

Peopling an Unaccustomed Earth with a New Generation: Jhumpa Lahiri's Supreme Fictional Journey into Human Conditions

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ABSTRACT

Using a theoretical framework derived from my ongoing engagement with what I have called a 'Gynocentric matrix' of Indic sensibility, along with James Hillman's polytheistic psychology and Wallace Stevens' notion of a Supreme Fiction, this paper offers a reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's (b. 1967) short stories beyond postcolonial criticism. Stemming from a depth consciousness where life, living and death, joy, indifference and sorrow, generation, de/re-generation, and transformation are intricately intertwined, Lahiri's fictional multiverse is peopled by a new generation of characters who speak to the soul of the reader; in the process, she sculpts a reality that does not tolerate any homogenizing impulse in the name of an abstract unity.

KEYWORDS

Bengali literature, diasporic writing, feminism, generation, Gynocentric matrix, Jhumpa Lahiri, postcolonial studies

The cover page of Jhumpa Lahiri's (b. 1967) *Unaccustomed Earth* (vintage version) with turquoise waves of the Tsunami delicately cradling a gold bangle captures not only the devastating story of Hema and Kaushik in that volume but hints at a sensibility that speaks from a depth consciousness where life, living and death, joy, indifference and sorrow, generation, de/re-generation, and transformation are intricately intertwined. Images seem to well up in Lahiri's writing from some unseen fount of forces that speak to the soul of the reader, regardless of her or his cultur-

al conditioning. Efforts to categorize Lahiri's work within various postcolonial, South Asian American and/or Indian American diasporic¹ writings are understandable given her and many of her characters' external backgrounds and the cache of these terms in literary criticism circles. However, Lahiri's work eludes these categories because it touches so deep a chord in the human heart that her third book *Unaccustomed Earth* opened number one at the *New York Times* best sellers' list. Her *Interpreter* had extracted such admirations as Amy Tan exclaiming she "is the kind of writer who makes you want to grab the next person you see and say, 'Read this!'" (LAHIRI 1999: jacket note).

I offer that her writing cannot necessarily be captured within 'post' anything that are temporal categories because not Chronos but Kairos speaks through her! Stemming from an Indic mindset, which is a civilizational not nationalistic category, and vaguely Bengali, (both Indian and Bangladeshi, 'west' and 'east' Bengal, equally 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' and neither) an always already crossbreed particularity, her mythopoeic storytelling sculpts for us a reality that will not tolerate any homogenizing impulse in the name of an abstract unity. All reading is perspectival, and in this essay I look at her work from a point of view that I have elsewhere called a 'Gynocentric'² matrix' that unconsciously honors the Mother principle and her myriad flowering away from any monomania. Developing this matrix with the help of James Hillman's polytheistic archetypal psychology, I offer an argument that Lahiri peoples her fictional world with a whole new generation. She births in her writing an extraordinary range of emotions and plurality of experiences that touch upon what Hillman calls the 'soul's code'.³

¹ Cf. BAHMANPOUR 2010. Bahareh Bahmanpour summarizes the scholarship in this vein as she offers her addition to this particular critical point of view. Since so much has been written by Spivak and Bhabha, and they are cited *ad infinitum* on the postcolonial condition so to speak, I am desisting repeating that point of view.

² In my book (SAXENA 2004) I argued that Indic worldview has a 'Gynocentric matrix' which has the Name of the Mother Goddesses as its informing presence in spite of its otherwise patriarchal social milieu. I have also argued in my other works that the Name of the Father or an unconscious presence of the supreme patriarchal monotheism informs most of western writing. James Hillman calls it a 'monotheism of consciousness' and in arguing for a psychic and polytheistic 'return to Greece', he hopes for westerners to get out of the 'tyrannical' and the 'jealous monotheism of Number One'. I argue that the Indic mindset does not need to return to Greece because resisting all imperium, the Divine Feminine presides over its polytheistic consciousness which reflects for Hillman our psychic reality which is "not I, but we; not one but many. Not monotheistic consciousness looking down from its mountain, but polytheistic consciousness wandering all over the place, in the vales and along rivers, in the woods, the sky, and under the earth" (HILLMAN 1975: 33).

³ Cf. HILLMAN 1997.

The other theoretical framework that informs this essay is Wallace Stevens' notion of a Supreme Fiction that produces an ever changing reality in its very imaginative labor of mythopoeic storytelling. Stevens replaces religion with poetry because in the poem *Angel Surrounded by Paysans* he invokes:

[...] the necessary angel of earth,
 Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,
 Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
 And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone
 Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
 Like watery words awash (STEVENS 1990: 497).

When the palimpsest is cleaned and the *Wholly Other* and utterly transcendent *Name of the Father* is put under a question mark, the Mother principle is revealed who has always been there but only seen by the so called 'primitives', heathens, poets, madmen and often women. All around today, one sees a hunger to re-vitalize the earth as a divine entity. Under the auspices of an imperial monotheistic consciousness and its corollary scientific materialism, certain homogenizing worldviews have been constructed that attempt to explain life and literature from all kinds of demystifying *isms*. But we have started to see a re-enchanting of the so called Weberian disenchantment of modernity under instrumental rationality. Lahiri's writing in a way re-enchants the storytelling, and instead of attempting to decipher and explain away her tales into some comfortable ism, we will stay within their mystique. For the sake of this brief essay, I will focus on her short stories even though her novel *Namesake* and its transformation in Mira Nair's remarkable film are equally enchanting and soul-making.

