is employed when characters of the story display actions that are contradictory to their words, or vice versa, with the audience being fully aware of the faux pas. Situational irony is a type of irony that exhibits results that are wholly at odds with what was expected to happen.
Whereas the word irony can have several meanings, symbol has only one: an inanimate object, picture, or word that becomes a representation of another concept, such as a heart drawn on a note might represent love towards the recipient.

D.H. Lawrence uses the symbol of the rocking horse in his short story “The Rocking Horse Winner” to show the situational irony that occurs between the main characters, the mother and her son, Paul. The rocking horse is an escape for Paul, a way to see beyond himself to get what he wants. Due to his mother’s own obsession for money, soon that is all Paul wants. Unlike his mother, Paul does not want the money to satisfy himself, but he seeks instead to gain the favor of his mother with money. Ironically, she married for love, but when that withered away, she was left a bitter woman bent on filling her void with material possessions. She could not even find within herself love for her children, lavishing upon them material things, but never love. Paul came to understand that being lucky was synonymous with being rich, two things that his mother lacked but needed in order to be happy. Using the rocking horse as an omniscient force, he won plenty of money, but it seemed his mother only wanted more and more. Paul became sick with his quest to see the winner of each derby race that he and his uncle would bet upon, eventually leading to his dramatic death due to possible heart failure. Although he made his mother rich at the end of the story, it appeared that the only thing she cared about was her dying son and not money. The mother felt love too late to save Paul, and Paul amassed a wealth he had dreamed of at the cost of his life.

Jumpa Lahiri employs the symbols of clothing and food in “Hell-Heaven” to foreshadow the decisions her main characters will make later in the story. They are a marker of cultural alienation which Lahiri wants to portray through her characters. In the beginning of the story, the young Pranab Kaku is drawn to a stranger simply because she is clothed in a fashion familiar to him. Her clothes and way of cooking reminds him of home, thus making him feel safe and cared for. Even so, he falls in love and marries an American girl, shunning his Indian ways, once again a sign of cultural alienation.

However, after twenty-three years of marriage to the American, Pranab Kaku cheats on her with a fellow Indian woman, a married woman no less. While Pranab Kaku thought he would be happy assimilating into American culture, it was evident from his actions in the beginning of the story that he would only be happy with a woman from his own culture. Another situational irony present in “Hell-Heaven” is the dissatisfaction in the marriage of the narrator’s parents. Their marriage was arranged in India, and so they did not love each other. Over time, and through Pranab Kaku’s indiscretion and divorce, they develop an affection for each other that is akin to love. One other instance of situational irony in the story is how the narrator’s mother is jealous of Pranab Kaku’s American wife Deborah at first, yet when Deborah is emotionally destroyed over her husband’s philandering ways, the narrator’s mother is the friend she chooses to turn to.
Dissolution of identity on account of migration is more a backdrop than a force holding the centre stage of her new anthology. Commoner yet grimmer human predicaments like death, deceit and desertion play defining roles in the lives of the characters of *Unaccustomed Earth*. The resultant perspective is rich in tonal contrast, achieved by the emergence of the second generation of immigrants, the children of the first movers.

Most of her earlier stories from *The Interpreter of Maladies* showcase the psychosocial conflicts of the characters, their isolation, the crises of identity and the struggle to belong. The first generation émigrés were like first settlers to an ‘unaccustomed earth’ braving the rough winds and weather alien to them, survival and sustenance being more the core of their problem. The epithet receives its due honour as it becomes the title of the succeeding volume.

*Unaccustomed Earth* picks up the threads right off the preceding volume. The first wave of settlers has arrived for long; some have switched to the new culture aggressively even as some stick to the old far off land. Then there are some who are straddling across two boats. Food, clothes and customs rendered unpalatable by the Indian ethos pose major stumbling blocks to smooth transition for some. Unable to cope, they fiercely cling to the earlier ways of life, almost as if mourning. The problem takes an acute turn when they succumb to the basic biological urge of perpetuating their existence through their children.

Regardless of their levels of assimilation, the sense of alienation has been passed to their offspring as if genetically. However, the children have become naturalized citizens of the adopted land imbibing its customs and mores. Not only they feel proud of it, they find the Indian culture incongruent. Their complete migration to the American culture as they move into adulthood is checked by their parents, causing friction and shaping their future.

The title story of the collection tells us about Roma, living in Seattle with her husband Adam and their toddler son Akash. She hasn’t joined her work after her mother’s sudden demise and is expecting her second child. Roma’s father is a consummate immigrant, naturalized to the extent that he could be easily mistaken for an American in his old age with his gray hair and fair skin. He conforms to the intense individualism manifest in the American culture. He lives alone and makes his own meal, loves to hop around the world, living off a suitcase. He has developed interest in Mrs Bagchi, a widower and a naturalized immigrant like him. Their paths had crossed on one of the packaged tours and they have been planning their future tours in tandem since then. Roma’s father is an epitome of the free spirit who sends over picture post-cards to her periodically.

