

# Jhumpa Lahiri's Portrayal of Women in *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Born in London, Jhumpa Lahiri was raised in Rhode Island and went on to study at Boston University (U.S.) where she earned a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. She currently lives in Brooklyn, New York with her husband and two children. Her first collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies* and her seminal novel, *The Namesake* won many awards and accolades.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a prolific writer. In 2008, she wrote *Unaccustomed Earth*, a volume of short stories. It is followed by a Novel, *The Lowland*. Again in 2015, she came out with a Non-fiction called *In other words*. Lahiri has carved a niche for herself as a diasporic, post modern, feminist writer.

A close study of postmodern feminist literature will state her irreplaceable position. When it comes to contemporary world Literature, her name has become indispensable. Celebrated all over in the U.S. and other countries, she is a much sought-after writer. Daughter of a postmodern, globalized, liberated world, Lahiri depicts the lives of people belonging to the pluralistic, fragmented and postmodern society. She belongs to the plethora of postmodern women writers who dared to explore the still to unexplored avenues for women in Literature. Dr. Robert Gnanamony mentions about Lahiri in the essay "Text / Textuality of Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*" in his collection of critical essays, *Literary Poly Rhythms* while elaborating the significance of postmodern women writers.

Inspired and encouraged by the post modernism's liberated gospel, feminist authors all over the world have taken the reading public by storm by producing profuse fiction of all sorts. Seeing an array of celebrated women authors in India right now, from Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, to Jhumpa Lahiri and Manju Kapur, it seems that they have benefited much from postmodernism. (35) *Literary Poly Rhythms*

The aim of this paper is to study the portrayal of Women by Jhumpa Lahiri in *Unaccustomed Earth*. This text is a collection of short stories with two parts. The part one of the book comprises five stories "Unaccustomed Earth", "Hell Heaven", "A choice of Accommodation", "Only Goodness", "Nobody's Business". The part two contains three stories.

“Once in a Life time”, “Year’s End” and “Going Ashore”. The stories in the first part narrate the lives of different women. The stories of the second part describe the lives of two people, Hema and Kaushik. These stories resemble the yester year Bildungsroman type of novels written by Dickens and Fielding. They deal with the theme of “growing up”. In other words they are ‘coming of age’ type of narratives.

Jhumpa Lahiri has peopled her stories with women belonging to different age groups and different strata of the society. Some of them are erudite, educated and privileged. A few of the women are conservative and conventional, but all of them are full of life and vigour. They are not mere figments of her imagination. Lahiri has faithfully reproduced the lives of women she has come across without romanticising them. Mothers, daughters and wives, women in all their possible avatars have been brilliantly portrayed by her. The women who are shown as liberated and outspoken in the stories are all off-springs of the postcolonial and postmodern world. Born after the two great World Wars, they seem to be very much influenced by the tenets of globalization and liberalisation. Self-reliance and economic independence have definitely given them an edge over their male counterparts.

Most of the female protagonists in the stories are Bengali women excluding only two, Deborah in the story “Hell and Heaven” and Megan in “A choice of Accommodation”. The conventional women in the stories are born and brought up in India, Ruma’s mother (Unaccustomed Earth) and Usha’s mother (Hell and Heaven) settled in U.S. after their marriage to Bengali men. The privileged ones are born to parents of Bengali origin Ruma, Usha, Sudha, the guilty sister in “only Goodness” and Hema, the heroine of the stories in the part two are the true daughters of U.S. soil. They have imbibed the culture of the country where they live. They are no longer citizens of India. What seems to be offensive and unconventional to their rather conservative mothers appears to be usual and common to them. These girls take things lightly. They consider chastity to be an overrated issue. They are postmodern in their outlook and all the established norms are questioned by them. Chris Snip-Walmsley in his essay defines the tenets of “postmodernism” in this way.

Scepticism, doubt and paranoiac are the tools of the trade for the postmodernism thinker who usually believes that agreement is always enforced, that truth is merely a coerced consensus, and everything is relative. Thus, we can move towards a more democratic mindset only through a spirit of dissensus, a tolerance for difference, a move to the marginal, and through small, localized resistance. In other words, rather than forcing one’s

truth to someone, one should accept that they have their own story to tell. (408) *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*.

Everyone has the right to tell their stories. The daughters in the story instead of following the footsteps of their mothers take an entirely different step. They come out with their own narratives unlike their moms who have spent all their lives with their legally wedded husbands. They have many affairs. They grow up with the “spirit dissensus”. Brought up in a country where marriage of convenience and live-in relationships are quite common, they indulge in mischievous and promiscuous activities. They never consider it to be a sin. Usha in “Hell and Heaven” reveals her experience.

When I began menstruating, the summer before I started ninth grade, my mother gave me a speech, telling me that I was to let no boy touch me and then she asked if I knew how a woman became pregnant. I told her what I had been taught in science, and then she asked me if I knew how, exactly that happened. I saw the terror in her eyes and so, though I knew that aspect of procreation as well, I lied... I began keeping other secrets from her, evading her with the aid of my friends. I told her I was sleeping over at friends when really I went to parties, drinking beer and allowing boys to kiss me and fondle my breasts.

