



Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* and the Reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Abstract

Born in England, to Bengali parents, and raised in America, Jhumpa Lahiri (1967) has been variously labeled as Indian-American, post-modern, post-colonial, and Indian writer. Naming Lahiri has been a long and intricate process. However, the identity she chooses for herself is something different. She wants herself to be simply recognized as an American writer. In her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), the protagonist, reflecting the dilemma of his creator, suffers the confusing experience of having an appropriate name. Lahiri resorts to Russian literature to establish an identity for her protagonist. In her second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), Lahiri uses the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne not just to suggest the title, and epigraph for the collection, but more importantly to "establish her belonging in an American literary canon," as Ambreen Hai suggests in "Re-Rooting Families: The Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*." I want to push this argument further by suggesting that Lahiri attempts to gain her formal entry into the main stream American literature by re-writing Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in reverse order in "Hema and Kaushik", the second part of *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Keywords: Lahiri, Hawthorne, India, *Scarlet Letter*, identity, America

In Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake*, the protagonist is named after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) to whose short story, "The Overcoat", his father keeps referring to the end of his life. In "Names Can Wait: The Misnaming of the South Asian Diaspora in Theory and Practice", Singh (2007) suggests that since "The Overcoat" deals with a strange name like "Gogol", that name is also expressive of the strangeness of the Indian immigrant experience in the United States. (p.17) As Lahiri's life shows, the child of immigrants begins in a kind of nowhere place. She lives in America, but is not quite an American, in part because she is not recognized as such by others. As a child, she has privileges, but she still has to first discover and then adapt to American values and concepts, which are firmly resisted at home. From the beginning of her writing career Lahiri was concerned with the experiences of the first and second-generation Bengali immigrants in the United States, a thing which sounded quite new to American readers at the time. Reflecting on her experience in the States, she said: "When I was growing up in the 1970s, India was an unknown thing for most Americans. I felt that it was basically like the moon to them." If she would accompany her parents to Calcutta, friends and teachers would say: "Oh, your parents drag you all the way to India, how scary must that be?" When she was a little child she visited the city of her birth, London, where India was not looked at as a foreign place because of the colonial past. In America, it was something else. For the English" it is still a very distant place, but in the collective consciousness it exists on some level. .. It existed as something that you would find mentioned in a Jane Austen novel-that's not something you're going to find in Hawthorne or Melville" (Tayler, 2008).

The overcoat, the identity, Lahiri wants is Hawthornian: American. She emphasized in many interviews that people would insist on referring to her as Indian, or read her books only in terms of reflecting the unique experience of the ethnic group of Indian-Americans in America. In an interview in August 2009 in New York, she was asked about the status of her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) among other Asian-American writers after the post-1965 immigration wave, she said:

I think it's inevitable that my writing will continue to be regarded alongside other writers of Indian descent and Indian writers...I spend half the time in interviews trying to explain to people that *I'm not from India*. And I think there is a large population of readers out there who, when they see my book, see the jacket, see the design, see the motifs, see my name-assume ...that I'm Indian or that I'm Indian in the way they want to think of me as Indian, having been born and brought up there, and that I'm a foreigner in this country (Leyda, 2011, p.71, italic mine).

Interpreted differently in terms of orientalism, post colonialism, and diaspora, Lahiri's works make her a successful writer simply because she does not try to charm her readers with exoticism or dazzle them with a polished style (Tayler, 2008). Lahiri is a second generation diasporic writer who represents in the cultural discourse, the problems of alienation, displacement, rootlessness, frustration, fragmentation, and marginalization. Overemphasis on the diasporic

experience has made readers overlook the aesthetic value of her work. Lahiri herself rejects such a limited categorization and emphasizes that "she creates not mere 'diasporic characters' but 'distinctively individualized characters' and writes not about 'a specific cultural experience' but about 'human beings and the difficulties of existence.' Her focus is the 'mindscape of characters' and 'human predicament'" (Hemlata, 2013). This is a very Hawthornian treatment and subject matter: Human nature and the human heart.

