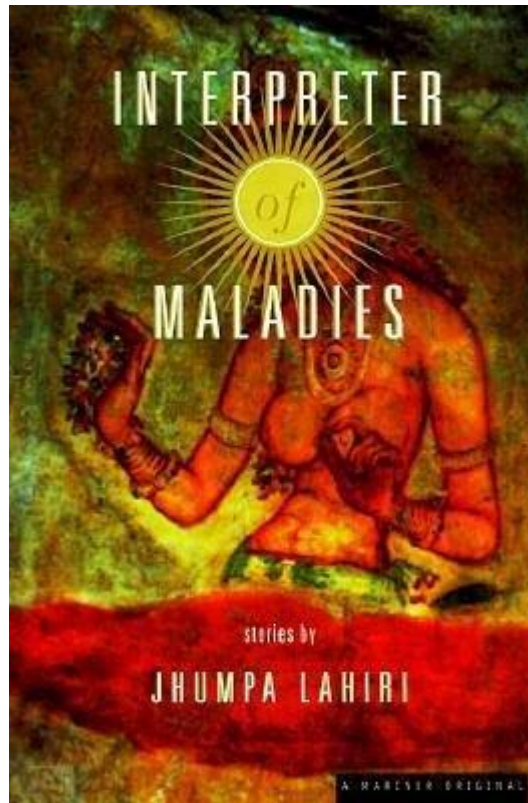


**Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's  
*Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth***

**C. G. Karthikadevi, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.**



**Abstract**

Indian writing in English has acquired a great significance in recent years, not only in India but all over the world. Short story is obviously the most popular literary form. The short story writers in English come from different parts of the country and they have diverse social, cultural and family backgrounds but what unites them is the use of English as their mode of expression. The short story genre is highly favoured by women writers of the South Asian diaspora. Jhumpa Lahiri, through her short stories addresses sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages and the disconnection among the immigrants. *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories. It is about the experiences of Indians who live in an alien country and how they are

deeply crushed under the burden of alienation and rootlessness. The collection attempts to be simultaneously both an anthology of outstanding short stories and virtually a casebook on relationship between the sexes. Lahiri has been acclaimed a dominant diaspora writer depicting the complexities of immigrant experience in diaspora in her *Unaccustomed Earth*. This collection of stories is a well thought-out addition to her oeuvre of fiction writing. The stories depict different aspects of the Bengali migrant experience. The eight stories in the collection revolve around quest for identity in relationships. The stories examine the difficulties the central characters have in integrating and relocating their identities beyond their familial homes.

**Key words:** Short stories, Indian Writing in English, Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, Indian diaspora, relationship between sexes

### **Short Stories**

The short story genre is highly favoured by women writers of the South Asian diaspora. The short stories by women of South Asian diaspora are often located in the present and they deal with immediate social realities, but they also contain personal memories or they traverse the space between the homeland and the diasporic location. In the evocative and poignant instances of female oppression narrated in these stories, a transnational resonance is evident. Not only are there similarities between women from different South Asian diasporic locations, but also many patterns of subjugation and gender discrimination common to other cultures and nation is apparent. The plurality and specificity of lived moments and everyday reality are captured in these stories. Much of the literature by women of the South Asian diaspora is drawn from personal experiences and deeply intimate concerns. Thus it often relies on personal memory, and sometimes on the synthesizing of facts, events, people, settings from the author's own life, with imagined characters and events.

### **Themes Adopted by Expatriate Writers**

The expatriate writer undergoes the pain of homelessness, alienation, and loss of belongingness. He struggles between two ways of life, which leads to the feeling of depression and frustration. The loss of homeland is the consequence of consciously opting a new home in a foreign or, an alien land. The old memories keep on hovering in his mind and the new land and unfriendly surrounding leads to the feeling of frustration and depression. It is a complex state of mind and emotion, which includes strong craving and longing for

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

C. G. Karthikadevi, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.

Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*

homeland or the past. When a person leaves his own homeland and enters another, his old values comes in conflict with the new one, which he has adopted. Thus 'Diaspora' is a dislocation from a geographical location of origin and relocation in another territory or country. A number of Indian English Writers can be recognized under such category of expatriate writers: Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, V.S.Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, Abraham Varghese, Amitav Ghosh, Hanif Kureishi, Ved Mehta, Meera Syal, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, etc.

