



## **CONTENT ANALYSIS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY IN THE FICTION OF JHUMPA LAHIRI**

**Dr.S.KARTHIK**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
KHADIR MOHIDEEN COLLEGE  
ADIRAMPATTINAM,  
Thanjavur district  
Tamilnadu  
[skarthikkmcollege@gmail.com](mailto:skarthikkmcollege@gmail.com)  
9080740008

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### **ABSTRACT**

The central theme of *Unaccustomed Earth* is the complicated relationships and continuity in dialogs between different generations of Indian Diasporas. Every generation has its own set of challenges and approach towards life and sometimes it clashes and sometimes it matches with other generations. Ruma is a typical second-generation immigrant who despite of Indian upbringing gets slowly away from Indian culture and becomes more absorbed into American identity. This process of gradual change and inevitable assimilation is aptly pointed out by Ruma's father—The more the children grew, the less they seemed to resemble either parent – they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way, from the texture of their hair to the shapes of their feet and hands.<sup>19</sup> Shedding many —habits of her upbringing... in her adult life. <sup>20</sup> As Ruma grew up, she too underwent several changes in terms of her perception towards her parents, Indian customs, languages etc. She also married an American man.

**Key words:** feminism, womanhood, power hood, identity crisis, generation gap etc.

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Ruma is aware that in her family, it's her mother who is very much attached to Indian culture and is solely responsible for keeping the Indian-ness alive in their hearts, much opposite to her father who is quite open, practical and easy to adjust into new culture. She knew that her mother would always wear sari and never look American unlike her father—resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere.<sup>21</sup> Having been born, educated and raised in America, Ruma is completely absorbed in American culture, but she still feels a constant loss when she sees her three-year-old son Akash is an American, far away from Ruma's Bengali roots—a perfect synthesis of Ruma and Adam. Having married to an American man leaves very little chance for Akash to get any exposure of Ruma's culture. He is not aware of Bengali language, food and even his memory of Ruma's parents is also fading away. This brings a certain insecurity and fear of loss of her original identity to Ruma. She sometimes feels alienated from her own son and husband. Even though Adam is an ideal husband who takes care of all the needs of Ruma but still she experiences that they are two different individuals belonging to two different worlds and also leading life in different ways—she and Adam were separate people leading separate lives.

The deserted backyard garden in Ruma's house is an important symbolic image in the story as it carries the link between the soil of unaccustomed earth and the trees grown in it. Gardening is Ruma's father's hobby which was never paid much attention to by both Ruma and her mother. He had put a lot of efforts to produce beautiful flowers and useful home-grown vegetables for his wife in their kitchen-garden. When Ruma's father visited his Ruma's home, he makes sure to revive the desolated garden by planting some new fresh flowers. The unfriendly soil – this act of his indicates that it's just a matter of one's perception and approach towards one's life. If the cultivator toils hard, understands the nature of land and tries to plant trees in new unfamiliar soil, then it is possible to turn the barren land into a fertile one. This is analogous to the situation of both Ruma and her father. Ruma, despite of a second-generation immigrant and highly educated one, still remains caught in the same place as her mother, similar to the un-watered plant in the same ill-maintained soil. However, Ruma's father has moved on in his life in the form of travelling and friendship with Mrs.

Bagchi, despite of huge personal loss. He is hopeful, liberated and tries to explore new avenues in his life and refuses to surrender to the miseries of life. Eventually, Ruma is both shocked and overwhelmed to see that the garden that she once believed to be useless is bearing beautiful plants and flowers. This indicates a new ray of hope for new possibilities and opportunities in the midst of the state of being lost and lonely. Moving to another story titled *Hell-Heaven*, reveals the

complications in daughter-mother relationships belonging to two different generations. The adult young narrator Usha recalls her childhood memories and shift to the miserable condition of her mother Aparna who gets married to a stranger through arranged marriage and immediately is landed to an unknown land amid completely unknown people. Her husband is quite opposite to her and hardly invests quality time for her. All this takes a heavy toll on her emotional well-being in a new country. This extreme sense of alienation and loneliness is relieved magically by the arrival of Pranab Chakraborty in Aparna's life. Pranab Kaku bring a fresh lease of air in otherwise gloomy and frustrated life of Aparna. She has now somebody to talk about her culture, music, art and customs back home in Calcutta. Aparna cherishes the presence of Pranab as he makes her feel important, heard and cared. However, Pranab is seemingly totally unaware of his influence and importance in Aparna's life. *In that picture, Pranab Kaku's shadow, his two arms raised at angles to hold the camera to his face, hovers in the corner of the frame, his darkened, featureless shape superimposed on one side of my mother's body.*