New Englander, like Lahiri, Hawthorne was well-known for his announcement that "New England was quite as large a lump of earth as his heart could readily take in" (Taylor, 1950, p. 153). Though intimate with his Pilgrim fathers, he held aloof from them. He added the (w) to his last name to dissociate himself from his ancestors. "Most dismal wretches", he would call them. He thanked God for them and then thanked God that every generation was far removed from them. Promulgating transplantation like Lahiri, he felt, "ancient evils could be changed ... only by slow changes into the subsoil out of which they grew-the human heart" (p. 154). Lahiri had the same ambivalence towards her Indian heritage. Like Hawthorne she also changed her name. Jhumpa was the pet name her family used at home but she adopted it at the suggestion of her American school teacher because it was easy to pronounce than her official name, Nilanjana Sudeshna. In a proclamation similar to that made by Hawthorne about New England, she said; "the part of the earth that I've always felt most at ease with is not the ground, but sort of the water's edge." However, she was conscious of her family's distance from the American way of life that she liked, "I felt intense pressure to be two things", she wrote in 2006, "loyal to the old world and fluent in the new." Speaking Bengali, eating rice with her two fingers, these seemed an utterly alien way of life, and she took pains to hide them from her American friends. In depicting the life of middle class American-born children of Indian immigrants (known as ABCD-American-Born Confused Desi) Lahiri also represents the mores of educated Americans, both Indian and non-Indian. "Her tales of marriage, divorce, becoming a parent and grappling with the deaths of adult parents are the opposite of exotic. Her fiction winds up painting a very intelligent portrait of upper-middle class life. They aren't immigrant stories, not in a traditional sense" (Taylor, 2008).

At the end of Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the protagonist Gogol Ganguli realizes the meaning of his name by reading "The Overcoat." As the protagonist starts reading the short story, readers realize why his father used to quote Dostoyevsky referring to Gogol's "Overcoat", "we all came out of Gogol's overcoat" although no clue is given by the novel's closing lines to Gogol's reaction to "The Overcoat" or an insight into his father's reference to Dostoyevsky. Though the story has inspired volumes of criticism, in Russian and English, there is no definite interpretation of the story or general agreement on its moral strength. However, this seems to be the charm of reading and referring to literature:

Critics agree that the story is important not only for what it says, but also...what it does not say. Herein lies one possibility for why classic Russian writers of the nineteenth century will never fail you: they never fail to inspire thought about the significance of an individual among vast forces, and they never fail to demand our attention as careful readers of form as well as content (Dhingra and Cheung, 2012, pp.45-6).

The same thing is true of nineteenth century American writers, like Nathaniel Hawthorne who has inspired the writing of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*. In her *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri uses the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne to suggest the title, main theme, and epigraph for the collection. *Unaccustomed Earth* starts with an epigraph taken from the "Custom House" section of *The Scarlet Letter*, "human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth." Lahiri announces by this her belonging to the American literary canon instead of identifying with postcolonial or ethnic writers (Arjopalo, 2015, p.12). Cardozo (2012) in "Ethnicity and Intertextuality in Jhumpa Lahiri's Oeuvre" in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, suggests that Lahiri uses intertextuality (reference to another writer's work, in her case, Hawthorne) to bridge the gap between the universal and the specific. She suggests that in quoting Hawthorne, Lahiri transcends ethnic identity and instead offers "an unabashed bid to claim America" (p.6) Moreover, to "[further] establish her American credentials" (p.xxi) she constructs the three interlinked stories in the second part of the collection called "Hema and Kaushik", on the model of Hester and Dimmesdale.