### **Sensitive Dilemmas Addressed by Jhumpa Lahiri**

Jhumpa Lahiri, through her short stories addresses sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages and the disconnection among the immigrants. Like other expatriate writers, Jhumpa Lahiri too suffers the same dilemma and undergoes the strong longing for Indian culture, which is a part of every Indian as an individual. Nilanjana Sudheshna Lahiri was born in London on 11 July 1967 and grew up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. She was the daughter of Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was two. Lahiri considers herself an American, stating "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been." Lahiri finished her Ph.D. in Renaissance studies. *Daughters of Calcuttans*, Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni delineate the Indian American's relationship to their homeland, as well as their responses to immigration and assimilation.

### ***Interpreter of Maladies***

Lahiri's debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* was released in 1999. *Interpreter of Maladies* received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Lahiri has won many awards for this collection. These awards and honours include The Transatlantic Review award from the Henfield Foundation, the Louisiana Review Award for short fiction, The O. Henry Award for Best American Short Stories, The PEN Hemingway Award, The New Yorker Debut of the year Award and The American Academy of Arts and Letters Award. Lahiri also received a nomination for the LA Times Book Prize. The stories address sensitive difficulties and the disconnection between first and second generation United States immigrants. Lahiri married Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, the deputy editor of the Latin American edition of Time in 15 January 2001. In 2003, Lahiri published *The Namesake*, her first novel.

## **A Dominant Diaspora Writer**

Lahiri has been acclaimed a dominant diaspora writer depicting the complexities of immigrant experience in diaspora in her *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). This collection of stories is a well thought-out addition to her oeuvre of fiction writing. It has won the coveted Frank O' Connor award of € 35,000, the richest short story prize in the world. The stories have been acclaimed for depicting different aspects of the Bengali migrant experience. The eight stories in the collection revolve around quest for identity in relationships. Jhumpa Lahiri was appointed as a member of the Committee on the Arts and Humanities along with five members in February 2010. In September 2013, her novel *The Lowland* was placed on the shortlist for the Man Booker Prize. In October 2013, it was also long-listed for the National Book award for fiction.

## **Realistic Experiences as the Basis**

Jhumpa Lahiri's themes such as alienation and assimilation, love and marriage, home, exile, and self-identity, are quite interesting and grasp the essence and experiences of Lahiri. Her realistic experiences take the readers to journey the new world of a foreign land. Her theme makes the readers to be aware of displacement by emphasizing the pain of exile. Lahiri is undoubtedly the most commanding literary figure in English.

## **Contents of *Interpreter of Maladies***

*Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories. It is about the experiences of Indians who live in an alien country and how they are deeply crushed under the burden of alienation and rootlessness. The stories present Lahiri's inter-continental journey during which she gets herself accustomed to both the cultures by her long stay abroad and regular trips to India during every summer. It seems that for Lahiri, the western culture forms a part of her emotional make up. Her writings are scattered with the details of traditional Indian names, food, flavour and wardrobe which collectively give shape to her stories. Three of Lahiri's stories are set in India and employ the narrative voices and indigenous experiences of Indians living in India. She focuses on people meeting each other, or separating, or on their subtle tensions and quiet moments of happiness or pain. Lahiri portrays Indians abroad, who face displacement, adhere to their native culture, attempt to integrate themselves into their adopted homeland and suffer tensions over moral and emotional issues.

### **Focus of *Interpreter of Maladies***

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* focuses on immigrants or expatriate Indians who have been on the move from India to United Kingdom and to the United States or are on a short visit to their native country, either way confronting surprising, even baffling, cultural differences. Lahiri has direct experience of these continents. It is quite natural that in her stories the two worlds of the East and the West have been brought together, as if in a simile—or even in a metaphysical conceit—which tease and please the reader. Whether they are set in Bengal or Boston, these sublimely understated stories, spiced with humour and subtle detail, speak with universal eloquence to anyone who has ever felt the yearnings of exile or the emotional confusion of the outsider.

### **Narrative – Spatial rather than Sequential**

Jhumpa Lahiri's narrative tends to be spatial rather than sequential. Her detached, impassionate style, structure, and characters force the reader to see the verisimilitude of the object. Lahiri's narrative world shuttles between India and the United States. Her excellent narrative techniques establish her as one of the towering figures in World Literature. Lahiri's works are necessarily the narratives of pain. She alludes to her constant listening to the tales of inconveniences, her parents or the friends of her parents encountered in their lives. She feels her sense of pain, alienation, and marginalization, to be a kind of inheritance from her parents. Home, homeland and food are the most significant elements of nostalgia. As such the metaphors of food and home make their presence strongly felt in Lahiri's works. As food provides a link, it induces a sense of belonging in an alien world.