This re-enchantment and this liquid re-generation of a 'fallen and sinful earth' can only happen when the Mother Principle and what I have called the Indic 'Gynocentric⁴ matrix' is acknowledged; she fills our earthly existence with numinosity. The cover illustration of the *Unaccustomed Earth*, mentioned above, invoking the Tsunami touches upon the devastating beauty of the Mother principle. Waters have always been

⁴ It is vitally important to distinguish my use of the word Gynocentric with a capital G from other usage of the word 'gynocentric'. I am using the word to describe a Śakti saturated culture whose collective psyche is suffused with the powerful presence of various manifestations of the Divine Feminine. It is not necessarily centered on human women as the matrix envelopes women and men; also, it may be as unconsciously present in Indic people regardless of their beliefs as the Name of the Father is present in western monotheistic cultures.

a deep symbol of the feminine according to Jung who came very close to understanding this elusive Mother.⁵ It is this generative principle that operates in all creativity, and newly minted women writers like Lahiri seem to dive into its inner depths to create a kind of soul food.

Similar to Faulkner's 'apocryphal' Yoknapatawpha County or R.K. Narayan's Malgudi,⁶ Lahiri has created a world of her own articulating an imagined community beyond all borders of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity or linguistic categories even as they have a distinct sense of this vague Bengali particularity. A product of her imaginal foray into the soul world of humans, her fictional space is peopled with creatures that belong to a new generation who hold out hopes for the re-generation of the earth that is not accustomed yet to the new reality. Their Bengaliness connects them to an always already in flux, non-identitarian identity that requires a rootedness without any imperial self-assertion. Like Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter of maladies in the title tale of her Pulitzer winning debut, Lahiri herself is an interpreter, not of maladies but of life's magnificent heartbreaking beauty and breathtaking diversity.⁷

While most of Lahiri's tales inhabit people who arrive on the shores of the new world due to British colonial adventures in India and its aftermath of real and 'epistemic violence', their loves, hates and human, all too human, endeavors speak of a new generation of human beings, especially women that are speaking of possibilities that the old could not have imagined. The omniscient narrator, whom I include in my category of characters, in Lahiri's stories has a voice that is a woman's and yet not gendered in a negative sense because she is one of those writers who are heralding the coming of a generation of women and men that have more or less taken for granted that women do not need to offer any apologies for their full humanity. They are also interestingly not confined by any deep individualistic or self-centered ideologies and are positively 'de-humanized' in Hillman's terms. These new people by their very existence in a fictional environment challenge binary categories such as first and third world, center and periphery, one and many, self and other(s) because their soul adven-

⁵ "The maternal significance of water [...] is one of the clearest interpretations of symbols in the whole field of mythology, so that even the ancient Greeks could say that the sea is the symbol of generation. [...] All living things rise, like the sun, from water, and sink into it again at evening. [...] Those black waters of death are the waters of life, for death with its cold embrace is the maternal womb, just as the sea devours the sun but brings it forth again. Life knows no death" (JUNG 1956: 218).

⁶ A blurb on the book (LAHIRI 2008) too compares her fictional universe with Narayan, Hardy and Murakami's.

⁷ Frederick Busch says she "honors the vastness and variousness of the world"; cf. LAHIRI 1999: jacket note.

tures animate the alienated modernist world they have stumbled upon as much as they bring into sharp focus their disparate experiences in a radically challenging and transformative setting. They inhabit a nowhere and everywhere land so quintessentially familiar to many of us who made similar journeys and find solace in her stories.

Disintegration of the empire and its subsequent scattering of people into various lands hitherto inhabited by more or less homogeneous groups have opened the western world toward sensibilities that are fundamentally plural and multiple. However, some of Lahiri's characters experience a happy fragmentation and become aware of possibilities that might not have been open to them in their home environments. Her readers get a glimpse of depth experiences that are at once devastating as they are soul-making. While the general conflicts of characters such as Gogol's in *Namesake* or Hema and Kaushik's in the brilliant novella in *Unaccustomed Earth* do arise out of a cultural encounter that left them adrift in a sea of difference and the world of transnational migrations they could not control, their journeys are not about such clashes because they are about peeking into the human soul. Their Bengali particularity gives them their rootedness in this Lahiri multiverse even as they move in and out of their multiple selves via an imaginative highway where so many worlds intersect that her fictional world becomes a quintessential slice of humanity in transition.

These characters are on a journey that was not available to any other generation before in a large scale because they are children of both a sort of global feminist consciousness that gave it a local habitation and a name and live in a global village, a product of a new mapping of the world. Lahiri weaves tales out of her bag that is as ancient as human storytelling itself and yet is fresh and new as a new born babe. The Random House India edition of *Unaccustomed Earth* pictures an evocative Lahiri sitting on a dinner table with her back toward the reader listening in to the gossips and chattering of her characters that await transformation into tales in her bedazzling little *desi* handbag dangling from the chair. It is a shiny little basket of stories that remind me of a childhood collection called *Thakurmar Jhuli* or the grandmother's bag which delighted little Bengali kids for many generations. Lahiri's jeweled box of stories revives our hope in story telling as a primal human activity; it's not just some exotic chic.⁸ It is no accident that Lahiri demanded from her ma-

⁸ This cover might have been used by the publisher to invoke a 'romanticized' and/or 'nativist' notion for the reader; however, I hope to show that Lahiri does not lend herself to romanticism as such.

ternal grandfather when she was two the never ending stories as she writes in *Trading Stories*:

My first experience of hearing stories aloud occurred the only time I met my maternal grandfather, when I was two, during my first visit to India. He would lie back on a bed and prop me up on his chest and invent things to tell me. [...] I am told that the two of us stayed up long after everyone else had gone to sleep, and that my grandfather kept extending these stories, because I insisted that they not end (LAHIRI 2011: 78, 87).

