



Consonanze 11.2

# ANANTARATNAPRABHAVA

## STUDI IN ONORE DI GIULIANO BOCCALI

*a cura di Alice Crisanti, Cinzia Pieruccini,  
Chiara Policardi, Paola M. Rossi*

II



*Anantaratnaprabhava*

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II

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## Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth": When the Twain Do Meet

*Alessandro Vescovi*

«*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet*». Surely, when Rudyard Kipling wrote this line in 1895, he could not imagine that a century later it would sound hilarious to two million Indian migrants in the USA, who have become an unprecedented blend of the two civilizations. "Unaccustomed Earth" by Jhumpa Lahiri is a story that tells exactly this: how East and West have met. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London to Bengali parents, and subsequently brought up in Rhode Island, within a circle of expatriate Bengali academics. She has become an internationally acclaimed writer with her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which won her the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. She is the first writer of Indian descent to win the prestigious prize in the fiction category. Her second book, the novel *The Namesake* (2003) won international recognition and was made into a movie by Mira Nair in 2006, while her third and fourth literary enterprises – the collection of stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and the novel *The Lowland* (2013) – were translated into most European and Indian languages. As Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung (2012) point out, Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the few writers that are widely read by both the general public, the academics, and ethnic minorities. This success probably depends on Lahiri's own inability to define herself as either an American or an Indian woman, let alone an American or an Indian writer. While migration, exile, displacement, generational conflicts are nothing new in the literary panorama, the experience of second-generation high caste Bengali migrants in the US is actually unprecedented. For the first time in history, a group of highly educated and well-to-do people have sought migration out of a deliberate act, retaining the possibility of keeping in touch with their motherland. Since they always had the possibility of going back to India, they renewed their choice of living in America year after year, postponing their return until retirement.

Emotionally, these migrants were poised between the enthusiasm for the professional possibilities that opened up in America and a kind of nostalgia for the land they had left behind; in fact, in the first generation this division is also gendered: men would be more likely to pursue a career, while women would rather stay at home to mourn and make up for their loss. Their equally privileged children, the



generation to which Jhumpa Lahiri belongs, were the first to grow up polarized between East and West, between American playmates and Indian families, rock bands and Bollywood music, consumerism and frugality, hamburgers and curry, individualism and family commitment. Most of Lahiri's stories<sup>1</sup> describe dichotomies whereby house and family are the domain of the woman of the house, and men go out to earn a living. Women keep up traditions and connections with the homeland, cooking Indian food, wearing Indian clothes, and observing festivities; men are supposed to be more integrated into the host society, working within the American establishment. This distribution of family duties is a natural prosecution of a trend initiated in colonial India back in the nineteenth century. As the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in his *Provincializing Europe*, the division of tasks between men and women had started when the timing of modern production began to clash with the timing of daily rituals. Men could no longer afford to stay at home and observe rituals, thus they felt allowed to go outside, eat forbidden food if need arose, and waive time-consuming rituals. As a balance to this infringement of traditions, women were supposed to preserve the sacredness of the familial abode, bringing *grihalakshmi*, or domestic harmony.<sup>2</sup> Women were asked to foster familial ties in order to preserve the vitality of the clan, and were likewise supposed to preserve the traditions and educate children to them. For this reason, Chakrabarty (2000) observes, women were sometimes the most strenuous defenders of customs such as *purdah*, or even *sati*. Thus it was natural that, once abroad, it fell on women to stay at home with children and make it a quaint harbour where their husbands could find a little India. However, as it happened also in Bengal, this division of work created some tensions, if we are to believe the small worlds depicted by Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni. In fact, it came to pass that men urged their wives to become more westernized and less steeped in traditional Indian habits, especially when it came to social occasions when American colleagues were involved. The old tension so well described by Tagore in *The Home and the World*, where the newly wedded Nikhil urged Bimala to leave the *purdah* and go into the world, was bound to repeat itself over and again in America.