What Lahiri did was to reverse the time sequence of *The Scarlet Letter*. So instead of starting from the present, the "Custom House" section, which is set in the nineteenth century Massachusetts, and then goes back to the past to relate the story of the scarlet letter which takes place in the seventeenth century, Lahiri sets the action of her first two stories in the past and the last one in the present. The trio relates how the main characters met some time in the past and how they moved on in their lives separately till they met again and developed their romance which is concluded in the present. Lahiri arranges her short stories in the following order: "Once in a Lifetime", "Year's End", and "Going Ashore." Read in this order we can simply think of the first two stories as providing the necessary background for the central piece, that is, "Going Ashore." "Once in a Lifetime" and "Year's End" are equivalent to the "Custom House" section in Hawthorne's. Read in reversed order "Going Ashore", "Once in a Lifetime", and "Year's End" we will have a rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter*. Both "Once in a Lifetime" and "Year's End" are set in the past. They relate the history of the friendship between Hema and Kaushik's family, the crush Hema has on Kaushik, the sickness of Kaushik's mother, and his life after her death. The first "Once in a Lifetime" is told by the thirteen-year old Hema to Kaushik when his family was staying with hers as they thought of resettling in the States. It could also be called "Once Upon a Time" since it has to do with beginnings and the story of the acquaintance between Hema and Kaushik. The second, "Year's End", is told by the adult Kaushik to Hema. He tells her about his time at college, his failure to get over

his mother's loss and his father's remarriage. Then the last one "Going Ashore" is set in the present. The omniscient narrator tells us about the resumption of Hema and Kaushik's romance in Rome. This story is followed by some paragraphs said by Hema describing her marriage to another man and her shock at the news of Kaushik's unexpected death. The Scarlet Letter starts in the present, nineteenth century Massachusetts, where the narrator finds in the Customs House where he is working, a scarlet letter wrapped with some old papers. After much investigation, he starts to tell us the story of that letter which took place two centuries ago in New England.

"Going Ashore" starts from *medias res*, like Hawthorne's (Turner, 1961, p.56). The Scarlet Letter starts after Hester Prynne committed adultery, gave birth to a girl and went to jail. She had to cope with the consequences of her action by living in isolation, winning her own bread and living an undignified life. Whereas "Going Ashore" relates the meeting between Hema and Kaushik in Rome after a twenty-year separation and how the passion they felt for one another in the past, was rekindled by that short meeting.

From the moment they arrived together at Paola and Edo's, [their friends in Rome] it was assumed, by the other guests, that they were old friends. One of the guests had even assumed they were lovers...She was aware that he had never corrected the guest's assumption. Aware, too, of the way he looked at her across the table during lunch, surprised by the allure that had come to her late. (p. 311)

The story deals with the consequences of the resumption of their relationship and their ultimate separation. Hema does not change her original plans of completing her traditional marriage to Navin, an Indian-American man she hardly knows, after Kaushik refuses to marry her. Whereas, Kaushik, who is as desperate and lost as ever, dies at tsunami while at vocation in Thailand.

The Scarlet Letter ends similarly. Dimmesdale is defeated and dies of a broken-heart and will after being eaten up by the sense of guilt and powerlessness at not confessing his sin and shouldering his moral responsibility towards Hester and his daughter Pearl. The rebellious Hester, on the other hand, survives despite the odds because she has coped with the consequences of her action and moved on in her life, albeit at a price. Hawthorne describes her first appearance in the novella and in the market place where she is publically disgraced:

She was lady-like...after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity...And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped (p.53).

Reversing the stereotypical representation of Asian-American men, Lahiri represents her men as spending their lives fighting the sense of guilt and failure, whereas her women achieve freedom and dependence though they remain traditional in the sense that they are taken under their parents' wings (Hemlata, 2013). Focusing on Lahiri's Bengali American men in her essay, "Feminizing Men? Moving Beyond Asian American Literary Gender Wars in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction" in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, Dhingra (2012) suggests that Jhumpa Lahiri's works transcend and challenge the stereotypical representation of men in the works of Asian American writers of the 1980s and 1990s. "The layer of emotional sensitivity and self-expression that Lahiri adds to her portrayal of male characters will provide a new twenty-first-century model of a sensitive, emotionally vulnerable, feminized...male" (p. 152). Unlike other Asian American women writers like the Chinese-American Maxine Hong Kingston, (1940-) and Indian-American Bharati Mukherjee (1940-), who stick to "the woman warrior syndrome" by rejecting gender oppression and arranged marriages, Lahiri "depicts a wide range of male protagonists...Thus she evokes even the female reader's empathy for [them]"(p.139).