What Hillman calls our *daimon*, the gift of storytelling in Lahiri's case, was visible from the start. She had won a prize in fifth grade for a story called *Adventures of a Weighing Scale* which gave her in her own words the imperative to 'do this' (*Trading Stories*). The fact she enters the soul of stories beyond all difference and perhaps because of it is reflected in her description of reading: "I entered into a pure relationship with the story and its characters, encountering fictional worlds as if physically, inhabiting them fully, at once immersed and invisible" (LAHIRI 2011: 87). This is the Supreme Fiction Lahiri creates both filling with and creating in the readers a soul hunger where creative expression becomes her *sine qua non*. Lahiri of all the so called 'postcolonial' writers is capable of invoking:

Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds [without] the blessed rage for order (STEVENS 1990: 130).⁹

It is the lack of any perceptible need for order that allows her to plumb the depth of the soul that is actually inexhaustible and bottomless. This soul is not religious in the sense of needing some acute redemption from some perceived sin or an escape from the cyclical samsara of Indic vicious cycle of our own making, but a subtle persona within us that demands expression. Hillman says that each soul "is given a unique *daimon* before we are born" (HILLMAN 1997: 8) and he invokes Plato's myth of Er and the word *paradeigma* which is "a basic form encompassing" one's "entire destiny" (HILLMAN 1997: 9). This is that vague something in us¹⁰ that will not

⁹ Cited from a famous poem by Wallace Stevens, *Idea of Order at Key West*, first published in 1936.

¹⁰ Hillman using E.B. Tylor writes that 'primitives' (as nonindustrial peoples were then called) conceived that which we name 'soul' to be a "thin insubstantial human image [...] mostly palpable and invisible, yet also manifesting physical power" (HILLMAN 1997: 9). In Sanskrit it is called *sukṣma śarīra*, or a subtle body, that has the creative energy of Śakti — a feminine force of energy, power and potency. Hillman says that this soul chooses its parents, an idea which is entirely consistent with Indic notion of *karman* and rebirth.

be satisfied with all the world's comforts but needs soul food so to speak in creative and birthing necessity; the *daimon* in us both propels us to act beyond our social *dharma* so to say, and protects us from and buoys us through invisible barriers to creative expression. Some amongst us with secondary imagination become creative writers and artists, and the rest of us are fed this soul food as mythopoeic stories, songs, and myriad other artistic expressions to make our earthly sojourn meaningful.

Her tales truly represent a world where a new generation of people without inhibition or self-advertising can simply just be themselves and allow their readers a peek into their imagined reality, exhilarating us with possibilities that only art can create. James Hillman writes in the preface to a new edition of *Re-Visioning Psychology* where he proceeded to 'de-humanize psychology' in the sense of taking the self-centered narcissism out of psychology, a product of western humanism, that "the idea of repression belongs to the nineteenth-century's era of colonialism, predatory industrialism, and white male supremacy, when repression was the law of life" (HILLMAN 1997: ix). Although for the non-white populations of the world even in the 21st century, the idea that these oppressive ideologies belong to the 19th seem a bit of wishful thinking, Lahiri, a product of an east-west adventure as well as confident feminism does produce writing that give a lie at least to white male supremacy in literature. While supremely capable of entering the male mind with easeful grace, she creates women that are often incomprehensible except in a depth dimension that gives us a sense of our *daimons* that are not contained by societal repression.

Arriving in 1999, the *Interpreter* announced the regeneration of storytelling into the new century away from both modernist angst and postmodernist pastiche. It was at the very end of the western millennium still dominated by male writers including black and brown ones that Jhumpa Lahiri descended on the American reading public and subsequently the English speaking world. This momentous arrival of a remarkable writer on the international literary scene decisively shows how a new generation of women writers is beginning to find her 'individual talent' within a larger 'tradition' that no longer requires any stamp of approval from the likes of Naipaul who recently declared that no woman writer is his equal. While the question of equality has vexed feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and other social justice movements, my Gynocentric sensibility argues that the idea of equality assumes androcentric norms that posit that women can only be as good as male authors who have established the norm. Jhumpa Lahiri definitely could be 'a complete master of the house' if she wanted to be

a 'master' and surely writes no 'narrow sentimental' and 'feminine tosh' whatever that might be.

At this point in our collective history, many people have begun to see the errors of judging diverse ways of being from mono-centric perspectives thrust upon the world via masculinist imperial ideologies. Some women writers whether they engage in *écriture féminine*¹¹ or not are capable of sculpting characters and weaving narratives in ways that announce the arrival of a wholly different sensibility that cannot be judged primarily by male measures or called postmodern or postcolonial because they do not need modernity or the small, though catastrophic, history of colonialism as a point of departure. Out of the ashes of such historic march,¹² rises the phoenix of creative humanity that is now spreading around the world with many writers with their magic pens or computers.

A Temporary Matter was the first Lahiri story I read simply because it was the first one in the collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, and the tone of the story told me that here is a writer who could delineate every particle of sorrow and every atom of human conditions in the sharpest detail possible without a tremor in the tone. This is a story about generation and degeneration; it speaks of slow and inevitable disintegration of a marriage that had died with the couple's child, but the ending was as sharp as the razor's edge, only hinting at re-generation. The story makes the reader convulse as a question halts her steps in the world of mundane reality: what happens when life as we know it stops. But life stopping is also a vital trope of regeneration; we must die to our old selves to be born anew and yet this dying incorporates the dead.

Lahiri's male characters whom she portrays with deep sympathy watch often in sincere perplexity the women in their lives or even ac-

¹¹ Helene Cixous' celebrated term that galvanized French feminist thought and Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism are revolutionary moves within western literary theorizing; however, I am adding another layer of 'difference' here and submit that my Gynocentric reading springs from the supreme Goddess of speech (Vac in Sanskrit) within Indic milieu who makes language too saturated with Śakti. Indic aesthetic theory of *rasa* an 'emotive aesthetics' is a part of this matrix. See my forth coming essay "Prodigy, Poet, Freedom Fighter: Sarojini Naidu, Nightingale of India". I have also developed this idea in a conference paper titled "Dance of the Dual Self and Creative Play: A Shakta Reading of Rasa Theory". In addition, I neither necessarily agree that language is always an 'instrument of patriarchal oppression' nor do I find myself in any particularly oppositional mode against 'phallogocentrism' which cannot be applied to Indic Gynocentric sensibilities.