Usha understands her mother's plight, desperation and loneliness only once she grows up. Aparna gets an intense blow when Pranab marries an American fellow student named Deborah. Aparna feels betrayed and deprived by this act of Pranab as she cannot accept somebody else taking him away from her. She again feels helpless, alienated and lonely like before. Usha, the narrator also develops a liking for Deborah and as Usha grows up, she too starts adapting American culture, in a process drifting away from her already alienated mother. This is again felt as betrayal to Aparna as she feels left alone by her daughter as well, just like she was marginalized by her husband and Pranab. Throughout her life, Aparna feels unhappy, unsatisfied, unheard and unattended for her feelings and care. Hell-Heaven describes the situation of life when one is living in an illusionary heaven but in reality, it is a hell. The lack of love and loss of one's identity caused due to displacement sometimes destroys the migrant's personality beyond repair. Although, Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* takes a happy turn at the end of the story as the tension between both the generations are called off. The first generation tries to assimilate and understand the second generation while the second generation also respects their heritage. On the other hand, the theme of the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* is not very manifest and straight. It gives a subtle idea about the life of second generation with their linkages to first generations. Lahiri, inspired by her own second generation immigrant child experience, summarizes the theme of *Unaccustomed Earth* as—*I think being an immigrant must teach you so much about the world and about human beings, things you can't understand if you are born and raised and live your whole life in one place. It must be an amazing experience in many ways, but it has a price.*

The central theme of most of all her fictions depicts the sense of loss, rootlessness, conflict in identities and fragmentation of an individual's persona. The titular story in *Interpreter of Maladies* revolves around the Indian American Das family and their Indian tourist guide Mr. Kapasi, set in India. Mr. and Mrs. Das is clearly not in love with each other as both are occupied in their own business. Mr. Das is completely indifferent to the family and children as he is always busy looking at the maps. Likewise, Mrs. Das is busy with her fancy thoughts and looks frustrated with her family life. The children don't have any exposure or values of Indian culture. On the other hand, Mr. Kapasi, the tourist guide who also works as interpreter of maladies at doctor's clinic is also disturb in his family life. His

relationship with his wife is lifeless as they both fail to support each other due to loss of their child. His wife thinks very low of his job as an interpreter because he cannot save his own child from illness. However, Mr. Kapasi thinks high about his knowledge and command over languages and wants to see himself as some high-end political diplomat. Mr. Kapasi develops some kind of unique bond with Das family thinking they share common heritage unlike other foreigners. He is also overwhelmed by the special attention from Mrs. Das who shows interest in his job of interpreter. Mr. Kapasi starts nursing the dreams of having an intimate friendship with Mrs. Das due to her behavior towards him. He feels that they both share a common situation of being unhappy in their marriages so there is a possibility of closeness with Mrs. Das. All these fantasies of Mr. Kapasi were shattered when Mrs. Das confides to him about her infidelity and her love child outside her marriage. Mrs. Das wonders that being a good and experienced interpreter, Mr. Kapasi would give her some relief and soft response to her malady of her life. She thinks that he would not judge her actions of past and simply listen to her so that she would feel lighter by sharing the burden of her guilt and moral misconduct.

Well, don't you have anything to say? About my secret, and about how terrible it makes me feel. I feel terrible, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I won out the window... Don't you think it's unhealthy?

Mrs. Das is totally unaware of the romantic feelings Mr. Kapasi is nursing for her and how much depressed he is after knowing her secret. But, on the contrary, Mrs. Das was looking at him as a father figure where she can speak whatever she wants to without the fear of being judged. As a matter of fact, Mr. Kapasi interpreted her feeling quite right and hence asked a difficult question to her that she has been trying to escape all her life so far. Mr.

Kapasi's right analysis and comprehension of her problem made her uncomfortable because she feels exposed in a way that she didn't intend. She couldn't take his accusation of being wrong

though she already knows about her mistake. All she wanted was some relaxation and forgiving words from Mr. Kapasi. As Das family leaves, Mr. Kapasi realizes the enormous geographical, cultural and emotional distance he has from them. He feels that his tryst with Mrs. Das was few moments of illusionary happiness after which they will also return to their routine life just like him. There is a sense of alienation, loneliness and loss at both the ends of world though everyone pretends to be normal and happy.

The characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's characters are mostly the ones who are straddling between two different sides of the planets, not only geographically but also culturally. On one side they are the link between two cultures and countries and on other hand they are facing difficulties to belong to both the worlds. Many characters in Lahiri's fictions are part of somewhat dysfunctional families that lacks soul. They are together just for the sake of being together and helplessness. Their life is filled with deep silences and shallow smiles.