Jhumpa Lahiri's world is a cosmopolitan space that has its centre in New England, but stretches from the Andaman Islands and Kolkata to Canada, including Europe (and Italy in particular), inhabited by first and second generation Bengali *bhadralok* expatriates. Through her novels and short stories, readers familiarize with this third space (Farshid 2013) to the point of finding it familiar, as it happens with Narayan's *Malgudi* or Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha* (Caesar 2005). The

1. The novel *The Lowland* is a most notable exception.

2. *Grihalakshmi* literally means "Lakshmi of the house"; indeed, women were supposed to possess all the virtues of Lakshmi, including beauty, silence and tolerance.

characters who inhabit this "unaccustomed earth", which is neither Indian nor American, strike the ordinary reader with their very normalcy. Yet, the exceptional predicament of their surrounding creates a kind of laboratory, where ordinary passions and conflicts can be tested and viewed under a new light. Possibly because she belongs to a cultural elite, or because the turmoil of colonization and decolonization is too far from New England, Jhumpa is neither a postcolonial nor a political writer in the narrow sense, but she is a cosmopolite rather committed to humanism (Srikanth 2012, Cardozo 2012). Her characters face ordinary illusions and delusions, encounter love and death and all the usual adventures and misadventures that life reserves to the middle class, but to the ordinary reader they look fresh and fascinating. Besides Lahiri's ability as a writer, there are two reasons why readers that are neither Indian nor American find her stories so intriguing. The first is that they shed light on the unique predicament of these Bengali migrants; the second that this very predicament, once absorbed, allows a deeper understanding of ordinary life also outside that setting. The first crush, a betrayal, or a generational conflict become all the more poignant when observed in this unique *milieu*. What makes the experience even more interesting is the fact that Lahiri's characters cannot rely on any older generation, they experience things for the first time and discover the exceptionality of their predicament with the same eager curiosity of their readers.

Considering the privileged position of New England in the map of Lahiri's world, it is no wonder that three *genii loci* surface in her stories now and again; I am of course referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), three nineteenth-century intellectuals, who shaped the American collective attitude towards metaphysics, literature and Nature.

Hawthorne, the author of several collections of short stories, among which the celebrated *Twice Told Tales* (1837), presides over Lahiri's second book from the very title. The title phrase "unaccustomed earth" comes from a passage of "The Custom House", the apocryphal preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, where Hawthorne's fictional narrator states that:

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.<sup>3</sup>

This quotation serves as epigraph to the whole collection. As Jeffrey Bilbro (Bilbro 2013) justly points out, the predicament of Hawthorne was in a way similar to that

3. Hawthorne 2014, 15.

of second generation migrants, who do have a venerable tradition behind them, but feel that they have to move on, finding new individual paths without totally rejecting their fathers' heritage.

The title story, which will form the object of the present essay, consistently recounts the different but somehow symmetrical uprootings of the main characters, Ruma and her father – a second and first generation migrant, a woman and a man. Ruma is in her late thirties, at a time when she has just left New England and her job as lawyer to follow her husband to Seattle, in Washington State; her first son, Akash, was born three years earlier in New York, where she worked as lawyer, and she is now expecting another baby. Adam, her American husband, has a corporate job and is often away on business, so that Ruma feels rather lonely in her new house, without friends or relatives. Besides, her mother has recently and unexpectedly died. Consequently, Ruma's father, whose name is not given, has moved into a smaller apartment and has found a new companion, Mrs Bagchi, during a tour to Europe. The short story covers seven days when the elderly man is visiting Ruma and Akash in their new abode. Before her father's arrival, the woman was worried that he expected to move in with her, on the assumption that it was her filial duty to look after him in old age. Things turn out to be rather different; the 70-years-old parent has found a new balance in his life and has no desire to move into his daughter's household. However, during the time he spends there, he proves a perfect father and grandfather, always caring but never obtrusive. He looks after Ruma's garden, buying flowers and plants, and tends the garden with little Akash. In her loneliness, Ruma wishes that her father stayed with them, but he refuses. The narrative's point of view shifts continuously from Ruma's to her father's, revealing their present thoughts and their different pasts.