¹² See the idea of history 2 in CHAKRABARTY 2001 where he imagines a history that lies beneath the imperial march of Hegelian history 1, quietly operating and awaiting recognition. He adds a postcolonial touch to many feminist theorists who have talked about ritual time and women's time that the instrumental rationality thankfully leaves behind in its wake.

quaintances like Mrs. Das in the title story, revealing secrets or making decisions that would be mostly unthinkable for other generations. Time and time again, we peek into the soul of these men in her stories whose sad amazement at their wives' or girlfriends' apparently errant behavior reveals how unaccustomed so many of us are for the re-generation of our lives through death. In this story after his now estranging wife Shobha who is unable to deal with the loss of her generative capacity declares that she is leaving the marriage, Shukumar reveals the most painful secret that only he knew that he had held their child in his arms: "Our baby was a boy", he said. "His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night". The details hit the reader as she becomes Shobha and enters her abysmal sorrow and alienated life. However, the story ends in the couple's cathartic weeping "for the things they now knew" (LAHIRI 1999: 22). While we are never told what happens after that and the temporary matter of loss of light in their apartment that frames the story, plunging them and readers into a depth dimension of the 'vale of soul-making', we find ourselves praying for re-generation for the sake of our fellow travelers.

It may very well be my own vaguely Bengali sensibility because, as accused by many outside of this imagined community, we can't resist remembering Rabindranath Tagore,¹³ the prime marker of Bengali sensibility who at once belonged to the world and is known as the inventor of Bengali short story and myriad other things. Lahiri's heartbreaking tales remind me of the style of a Tagore short story called *Postmaster* which was also turned into a little filmic *objet d'art* by another Bengali, Satyajit Ray in *Teen Kanya*. In this story Tagore simply invokes in a few brushstrokes of words the heartbreaking tale of a little orphan girl in a remote village in Bengal whose budding hope of breaking out of abject mental and emotional impoverishment is thwarted when the new homesick postmaster, whom she serves happily because he is kind enough to treat her as a real human being, resigns and leaves his post because this city bred man cannot survive in this malaria infested and madness inducing village. He, of course, misses like most of us the soul making world of Ulapur's Ratan, a little pre-pubescent girl, who finds a face in Ray's depiction of her in the first vignette in the film about three daughters, girls

¹³ The first Asian to win a Nobel Prize in literature, Tagore can only be described as a multifaceted genius who could not be contained by any genre. A poet par excellence, he was a lyricist, musician, choreographer, novelist, playwright, painter, essayist who also contributed to fundamental notions of nation building through education, science, sustainable agriculture without resorting to nationalism.

or women whom Tagore had given his magic touch of diverse characterization.

Let us now look at the second story in the *Interpreter, When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, to communicate this vague Bengality and its borderless particularity. A slice of Boston with the privileged names of Harvard and MIT hovering in the background creates at least a big part of the Lahiri multiverse. It is an elemental story of a divided and yet undivided Bengal arriving in America to meet each other. The story is set in 1971 when the birth pangs of another nation now called Bangladesh were once again trembling the subcontinent. The narrator's voice that recalls her childhood experience when Mr. Pirzada, a Muslim man, came to dinner in the middle of this upheaval is full of deep sympathy as she discovers this whole saga is totally unknown to the American life she led. World literature is not rife with stories of this new partition; this time of Pakistan and not on religious but cultural and linguistic grounds.

Bengal was first divided by Lord Curzon in 1905 in the beginning of the last century when deeper schisms between Hindus and Muslims were sown by both imperial machinations and corrupt politicians. The song *Amar Shonar Bangla* [My golden Bengal] that Tagore wrote in prescient opposition to this division would later ironically become the national anthem of Bangladesh. In 1947, the definitive division on religious grounds created East Pakistan,¹⁴ a story of blood and tears still wracking the subcontinent. And in 1971 this eastern part mutinied to become Bangladesh.

The narrator's ten year old self could not separate the Indian man from the East Pakistani, soon to become Bangladeshi. The word *desi* in today's South Asian lingo captures that shared civilization of hybrid people with their many deities living in relative harmony for millennia that nationalists of every kind forget. Lahiri's narrator captures this violent and utterly useless division:

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea (LAHIRI 1999: 25).

Her father's efforts to explain the difference reminds us of Roy's *God of Small Things* where too the adult world's incomprehensible actions are

¹⁴ My mother's family fled this newly created country and her stories haunted me enough to write my first published essay. Cf. SAXENA 2002.

laid bare by the reasoning mind of a child. As the child tries to understand the history, the story unpacks the rituals of the family around the television that was the only source of information of Mr. Pirzada's family with seven daughters whom he had left behind because he had earned an honored scholarship that allowed him, the narrator explains, to live "in a room in a graduate dormitory, and [he] did not own a proper stove or a television set of his own. And so he came to our house to eat dinner and watch the evening news" (LAHIRI 1999: 24). The two worlds of the child — the pumpkin carving during Halloween and a far off sweltering Indian subcontinent — are so skillfully juxtaposed that we forget where we are as the Supreme Fiction of Lahiri's multiverse takes over our imagination.