#### 76) *Unaccustomed Earth*

Infidelity and adulterous behaviour have become part of life for them. They are not bitten by the bug of pathini dharma. Hedonistic in their attitude, these girls celebrate life without any guilt. Hema, the heroine in all the three stories of the part two of *Unaccustomed Earth* is one such girl. She strikes up a relationship with her childhood acquaintance Kaushik, though she is engaged to another man. Not only in *Unaccustomed Earth*, even in her seminal novel *Namesake*, has one come across such an illegitimate affair between Gogol’s wife Moushmi and her friend Dimitri. What fascinates one is Lahiri’s choice of words to express the thoughts of Moushmi or Mouse as she is fondly called by her boyfriend, Dimitri.

One Friday she finds herself alone in Dimitri’s apartment; he goes out as soon as she arrives, to buy a stick of butter for a white sauce he is making to pour over trout... She watches him from the window, walking down the block, a small, balding, unemployed, middle aged man, who is enabling to wreck her marriage. She wonders if she is the only woman in her family to have ever betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful. This is what upsets her most to admit; that the affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her and structuring her day. (266) *Namesake*

Traditional and conventional in their approach, the mothers of the post modern daughters have been etched beautifully. Be it Usha's mother or Ruma's mother, they are self-less women who have sacrificed a lot for their families. They still stick to their roots. Astounded by the melting pot culture of the U.S., at first they try to control their daughters. In due course of time, they realise that this is the "in thing" or order of the day. Slowly they come to terms with the culture of one of the super powers of the world. Ruma's mother laments about the future of her two hundred and eighteen saris after her death. She knows pretty well that her daughter will never drape saris. Ruma remembers her mother's words. And she had remembered the many times her mother had predicted this very moment lamenting the fact that daughter preferred pants and skirts to the clothing she wore, that there would be no one to whom to pass on her things(17) (UE)

Usha observes the drastic change in her mother. She is no longer the same idle woman who has been nagging her during her adolescence. Mother has in a way become resourceful. She has prohibited her daughter from speaking to boys earlier. Now she is the only solace to Usha, the victim of many break-ups. Mother consoles Usha by sharing her experience. She tells her how bad she felt after Pranab's exit from her life. Though there is nothing physical about that relationship, it has left a deep scar in her heart.

My mother and I had also made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well. Slowly, she accepted that I dated one American man, and then another, and then yet another, that I slept with them, and even that I lived with one though we were not married. She welcomed my boyfriends into our home and when things didn't work out she told me I would find someone better. (82) UE

Another striking difference between the mothers and daughters is their attitude towards money. The mothers are not stingy but they are rather economical when it comes to spending. The daughters are all spendthrifts. They swindle money without thinking about future. Moreover, they have been minting a lot of money because the country where they live warrants them to work from teenage. Economic independence in a way has empowered them. On the other hand it has made them unruly buyers. Living in the richest country of the world, they are addicted to shopping. Consumerism and neo liberalism have exploited them so dearly. In the West, a life style of unnecessary spending has been deliberately cultivated and nurtured. They buy stuff to cheer them. Smitten by the size zero culture and "being in shape" mindset, these girls attach enormous importance to their looks. Ruma who is pregnant for the second time laments about the change in her looks.

She had taken to applying concealer below her eyes, even when she had no plans to leave the house. In addition she's been putting on weight. She decided that it must have been the food she found herself always finishing off of Akash's plate and the fact that now she had to drive everywhere instead of walk. She'd already ordered pants and skirts with elastic waist bands from catalogues. (13) (UE)

In the story, "Choice of Accommodation" Amit and his American wife, Megan switch hotel rooms for petty reasons. Even if they could get dorms in Langford for twenty dollars, they prefer to check in a hotel named Chadwick Inn. "There had been an option to sleep, for twenty dollars a person, at one of the Langford dorms, empty now because it was August. But Amit had decided to splurge on the Chadwick Inn, which was slightly removed from campus, and, offered a pool, a tennis court, a restaurant with two stars, and access to the shaded lake ...

Lahiri reiterates this particular trait of switching accommodation of the couple to reveal something at the end of the story. Though they change hotels often, at the end of the day, they spend a good time at one of the dorms. Lucid and eloquent in her narration, Lahiri inspires her readers. Her stories offer a concoction of all types of characters. She herself is a daughter of the postmodern world and she excels in writing diasporic literature. Prolific and profound, her narration is so vivid that one feels like re-living all those moments especially when she describes food it is irresistibly appetizing. She is such a powerful narrator. Similarly, all her female protagonists are as powerful as Jhumpa Lahiri. The heroine of the stories in the part two Hema, seems to be an alter-ego of Lahiri with a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. A separate research paper can be written on her. Postmodern, postcolonial, diasporic and dynamic, women of Lahiri's stories are true to life.

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