While Ruma thinks back to her adolescence as a period when she had to assert herself against her parents' vetoes, seeking American rather than Indian values, she is surprised to see that, after all, her life ended up looking like her secluded mother's. She has become a homemaker, mostly alone, with two children to raise in an alien land. Ironically enough, it is her father who alerts her to the risks of losing contact with American values. Halfway through his stay in Seattle, he finds the opportunity and the words to give vent to his preoccupations about her career. The ensuing dialogue is the very opposite of what Ruma may have expected.

"And you? Have you found work in the new place?"

"Part-time litigation work is hard to find", she said.

"In order to practice here you will have to take another bar exam?" her father asked.

"No. There's reciprocity with New York".

"Then why not look for a new job?"

"I am not ready yet, Baba". [...] "maybe when the new baby starts kindergarten".  
 "But that's over five years from now. Now is the time for you to be working, building your career". (UE, 36)<sup>4</sup>

The absence of exclamation marks in the dialogue shows that both Ruma and her father are trying to keep a calm, almost casual tone, especially because this dialogue takes place in a car, in the presence of little Akash. Still, after a few hours, the old man resumes the discussion comparing Ruma to himself and not to his late wife, as Ruma would rather often do:

"Work is important, Ruma. Not only for financial stability. For mental stability. All my life, since I have been sixteen, I have been working".  
 [...]  
 "Self-reliance is important, Ruma", he continued. "Life is full of surprises. Today you can depend on Adam, on Adam's job. Tomorrow who knows". (UE, 37)

The compound word «self-reliance» has a venerable tradition in America well beyond New England; it is the title of the second essay in the collection that Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the fathers of American Transcendentalism, published under the bare title of *Essays*. It is the year 1840 and Emerson – a former minister, teacher and preacher now turned an independent lecturer – is reforming Puritanical doctrines with the suggestions that he derived from Wordsworth, Carlyle and German thinkers like Fichte and Novalis. The "essays" that form his book are nothing new for the people of Concord, where he lives, as he has been expounding his ideas in the form of lectures for years, but his words are destined to enter the DNA of American people. Harold Bloom (2006) singles out this particular essay as the constituent of a distinct American religion. According to Bloom, while Puritanism posited a God outside Man, Emerson, through his idea of Nature, for the first time in the West preached a religion whereby God is within Man. In the published version, Emerson took care to maintain a vivid style, full of imperatives that unfailingly surprise readers. In the collection, he juxtaposed essays in order to create the maximum contrast: the opening chapter is a meditation on the collective experience of the race ("History"), immediately followed by an essay on the individual ("Self-Reliance"); an advice for worldly success ("Prudence") is compensated by an exhortation to despise it. Yet the paradoxical nature of the essays is such that they do not contradict but rather reinforce each other. According to Emerson, self-reliance is an assault against the obstacles that impede the development of human soul. The first of these obstacles is fear of common opinion, so that instead of

4. Lahiri 2008a, 3-59. All references, henceforward indicated as UE, are to this edition.

pursuing Truth (or their own Nature, which is all the same to him) people end up pursuing general acceptance. «Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist» runs a much-quoted aphorism in the essay. It is not important what we do, but why we do it; as long as we follow our nature and not the general opinion in doing things, we are developing our soul and attaining spiritual freedom. «The only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it» proclaims Emerson.

As for work, a subject very close to the heart of Ruma's father, Emerson writes that «A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and has done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace». Work is the propelling force that saves man from the abyss and makes him closer to God. In a more secular, but not altogether different way, Ruma's father worries that his daughter might not feel well because apparently she has little pleasure in staying at home and is not looking for a job either. It may seem contradictory that the man who had allowed his wife to stay at home all the time while he was at work is now advising her daughter against it, but the contradiction is only outward. In fact, Ruma's mother relished her staying at home and looking after the house, this is what she had expected as a bride and the work in which she would "put her heart". In Emerson's words, we could say that she was following her nature, or we could say that she was performing her duty by accepting her *karman*. Ruma's case is different from her mother's because she does not enjoy being at home, and would feel better, so her father thinks, if she did the job for which she was trained. Now Ruma is trying to resemble her mother, which can only end up in a disaster. Emerson and Ruma's father would doubtless agree with the *Gita's* precept that