Sometimes the reason is an arranged marriage; sometimes its disconnection with people, sometimes its lack of openness towards new things and sometimes it's the unavailability of somebody to share one's feelings and most of the time it is communication gap and inability to reach out to the individuals when needed. For example, Sudha in *Only Goodness* feels there are no real emotions in her parents' marriage while she herself couldn't share the secret of her brother's alcohol addiction to her husband. Usha in *Hell-Heaven* wonders that her mother Aparna never got any real happiness in her lifeless marriage and the only fulfilling sentiment of companionship to her mother was when Pranab arrives in her life. In *A Choice of Accommodations*, the protagonist Amit never really felt any profound meaning to his life until the birth of his daughters and thereafter his whole life only revolves around them. The rest of the entities hardly influenced him in positive way as he remains indifferent to other aspects of life just like before. Lahiri's characters shows the essence of solitude and emptiness even when they are surrounded by crowd and occupied in their routine life. There is an absence of real happiness, real connection that touches an individual's sensitivities.

Similarly, Ruma and her father in *Unaccustomed Earth* try to avoid each other and makes an effort to escape the real discussions or real issues that concerns their lives. Their conversations are shallow and casual. They intentionally choose to shun talking on topics like Ruma's mother, Ruma's pregnancy or career, Ruma's father's new female friend etc.

Ironically, while they try not to discuss on such matters to avoid any clash or opinions or any conflict, however, this very tendency to maintain distance from each other in order to not hurt somebody is actually the real cause of increase in detachment in relationships. People are scared to

convey their feelings to save their already weak relationships but, in the process, there is the loss of actual bond and the relationship looks soulless and lifeless. Similarly, in *The Namesake*, Ashima couldn't connect to American culture even after staying there for thirty years. However, as a mother of two American born children, she somehow manages to assimilate. The shadow of her cultural legacy is passed on to her children Gogol and Sonia as they face identity crisis and alienation in their peer groups. This very theme of multiplicity of identity is prevalent in Lahiri's *The Lowland* as well. The protagonist Gauri despite of her Indian birth and upbringing adapts to American lifestyle and value system. When one acquires new identity, there is a simultaneous loss of old identity to some extent. Gauri gives birth to a girl child, but she never really becomes the mother of Bela. Gauri is too self-centered and obsessed by her work that she chooses to ignore her motherly responsibilities.

Her character shows that one cannot possess everything about everything in one's life. There has to be some compromises and settlements that eventually define who we are. This is the reason why Lahiri's characters are realistic, raw, flawed and relatable. Ms. Lahiri's second generation characters are well-aware of the expectations of their Indian born parents who have migrated to new land just for a better quality of life and commercial opportunities.

These Indian migrants have toiled really hard to achieve the life they are today in America, most of them have been distinguished students in medicines, engineering, arts and other schools. The kind of life they give to their children is far more comfortable and convenient as compared to their struggle both emotionally and financially. Hence, the issues like generation gap, feeling of being different among school crowd, struggle to get acceptance among Americans, inclination towards recreational activities, depression, drug addiction, different sexual behavior and developing passion in non-academic fields like acting, music etc. might not be revered and understood by first generation migrants parents. Lahiri shows that sometimes though these children take a different path disobeying their parents' expectations but then the way forward is not easy for them as they feel burdened and hollow from inside due to the shadow of their parents' cultural heritage.

Jhumpa Lahiri herself represents the second-generation Indian American immigrant and her stories are nothing short of her own autobiographical experiences. This makes her writings and characters very real, raw, fresh and relevant. There is no fanciness but plain and simple narration that dives deep into the heart and soul of her well-sketched characters. Lahiri's fictional plots sublimely underline the struggle of two generations of immigrants. The first one is from the Indian born and raised migrated parents' perspective who struggles to find their new identity and home

in a foreign land far away from their original culture and people. Besides, these immigrants also want to preserve their culture which they had left behind at their homeland.

And the second one is from the children of immigrants' perspective who are born and raised in America and faces challenges to meet their parents' cultural expectations and also to assimilate smoothly in their land of birth. These children never feel the displacement directly, but they do feel the impact of the cultural legacies passed on to them by their parents. The extraordinary and complicated experience of permanent displacement from motherland to a new continent in search of better opportunities and avenues brings lot of struggle in the form of alienation, rootlessness and identity crisis. The first-generation immigrants choose this life, but the second-generation Diasporas gets this indirect experience due to the choices made by their parents. Lahiri is an exceptional storyteller who uses her amazing journey to create some mind-blowing deep and insightful characters and meaningful fictions that captivate the readers.

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