As the tense saga of the war is played out with refugees pouring into India and Bangladesh is born in front of her very eyes, the child narrator's vivid memory of Mr. Pirzada and her family is very telling: "Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, and a single fear" (LAHIRI 1999: 41). Although she and her family would never see Mr. Pirzada again once he returned to Bangladesh and informed via a letter that his family was safe as refugees in the Indian city of Shillong, it was the absence that the child felt that captured an entire culture's anguish and sorrow.

Many diverse women inhabit this Lahiri world. The sheer Bengalingness of Mrs. Sen is evident in her fish obsession and her *bonti*, a very curious cutting blade that the American child Eliot watches with pleasure. Mrs. Sen chops things "seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas" (LAHIRI 1999: 114). Her homesickness is accentuated by her supposedly female fear of driving, but at home she had a chauffeur! Her driving plight and narrow escape reveals modernity's challenge to the home bound woman who finds meaning in cutting vegetables and fresh fish heads so that she can feed her family a healthy meal, an ability that the modern *homo economicus* has no use for.

In our mono-mania, we may want to define her as backward or too *desi* to survive in America, but she too has a sympathetic place in this diverse soul world that Lahiri creates. The child is able to see that while many adults don't. I am not sure that Mrs. Sen is necessarily venturing into the realm of the other as this critic states:

Her first attempt to cross the boundaries fails but, no matter how traumatic the experience is, it at least makes her face the trauma and possibly release herself from the vi-

cious cycle of escape and avoidance through being more open to the realm of the Other — what is definitely going to prove useful in crafting and negotiating her new diasporic identity and in encouraging her to embrace her new life in America (BAHAMANPOUR 2010: 46).

As we will see later, embracing a diasporic identity is no panacea, and in the Lahiri world it does not necessarily lead to any redemption. If Mrs. Sen belongs to a world beyond modernity, Twinkle seems to be her polar opposite but is equally eccentric. Many critics accept that ‘embracing a new life in America’ makes Twinkle a successful human being, but Lahiri’s works so far clearly show that there is no escaping a human hunger for something far more urgent than ‘assimilation’. The third person narrator of *This Blessed House* focuses on the consciousness of a vexed Sanjeev as he observes his newly married wife’s obsession with finding Christian paraphernalia in their new home. While critics see her ability to accept the other in spite being a ‘good little Hindu’ as a sign of her hybridity, she is one of those Lahiri women whom we cannot easily fathom. She comes from a milieu where multiplicity is a given and for her an agonistic conflict between a constructed Hindu identity that of Sanjeev against a constructed Christian proselytizing identity is meaningless. She seems to display Hillman’s polytheistic archetypal psyche and is not threatened by any other; kissing Christ is a symbol not of her assimilation but her instinctive and unconscious archetypal recognition of multiple ways of being in the presence of the Divine.

Then we have Miranda, the ‘sexy’ white American woman stereotyped by Devs of the world. Repressed Indian males’ fantasy of ‘sexy’ and ‘easy’ white women is a trope that plays out in this story with depth and passion. The story reveals, once again with the help of a child witness, an adult drama of deceit and infidelity. She is a ‘real’ American and does not need assimilation but her anguish and loneliness is experienced by the reader as the narrator this time takes us within her inner reality. She listens as her friend Laxmi tells the story of her cousin whose husband is apparently lured away by another white ‘sexy’ woman as Miranda prepares with proper accouterment to play the mistress of Dev. His wife, by the way, is understood to be as beautiful as a Bollywood star, Madhury Dixit!¹⁵ We could not find a better meaning of the word sexy than what the child Rohin utters in remembering mixed up dialogue between his parents: “It means loving someone you do not know” (LAHIRI 1999: 107). A nine year old Miranda/Mira’s frightening encounter in her neigh-

¹⁵ Her beauty is so legendary that the recently deceased Indian artist M.F. Hussain made her his muse and epitome of female beauty.

bor's home with the fierce Indian goddess Kali who both presides over and liberates one from desire and death was a quintessential meeting with the other, but this was a psychic encounter, not a social one. As Miranda chooses loneliness over deceit, she enriches the Lahiri world of new women.

On the other side of the world, Mrs. Das, the Indian tourist, born and brought up in America allures the interpreter of maladies by her exotic sexiness. Against the backdrop of Konark Surya temple, it is a story of Mr. Kapasi who is put in the impossible of situation of interpreting a malady he does not understand. Here Lahiri captures the strange world of Indian foreigners in their native land through the eyes of Mr. Kapasi. Marriages and their discontents being one of Lahiri's major themes, Mrs. Das "who had already fallen out of love with life" (LAHIRI 1999: 66) does not surprise us as she reveals to a stranger that one of her son was begotten by another man as it does Mr. Kapasi. She switches on the fantasy world of Mr. Kapasi and the dreadfulness of hope that flits away as he is called to interpret a malady that threatens life's neat little organization called marriage makes this story a part of the quintessential Lahiri world.

Set in Kolkata, *What ails Bibi Haldar?* makes us aware of another mad woman whose ailment is incomprehensible because it is a soul hunger. She is in her cultural space but suffers from an unknown disease that neither doctors nor amulets could cure. A blushing recognition by the collective narrative voice that is very much like the chorus of women, "relations will calm her blood" hints at her malady as these women take care of her. The parody of an Indian matrimonial ad "Girl, unstable, height 152 centimeter, seeks husband" (LAHIRI 1999: 165) does lure a man, although not a husband. Perhaps a desire to birth herself beyond the cultural constructs of gender that finally cured her as she became a mother without being a wife.