Kaushik is emotionally fragile after the death of his mother. His world collapses after her death. He keeps remembering her and every single detail of their lives together. In the "Year's End" everything for him begins to have a sentimental value because it reminds him of her; the swimming pool, the kitchen, the food, etc.... He argues with his step sisters on Christmas eve because he hates the fact that his mother's place has been taken by another woman who is so different from his mother and less beautiful and refined than her. In a moment of emotional outburst he tells his stepsisters Rupa and Piu as they innocently go through his mother's photo album, how much he hates them and their mother:

"You have no right to be looking at those," I told them.

"They don't belong to you, do you understand?"

They nodded, Rupa trembling as if with cold, Piu's lips pressed tightly together. Tears fell down their faces but words continued to pour out of me, words that should not have been uttered, should not have been heard. "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 she's here, the only reason both of you are here." (p. 287)

During Kaushik's graduation ceremony his father advised him to move on; "We are both moving forward, Kaushik...New roads to explore." (p.293). His father did move forward by having a new life with a young wife from India with two little daughters. He even moved to a new house outside New England. Kaushik moved on by running away. He physically avoided visiting the United States of America but emotionally stored every memory of home and

mother. He kept moving from one job to another and from one place to another. He could not even stay with one woman till he incidentally met Hema in Rome, "She was the only person he'd met in his adult life who had any understanding of his past, the only woman he wanted to remain connected to" (p.326). Responding to Hema's comment on a loving couple they saw in Rome that they would live together in the same place forever, Kaushik said enviously, "I've never belonged to any place that way"(p.320). Earlier the writer described him as a wanderer moving from north to South and Central America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and finally Asia. His life as a photojournalist had begun nearly twenty years ago (after his mother's death) as he wandered through Latin America, living off the money his father left him after his graduation. This is reminiscent of Dimmesdale's vigils, his night errands, when he was burdened with keeping the secret of his share in Hester's adultery and his moral cowardice in confessing his part. The vigils indicate his helplessness at the loss of self-respect, love and faith. Meeting many years after their romance and talking for the first time in private as lovers in the forest, Dimmesdale describes his agony to Hester,

"[I feel] more misery, Hester!-only the more misery!" answered the clergyman, with a bitter smile. "As concerns the good which I may appear to do, I have no faith in it. It must needs be a delusion. What can a ruined soul, like mine, effect towards the redemption of other souls?. And as for the people's reverence, would that it were turned to scorn and hatred! Canst thou deem it, Hester, a consolation, that I must stand up in my pulpit, and meet so many eyes turned upward to my face, as if the light of heaven were beaming from it!-...and then look inward, and discern the black reality of what they idolize?" (p.191)

His emotional, physical and psychological sufferings ended by his untimely and sudden death at the scaffold after confessing his sin and spoiling the plan of eloping with Hester and Pearl to start a new life in Europe.

Hema, Hester's prototype, (they even have the same initials), achieves her financial and intellectual independence by having her Ph.D. and getting a house on her own. She has already ended a ten-year affair with a married American man, Julian, after realizing that they have no future together. She has to agree to a traditional marriage arranged by her parents. She is now engaged to Navin to be married in India within some months. She is no longer satisfied with her life. She is looking for settlement and yearning to make a family that neither Julian nor even Kaushik are able to offer. "As a thirty-five-year-old woman, Hema is no longer willing to leave love to chance, and finds pleasure in the sense of "certainty" that comes with her arranged marriage" (Bollinger, 2014, p.494). When asked by Kaushik why she would marry a man she does not love, she answered, "I thought it might fix things" (p.313).