### **Depiction of Protagonists**

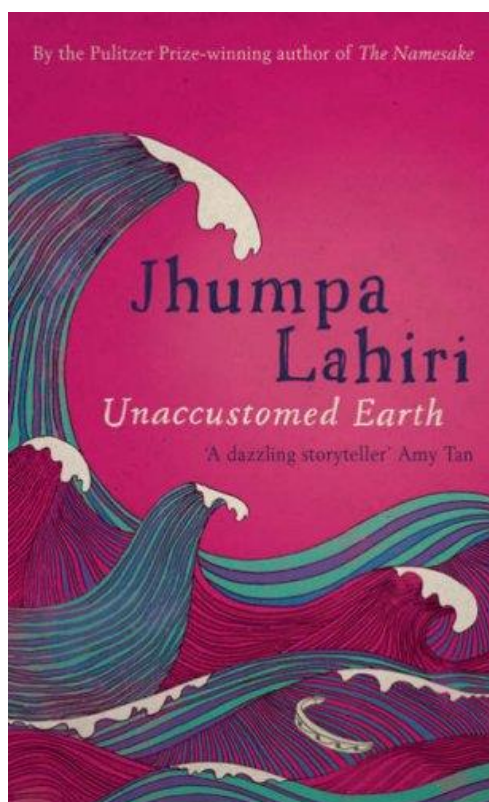
Depicting all Lahiri's protagonists with their several senses of exile, Lahiri relates them with their fondness for food. Images of food have functioned in many different and often contradictory ways in literary works, particularly in writing by women. Food is seen as a cultural signifier. It is a source of empowerment and control on the one hand and of powerlessness and domination on the other. It is also of bonding as well as of separation, of a form of resistance to assimilation and at the same time a nostalgic longing for a lost world; in short, it could define one's identity in positive and negative, complex and complicated ways.

### **Unaccustomed Earth**

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

C. G. Karthikadevi, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.

Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*



*Unaccustomed Earth* symbolizes the new earth and soil in which the descendants of immigrants as well as their parents submerge their roots and culture. The title conveys a dual meaning. First, it is suggestive of the world of the first generation immigrants who are now not accustomed to the world of their children. Secondly, a different kind of world is occupied by the children of immigrants who often look up to the associative life which they share with their parents but can no longer connect emotionally and psychologically with them. Lahiri's narration and plot construction are distinct. Every word assumes significance and language bears lucid and lyrical verve. Alienation, nostalgia, yearning for the native land and the dissatisfaction and mental agony resulting from them has been recurrently exposed in the stories.

*Unaccustomed Earth* examines the difficulties the central characters have in integrating and relocating their identities to an empowered space beyond their familial homes. Their identities are hybrid but they are of a vexed hybridity, deeply troubled by complicated and unresolved connections to their multi-cultural families of origin. Most of the marriages are mixed or inter-cultural marriages. In these marriages two persons of distant historical, social and cultural backgrounds share their experiences with each other and out of

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

C. G. Karthikadevi, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.

Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*

these shared experiences emerge a ‘third space.’ These marriages between Indian Bengali man or woman and American woman or man create a “hybrid culture,” a new form of culture where both of them negotiate at various fronts of life. Their encounter between two cultures i.e. eastern and western constructs a hybrid culture where both the parties negotiate and interact to reframe and restructure ethnic essentialism, nationalism and fundamentalism.

### **Exploration of the Powerful Familial Ties**

Lahiri explores the very powerfully familial ties and emotional relationships. Her intricate dialogues with detailed observation render the stories powerful and universal in application. Lahiri has successfully touched the hearts of her readers with the losses and uncertainties in the title story. The story revolves around minute observation of life with humour and suspense. The story being elegiac leads the readers through a kind of personal introspection in relationships. She is able to enter into her characters thoughts and feelings like a superb psychoanalyst.

### **Different from Other Indian Writers Writing in English**

Jhumpa Lahiri is different from other Indian writers writing in English. Most of the Indian fiction writers writing in English are born and brought up in India, although the writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Jhabvala, Vikram Seth and Salman Rushdie are living either in England or America. Lahiri was born in London, of Bengali parents and grew up in Rhode Island, United States. Jhumpa Lahiri has evidently benefitted from all three cultures. Their aroma drifts from the pages of her first collection of short fiction. Naturally, her connection with India may be through her parents and grandparents. So her knowledge of India is bound to be confined to the stories from her grandparents, parents, books and newspapers. India would appear to Lahiri sometimes full of wonders and sometimes full of beggars. But the writers who live outside India and confidently write or comment on the economic, social, political and religious scenario may appear very often exaggerating or under-rating. They are liable to lack honesty and authenticity which a writer should possess. From this standpoint, Jhumpa Lahiri is honest and authentic to her experiences.