This is no diasporic story and to see some kind of theoretical othering here is to miss the point. The story hints at women's collective participation in generation of life; the narrators like Greek chorus and Indian goddesses stand witness to a very female, although limited, experience, birthing oneself through childbirth: "we helped her deliver a son. We showed her how to feed him, and bathe him, and lull him to sleep" (LAHIRI 1999: 172). While people gossiped and wondered about the father but "there was no point in carrying out an investigation" (LAHIRI 1999: 172), the wise collective voice recognized, because the madwoman in the attic is cured, starts a business and raises her child in a culture where the word single mother is not a part of everyday parlance. Participating in 'cultural codes' may save some from utter destruction in oth-

erness, but some remain aliens even within all the symbols of comforting familiarity. Bibi was a creature who could not be contained by the symbolic order of cultural comfort zone. Primal motherhood without needing paternity for her son makes her a proud inhabitant of this Lahiri zone.

The last story *The Third and Final Continent* may be one of those quiet stories that imagines a new Bengali immigrant who travels from the third world via imperial London to the final continent of America, a librarian like Lahiri's father, meeting a hundred and three year old American woman Mrs. Croft, who only rents rooms to boys from *Harvard or Tech*. Against the backdrop of another historical event, this time a very American one, the moon landing, the story is both humorous and poignant with a deep sense of mortality that connects the young man with his deceased mother, this dying American woman and his newly wedded wife Mala whom Mrs. Croft describes as a perfect lady. Three women across culture and age introduce him to love and death, the two sides of the same coin within this 'Gynocentric matrix'.

The encounter between 'constructed' natives and 'constructed' aliens in Lahiri's tales foregrounds a narrative expanse of reality where her Supreme Fiction dissolves identity crisis into productive nothingness. Both female natives and female immigrants carry out a curious drama of life that most well-adjusted people cannot comprehend, but children and collective selves do. Like the *Interpreter* her latest collection *Unaccustomed Earth* tells the stories of a new generation whose human anguish cannot be solved even after they have 'become' hybrid or 'modern' 'American' selves. They display elemental suffering (in Sanskrit *duḥkha*) that is life and the struggle to find meaning in the dualities that are always already ever present. Deep access to their psyches whether male or female through Lahiri's narrators provides the reader a kind of uncanny communion with stuff that is too deep for mere literary criticism and the politics of identity.

Lahiri continues her peopling of her storyland with more new characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Her stories in this collection speak that even when you have 'succeeded' you still have to face the terror of history and the contingencies of life. No American dream can save you from facing the ultimate question where identity itself is a mere cipher. Women characters like Ruma in the title story of *Unaccustomed Earth* as an educated professional who has chosen to stay home with her son Akash while she awaits the birth of the next one, belong to this new generation of people whose gendered identity is hardly a cause celebre. Married to an American man, she is deeply aware of the meaning of life and death

through giving birth which had “caused Ruma to acknowledge the supernatural in everyday life”, and through her mother’s sudden death:

But death, too, had the power of awe, she knew this now — that a human being could be alive for years and years, thinking and breathing and eating, full of millions of worries and feelings and thoughts, taking up space in the world, and then, in an instant, become absent, invisible (LAHIRI 2008: 46).

While she is poised to experience a deep shift in her relationship with her widowed father, the story spans a psychological landscape utterly delicate and conscious of human potentiality for deep sympathy and total transformation.

Martha Nussbaum’s cosmopolitanism could be used to describe many of Lahiri’s characters most of whom are socio-politically privileged. Here accepting one’s privilege without apology is important because “eagerness to understand humanity in all its strange guise” (NUSSBAUM 2010: 158) has been a male privilege for the longest time. It is only now, as a side effect of modernization that women are the new immigrants of this cosmopolitan universe where a Mrs. Bagchi, Ruma’s father’s companion can exist without ‘cultural codes’ affecting her movement. Death self and sex self are after all one, but ethnic cultural codes, gender codes must keep people from exploding into areas where they cannot manage its upheaval. Jung had said religions protect people from religious experience; similarly boxes of caste, class, gender identities protect most people from drowning in the void of ultimate reality with no protective borders. Mrs. Bagchi has broken those borders and has invited Ruma’s father to do so.

Many of Lahiri’s male characters are taken aback by these new and unconventional women because they are unaccustomed to this new earth, and therefore her writing can scare people¹⁶ in its ordinariness. She moves between consciousnesses — male, female, child, parent, lover. When the title story ends with a postcard growing on her son’s garden that reveals to Ruma her father’s longing to be more than a Dadu (grandfather) and a father, it leaves us with a powerful sense of regeneration. Although she was more attached to her dead mother, Ruma sends the postcard to Mrs. Bagchi, and frees herself to move on in a new reality. Lahiri portrays a perfect adult response from one human to another when a child frees the parent because her own child grows his grandfather in his garden, an image that stays with the reader as she witnesses this creative drama.

¹⁶ In a *Time Magazine* article titled “Jhumpa Lahiri: The Quiet Laureate” Lev Grossman exclaims, “Now, she is the one people are scared of” (GROSSMAN 2008).

Since so many critics focus on the diasporic elements often the fact that the Lahiri zone is peopled with children is ignored. *Hell-Heaven* is another child centered story, clear and unsentimental. It is ruthless and yet it is a heart break house — so banal and so baleful and yet fills one with absurd longings. This young girl tells the story of her mother falling in love with a young visitor Pranab Kaku who marries an American woman only to betray her after twenty-three years of marriage. Her parents come close to each other in their old age: “I noticed a warmth between my parents [...] a quiet teasing, a solidarity” (LAHIRI 2008: 81). As the women in the tale congregate, commune, and accept each other, they too create solidarity; the daughter learns after her “own heart was broken by a man” as we do at the end of the story that her mother had come to the verge of committing suicide but was saved by a stray remark of a neighbor about “how beautiful the sunset was” (LAHIRI 2008: 83). It is another story that speaks of life as a Keatsian ‘vale of soul making’.