Ruma has not been able to get over her mother’s instincts who had refused to shun her Indian identity. Although she has chosen to marry an American, much to the mortification of her mother, there are unmistakeable streaks of the orient in her. She feels guilty for not taking due care of his father as an Indian daughter would and is constantly worried about him. She yearns to be with...
him if only to invoke the old times when her mother was still alive. However, when her father pays her a visit she fears that he may decide to stay with them, not sure how Adam will receive it in the long run and what impact it will have on the family she has so carefully nurtured.

Hell-Heaven is told from the perspective of a young girl whose mother hated the American way of life, enforced Bengali customs at home, forbade her from going on dates or even to Harvard square with a friend, eating turkeys and touching wine. Her mother had a secret crush on Pranab, an acquaintance who married an American girl Deborah. Her recurrent refrain to the daughter is, she will not get away with marrying an American like Pranab Kaku did.

Choice of Accommodation is about secret personal rivalry between Amit and his American wife, Megan. Their emotions are tested when they travel to Langford to attend the marriage of Pam Borden, with whom Megan suspects Amit of having had an affair. Both Only Goodness and Nobody’s Business have Indian Immigrant girls as protagonists, painfully seeking to balance their lives with their English and Egyptian counterparts, respectively.

The last three stories are in the form of a triptych about Hema and Kaushik, childhood acquaintances and lovers later on. Lahiri has rendered poignant urgency to the tales using alternate perspectives, summing up the conflicts and the fates of the émigrés, the immigrant and the vagabond. Once in a Lifetime is a tale about Kaushik’s parents returning to America after staying in Bombay for seven years. As they stay together at Hema’s house, her mother and Mrs Chowdhary represent two opposing forces at different ladders of assimilation and at a conflict with each other. Hema’s mother dresses and eats in typically Indian manner, Kaushik’s mother dresses and eats like Americans, smokes cigarettes and loves to have her drinks. For a while the families stay together in a strained dichotomy. The next story, Year’s End, is told from Kaushik’s perspective. His mother is already dead as he receives a call from his father to inform him about his new mother and stepsisters. He tries to stay with the newly defined family, struggling to suppress his emotions poorly. Eventually, he breaks free, driving away aimlessly with his mother’s photographs towards the desolate North Atlantic shores. Going Ashore is mostly told from the author’s perspective. Both Hema and Kaushik have transcended beyond their Indian or American identities and are more of global citizens. Hema is now a professor of Latin. She is visiting Rome, taking advantage of her colleague’s unoccupied apartment. Kaushik has evolved into a war photographer and is reported to have visited violent Latin American destinations and Salvador. A map of Gaza strip is a permanent fixture on the wall of his apartment in Rome. The two run into each other like fish to water. However, Hema’s marriage with Navin has already been fixed and Navin is scheduled to move to Hong Kong on a new job. Eventually, they break away to their respective ends.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a master of captivating narratives. Her language flows with purpose and grace without many swirls and ripples. Her style is minimalist and restrained. Sentences are precise
and apt but suffused with nuances and a casual reader risks overlooking the undercurrent. “It was colder than Rome, a cold that emanated from stone, and instead of her leather jacket Hema now wore a peacoat of Kaushik’s, grateful for the weight over her shoulders, remembering that other coat of Kaushik’s she’d so hated wearing when she was a girl, back when they were nothing but already something to each other.”

She doesn’t set much store by floral sentences but her prose is not bereft of imageries and symbolism. Planting flowers in unyielding soils has a deeper meaning in the title story. Sarcophagi appear twice in Going Ashore and aptly hint at the futures in store for Hema and Kaushik.

The progress of stories in the collection marks an evolution in the concepts of home and belongingness. The further we move, the more we find home and identity becoming fluid concepts for the cast. “It didn’t matter where she was in the world, or whether or not she was dying; she had always given everything to make her homes beautiful, always drawn strength from her things, her walls. But Kaushik never fully trusted the places he’d lived, never turned to them for refuge. From childhood, he realized now, he was always happiest to be outside, away from the private detritus of life.”

Strangely, Lahiri’s stories betray barest of traces of people of Indian descent facing adverse societal attitudes in the adopted countries. The range of her focus is often elitist; her characters gravitate towards whiter partners as if to reinforce their status. The dilemmas and agonies haunting the characters of Unaccustomed Earth are global rather than limited in appeal. The conflicts and alienation of the chosen diaspora are representative of human suffering regardless of the geography.

References:


iv Ibid. p. 309.