---

### **WORKS CITED**

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

C. G. Karthikadevi, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.

Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*

Agarwal, Sunita. "Changing perspective of Diaspora: Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth." *The Vedic Path* 83.3 and 4 (Jul-Dec 2009): 172-184.

Chowdhury, Anupama. "Interpreter of Maladies: a saga of diaspora and multiculturalism." *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* 37.1 (Jan 2009) 12-24.

Chaudaha, Kapil. "Local and Global Conflict in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies." *Cyber Literature* 25(26).2 (Dec 2010): 20-28.

Das, Nigamananda. *Dynamics of Culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors 2010. xviii, 220.

Dasgupta Sanjukta and Malashri Lal. *The Indian Family in Transition: Reading Literary and Cultural Texts*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007. 380.

Dept. of English, SDNBV College for Women. *Some Perspectives in Indian Writing in English*. Chennai: The Dept. of English, SDNBV College for Women 2005. 348.

Dhawan, R. K. *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001. 160

Dubey, Ashutosh. "Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies." *Poetcrit* 15.1 (Jan 2002): 65-69.

Field, Robin. "Writing the Second Generation: Negotiating Cultural Borderlands in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies and The Namesake" *South Asian Review* 25.2 (2004): 165-177.

Fine, Laura. "Space and Hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth and Only Goodness." *South Asian Review* 32.2 (Nov 2001): 209-222.

Gnanamony, S. Robert. "Cultural Diversity and Immigrant Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies." *Reflections* 5.1 and 2 (Jan-Jul 2006): 96-105.



Jayalaxmi, Phurailatpam. "Generational Differences: Migrant Women in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*, *Hell-Heaven* and *Only Goodness*." *The Quest* 25.2 (Dec 2011): 13-19.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Unaccustomed Earth*. New York: Bloomsbury publishers, 2008.

Mukherjee, A. K. "Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*: A Study." *The Commonwealth Review* 10.2 (1998-1999): 108-116.

Naikar, Basavaraj. *Indian English Literature: Vol. II* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002. viii, 215.

Nityanandam, Indira. "The Diasporic Tale: Jhumpa Lahiri." *Seva-Bharati Journal of English Studies* 4. (Mar 2008): 42-45.

Ranjini, V. and N. Ramakrishna. "Immigrant Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*." *Poetcrit* 21. (Jan 2008): 64-74.

Rao, B. Gopal. "The Human Incompatibility and The Inside of Interpretation—A study of Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction." *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies* 20. (2000): 128-134.

Rao, V. Jaya Lakshmi. "Jhumpa Lahiri: A Perceptive of *Interpreter of Maladies*." *Poetcrit* 19.1(January 2006): 19-25.

Rawat Urmil. "Diasporic Experiences and Dilemmas in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*." *Journal of English Literature and Language* 4.2 (Dec 2010): 57-64.

Sarangi, Jaydeep. *On the Alien Shore: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee*. Delhi: GNOSIS, 2010. xiv, 234.

SDB, A. J. Sebastian. "Different Facets of Human Interactions in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*." *Seva Bharati Journal of English studies* 6. (Jan 2010): 114-129.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

C. G. Karthikadevi, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.

Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*

SDB, A. J. Sebastian. *Quest for Identity in Contemporary Indian English: Fiction and Poetry*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers 2011. xii, 290.

Singh, Anita and Nagendra Kumar Singh. *From Mulk Raj Anand to Aravind Adiga: A critical Analysis*. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2012. xi, 254.

Sondkar, Madhavi. "Cultural Nostalgia in Jhumpa Lahiri's Hell-Heaven." *Seva Bharati Journal of English Studies* 6. (Jan 2010): 114-129.

Srivastava, Ramesh. K. "Comic Touches in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond." *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* 33.2 (July 2005): 30-40

Vijayalakshmi, K. *A Study on the Works of Contemporary Indian Writers in English*. Erode: Dept. of English, P. K. R. Arts college for Women 2012. xviii, 318.

Vinoda. "Living on the Cusp: A Study of Lahiri." *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies* 20. (2000): 120-127.

*Voices of the Displaced: Indian Immigrant Writers in America*.  
Madurai: Department of English, The Madura College 2011. 236.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/jhumpa\\_lahiri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/jhumpa_lahiri)

=====

C. G. Karthikadevi, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.  
7/76, North Mariamman Kovil Street  
Rayagiri 627757  
Tirunelveli District  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[karthikapushpa90@gmail.com](mailto:karthikapushpa90@gmail.com)