In *A Choice of Accommodations* we delicately walk into the interior life of a man who had dropped out of medical school and is a care giver father, married to an American woman, a doctor. Amit was a failure in his Bengali affluent parents’ eyes and as he sojourns into his past with his wife Megan, he recognizes the depth of loneliness that people keep within their hearts, and it produces this remarkable story of love and longing and once again married angst:

Wasn't it terrible that after all the work one put into finding a person to spend one's life with, after making a family with that person, even in spite of missing that person, as Amit missed Megan night after night, that solitude was what one relished most, the only thing that, even fleeting, diminished doses, kept one sane? (LAHIRI 2008: 115).

Only Goodness touches on a taboo subject of alcoholism and is extraordinary as it is uncompromising while *Nobody's Business* is a curious tale of an American man falling in love with a Bengali woman whose insanity with men he watches closely. However, I would now like to come to the second section of the book which gave me the impetus to frame this essay in this notion of the Gynocentric ‘soul’s code’ within a supreme fictional journey. Part two is called *Hema and Kaushik* and has three interconnected stories *Once in a Lifetime*, *Year's End*, and *Going Ashore*. Together they make a novella telling in a sort of epistolary form a tale of mother hunger. Once again, we see the world through the eyes and life of children as they grow into adults or make an effort to do so. Although it is supposed to be a story about Hema and Kaushik, Hema plays the role of a witness in the life of Kaushik even as she populates the Lahiri multiverse with her own unique presence.

We are introduced to Kaushik in the first story through Hema who remembers him as a nine year old when she was six. His departure for India with his parents occasioned one of those *desi* parties of apparent food and fun that Lahiri so deftly articulates in many stories. We embark on a journey within that Harvard MIT Lahiri zone as Hema wears unwillingly Kaushik's discarded sweater and thus begins to inhabit his life in a way. Addressing Kaushik, she recounts how seven years later, they meet again as he returns to the US with his parents and lives with her family until they find their own lavish house. Far wealthier than her family, Kaushik's parents, especially her elegant mother in fancy clothes, fill Hema with awe as her thirteen year self gets a crush on Kaushik. He was given the gift of her bedroom as she slept on the couch and did her homework on ancient Rome on the dining table. Yet she wonders: "How bored you must have been in my room full of a girl's things" (LAHIRI 2008: 242).

It is Hema and Kaushik's entry into the forbidden woods behind their house that inaugurates for them a saga that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. As they walk into the snowy woods where once a boy was lost, Kaushik shows her as they dig together 'unburying the buried' the tombs of a family of six including a girl named Emma who died in 1923. As Hema is disturbed by the similarity of their names, Kaushik blurts out: "It makes me wish we were not Hindu, so that my mother could be buried somewhere. But she's made us promise we will scatter her ashes into the Atlantic" (LAHIRI 2008: 249), thus revealing the reason for their return: his mother's terminal breast cancer, for her to be left alone. Tears that fell from Hema's eyes unbeknownst to her had bound her more closely to Kaushik's fate although she could not have imagined to what extent, especially because she cried more due to her fear of proximity to death; she after all had stood topless with Kaushik's mother in the fitting room who had gifted her, her first bra.

Year's End is told by Kaushik as he tells us he did not attend his father's wedding revealing the depth of sorrow both in him and his father. His father surprised him one early morning with a phone call in his college dorm with the news that he was marrying Chitra, a school teacher nearly twenty years younger than him who had lost her spouse two years ago and had two daughters. Kaushik returns to bed to a woman who knew nothing at all about his family; he tells Jessica about his family "after crying briefly against her body" (LAHIRI 2008: 256).

Kaushik meets his step mother and her two daughters in a surrealist scenario in his home. Their old fashioned Indianness sickening him to his stomach as he ate the *luchis* Chitra had cooked: "They were overdressed in our comfortably heated house, in thick sweaters and socks, incongruous In-

dian things that would soon be rejected, I knew, in favor of clothes from the mall". But for now, "the sweaters were made of the same sickeningly bright shade of pink wool" (LAHIRI 2008: 261), not to say that his father had hidden the scotch they always drank together. Kaushik's attempts to befriend the little girls come to a crashing halt when he sees them huddled over something in his room that they now used, whispering in Bengali to each other something: "Spread out on the gray carpet, arranged like a game of Solitaire, were about a dozen photographs of my mother taken from the box my father had sealed up and hidden after her death" (LAHIRI 2008: 285). Kaushik breaks out violently:

Well, you've seen it for yourselves, how beautiful my mother was. How much prettier and more sophisticated than yours. Your mother is nothing in comparison. Just a servant to wash my father's clothes and cook his meals. That's the only reason both of you are here (LAHIRI 2008: 286–287).

Kaushik left home, and as he discovers through phone talks with his father that the girls had not revealed how he "had harmed and terrified them", he drives aimlessly all the way to Canada. The vignette ends with his addressing Hema, recalling her crying in the woods, and telling her about his burying the box of his mother's photos on a beach in the Bay of Fundy.

Going Ashore almost logically takes the reader to Rome where Hema has now taken temporary refuge from her teaching job at Wellesley and her impending marriage to Navin, arranged by her parents. She had been in love with a married man for a decade and the story told in third person eloquently reveals the despair and anguish: "after years of refusing similar requests" from her parents to meet someone, "after believing that Julian would leave his wife, she'd agreed" to meet Navin. While her meeting Kaushik at a friend's house in Rome is predictable enough, the novella's denouement is not. We learn about Kaushik's life as a photojournalist, his anguished encounter with death and destruction documenting abysmal and gruesome human conflicts from Gaza and West Bank to Guatemala and El Salvador. Waiting in Rome before his move to Hong Kong as a desk editor, he inevitably meets Hema. They consummate their deeply buried connection and profound passion even though Hema knew "clear-eyed, aware that in a matter of weeks it would end" (LAHIRI 2008: 317). Kaushik had called her a coward when she refused his invitation to go with him. She last saw him before she took her bangle off, her grandmother's gift that Kaushik had remembered she wore as a child, to go through security on her way to India, to marry Navin whom she did not love. Too late she remembered leaving the gold bangle on the tray.