Hema is a model of the classic dutiful Indian daughter, who, despite her academic success, still desires to settle down in a marriage. She wants to achieve a balance between her needs for security and freedom. She travels to Italy to be on her own, but while in Rome, she sticks to the same daily routine, and even has lunch at the same restaurant daily (Arjopalo, 2015, p.42). Hema lives in the past. She studies Etruscans, a dead people in Rome, and loves Kaushik because of their shared past. But her last romance with Kaushik in Rome makes her realize that she can never retrieve the past. The bangle she has inherited from her grandmother and lost at the Customs back in Rome indicates that she has cut all relationships with her unpleasant past and is looking forward to a new life (Yun, 2014, p.142). By her marriage in the final pages of the book she feels (going ashore) and touching "the ground once more underfoot." She reaches the shore she has been looking for, though not with the man of her dreams, the person one might meet (once in a life time). In contrast, Kaushik was left by the (year's end) to be wrapped by the waves of the Indian Ocean, "The sea was as warm and welcoming as a bath. His feet touched the bottom, and so he let go" (p.133).

Hema's profession and marriage symbolize her attempts to come to terms with her past in order to find closure and understand the present. She is capable of living on her own, but no longer wants to. She resorts to traditional marriage to enhance her self-respect and dignity (Arjopalo, 2015). Though as individual and passionate as Hema, the defiant and rebellious Hester Prynne also tried to restore her dignity, but in a different way. In an interesting study of the influence of Hawthorne on Lahiri, Sazzad (2015), suggests that Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is set against the background of strict Puritanical rules of the seventeenth century Massachusetts where the social outcast Hester struggles to get her dignity that is confiscated by the scarlet letter (A) which she is forced to wear round her neck as a sign of her sin. Although Lahiri's characters are not so rebellious as Hawthorne's protagonist (Hester), yet they have to undertake many struggles in the twenty-first Massachusetts. Working hard to become successful professionals, they, however, fail "to escape the allure of the forbidden territory symbolized by Hester's sign of adultery. Despite their apparently dignified life, ...[they] suffer from the pangs of unfulfillment...Lahiri's appropriation of Hawthorne makes us realize that the unwritten 'A' on the hearts of her protagonists represents the undying human yearning for love and the havoc it creates in an adverse environment (p.54).

Hema's scarlet letter is her long-term affair with Julian in the States and her deeply-rooted love for Kaushik crowned by their short-lived romance in Rome. There is even a suggestion that she is pregnant with the baby of Kaushik, and not Navin, her husband. "It might have been your child", Hema said in the final lines of the novella addressing Kaushik after his death, "but this was not the case. We had been careful, and you had left nothing behind" (333). Kaushik's unrevealed scarlet letter is his yearning for his beloved mother and his love for Hema.

Jhumpa Lahiri summarizes the influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne on *Unaccustomed Earth*:

I was reading a lot of Hawthorne while I wrote these stories. The reason the last story is set in Rome is because I was reading *The Marble Faun*, and I had the idea of setting a story of American characters in Rome because of that. On a more personal level, because I grew up in New England, I grew up with a sense who Nathaniel

Hawthorne was and what he represented in the culture. Throughout my childhood, I had the feeling that my world and my family, our lives, were completely segregated from Hawthorne and the world he represented. He represented the tradition of great American writing. ..So it was very intense for me to be re-reading him as an adult, and also a writer, and to come across this passage [epigraph] and to recognize, in such a visceral way, how those words reflected my own life and upbringing and now my work as a writer (Leyda, 2011, p.79, italics mine).

No other words could have eloquently described Hawthorne's influence on Lahiri and Lahiri's reading of Hawthorne. In the "Hema and Kaushik" section of Lahiri's book Lahiri materializes that influence. The more one reads the more affinities he finds between the two works. But if Hawthorne's book has to do with the power of a letter, Lahiri's has to do with the power of reading and rewriting that letter which has made it possible for her name to be linked to writers like Hawthorne and to be hopefully canonized among the great ones like him.

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