Kaushik is on a beach resort bereft of anger and yet longing for Hema, the only woman who knew his past, without whom “he was lost”. On a flawless day near Phuket, he is invited to go for a swim with the Swedish family he had met, but he is not a good swimmer. The boatman is a Thai boy and Kaushik follows him into the water, “white foam like soap suds hissing around his ankles” (LAHIRI 2008: 330).

He wanted to swim to the cove as Henrik had, to show his mother he was not afraid [...]. He held onto the edge of that boat, swinging his legs over the side, lowering himself. The sea was warm and welcoming as a bath. His feet touched the bottom, and so he let go (LAHIRI 2008: 331).

The tale returns to first person narration by Hema still writing to Kaushik as she marries Navin in gruesome recognition that he lives while Kaushik and the turquoise waves of the Tsunami had become one.

Those cold dark days I spent in bed, unable to speak, burning with new life but mourning your death, went unquestioned by Navin, who had already begun to take a quiet pride in my condition [...]. It might have been your child but this was not the case. We had been careful, and you had left nothing behind (LAHIRI 2008: 333).

Hardly an immigrant experience story, this novella makes Jhumpa Lahiri lead us to participate in a cosmic soul saga that fills one with awe. Kaushik’s mother hunger allows him to quietly slip into this ‘hissing melodious’ kiss of the mother as Whitmanesquely American as it is Indic. The ironies of life in their vast cosmic insignificance or indifference make the idea of choice for Hema to marry Navin utterly innocuous. What does it matter whether you are Indian or American, an ape or some foolish human at the center of some deluded creation, when you recognize that in the vast universe in which the earth itself is a mere speck none of these posturing matter even the least bit?

Seen from the annihilating image of the 2004 Tsunami, Whitman’s hissing melodious “death, death, death, death” at the end of *Unaccustomed Earth*, frames for me the idea of elemental *duḥkha* that Indic paths from Buddha, Sāṃkhya school to *Mahābhārata* have postulated. I have added James Hillman’s polytheistic archetypal psychology and soul’s code to the basket of analysis to get a sense of Lahiri’s *oeuvre* so far, beyond postcolonial criticism. The source of creativity is staying within the power of *duḥkha* where no metaphysical comfort or even experience of meditative unity can negate the reality of life’s contingent existence. But this is not tragic either because this is not coming from a narcissistic ego driven quest against a God that decides your fate one way or another.

This is a cry coming from the belly of the Mother, whose incessant re-generative power we recognize in our own psyches because we are her. Lahiri is birthing something so elemental that any conscious self may not be aware of its depths. This is women's writing that touches upon the depth of a 'pregnant nothingness'¹⁷ without having any conscious and necessary connection with that reality.

Hillman who extends Jung's primal recognition and questions the very idea of a self and its unitary journey into individuation posits a therapy for the healing of the soul recognizing multiplicity itself as the fact of existence, and all unity perhaps a constructed fantasy. His famous staying with the serpent image rather than explain it away is a very apt way of entering Lahiri's text. Literature is that smooth object from which all interpretative and philosophical abstractions slip away because it speaks as it is, yet of course, those of us parasites on that sublime creative action and are mediators as literature teachers to make that art come alive for the young, do attempt to write about them in a daring theft of ideas.

Like Kate Chopin's character in *The Awakening* who walks into the ocean, unable to contain that tremendous surge called love in the depth of her soul, Kaushik wades into the water. Neither is a suicide or even a willing submission to the elemental but a submerging into the psyche which is so much more than collective unconscious. Perhaps Buddhist 'store consciousness' (Sanskrit: *ālaya vijñāna*) and other dream selves can be combined with this collective unconscious to hint at our multiversal recognition of our insignificant and yet tremendously meaningful temporary participation in this play of the Great Goddess.

Women at the threshold of home and the world are the new immigrants arriving at the new earth birthing themselves as they take their rightful place in sustaining a planet devastated by androcentric and mono-maniacal paths. Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional multiverse dismantles the American Dream. While displacements or external diasporic journeys may create alienation, 'degeneration' as an internal dissolution and as a mythic process can create what Tibetan Buddhists call *bardo*, a submerging into the void which simultaneously degenerates a being into death and generates another being in the process. There are no victims here because victims are, as Hillman says the other side of the hero complex, the prime western archetype. Lahiri articulates a primal human soul saga that resists comparison and operates outside male narcissistic iden-

¹⁷ I describe the paradox of Kali in my book as 'pregnant nothingness'. Cf. SAXENA 2004.

tity constructs that above mentioned Naipaul's comments articulate. Some writers, male or female, are not operating from within identity constructs, and Lahiri supremely exemplifies how centers and margins vanish when faced with a planetary crisis exemplified by the Tsunami that wipes out the cozy vacation spot of western leisure in Phuket where Kaushik, the Indic westerner finally meets his mother's embrace.

In conclusion, I would say that this reading of Lahiri's works touching upon a 'Gynocentric matrix' shows emergent possibilities of regeneration because in this non-linear and Kairos moment, time of the phallus has no dominant power. Phallic time has given way to the womb time where a Tsunami as the Great Mother who is 'endlessly rocking' the cradle of life and yet whispers death, is the very voice of a non-dual regeneration. Patriarchy's power to silence the woman has failed, and yet there is no anger, no deep loss, and no deep trauma of postcolonial angst either. Lahiri's 'privileged' characters both epitomize the movements of people via education to metropolitan centers and their deep anguish of displacement as they face ultimate questions not just temporal ones; they in the process resist becoming merely a trope of power.

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