One's own Law (*dharmā*) imperfectly observed is better than another's Law carried out with perfection. As long as one does the work set by nature, he does not incur blame. (*Bhagavad Gita* 18.47, transl. van Buitenen 2013)

This dharmic attitude is hardly surprising in a high-caste Indian man. In fact, Indian and American doctrines chime; the same thought is expressed in Emerson's essay, where the American philosopher advises «Accept the place that the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connexion of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age...». The American Unitarian tradition can apparently accommodate at least part of the *Advaita Vedānta* philosophy.

In depicting Ruma's parent, Jhumpa Lahiri was probably thinking of her own father about whom she wrote:

In many ways [my father] is a spiritual descendant of America's earliest Puritan settlers; thrifty, hard-working, plain in his habits. [...] He also embodies the values of two New England's greatest thinkers, demonstrating a profound lack of materialism and *self-reliance* that would have made Thoreau and Emerson proud. (Lahiri 2008b, 397)

These words are contained in a short prose piece entitled *Rhode Island*, which appeared in 2008, the same year as *Unaccustomed Earth*.<sup>5</sup> Here Lahiri mentions that her father loves gardening, another point of contact with the character. Gardening is also a matching image for a story about roots (Saxena 2012), and the activity that most intimately connects the old man with Thoreau, who used to live in a cabin next to Walden Pond – a place explicitly mentioned in “Hell-Heaven”, another short story from the same collection – and cultivate his own food.

In his essence, Ruma's father embodies a modern, secular version of a *sannyasin*. Once his life as a family-man is over, he retires to a tiny apartment, where he takes only a few things. He no longer cares for a big house «that would only fill up with things over the years», he muses. «Life grew to a certain point. The point he had reached now». From this moment on, he is trying to strip himself from all life connections, be they objects or people. He has a very loose affair with a Bengali woman, Mrs Bagchi, whom he only sees when they are on organized tours, and they are both content with this distant relationship. At a point he feels tempted to stay on in Seattle, and build a solid relationship with his grandson, but he knows that it is no longer the time for depending on other people, and decides to leave instead – to accept his own *kismet*, destiny, one might say.

Comparing his past life with the life of his three-year-old grandson, he cannot help thinking that the boy will eventually leave his family and realizes that «he, too, had turned his back on his parents, by settling in America. In the name of ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered anymore». His relation with food is also interesting in this respect. Most migrants tend to retain their culinary habits in the host country, but Indians, because of the many food taboos and the use of food to distinguish castes and religions, are particularly sensitive about this subject (Martin-Rodriguez 2000, Kunow 2003, Mehta 2011, Roy 2002). Thus food, together with clothing, becomes a matter of confrontation between mothers and daughters. Typically, second generation teenagers would steal more or less secretly to some fast-food restaurant to eat hamburgers with their American peers, while their mothers would rather have them in the kitchen folding samosas and rolling gulab jamuns. Ruma's mother had been no exception, being a scrupulous cook, she used to prepare elaborated meals for the family. Dinners were used also

5. I am grateful to Angelo Monaco for pointing this rare book out to me.

to mark family hierarchies, another typically Indian custom (Sekaran 2011); no one, the narrator points out, was allowed to eat until the father arrived. During her father's visit, Ruma tries to please him with Indian meals that, predictably, do not turn out as good as her mother's.

Her mother had been an excellent cook. [...] Ruma's cooking didn't come close, the vegetables sliced too thickly, the rice overdone, but as her father worked his way through the things she'd made, he repeatedly told her how delicious it was. (UE, 22)

And yet, to Ruma's astonishment, it hardly seems to matter to her father now.

"Sorry the *begunis* (deep fried aubergines) broke apart", she added. "I didn't let the oil get hot enough".

"It doesn't matter. Try it", he told Akash. (UE, 23)

There may be three reasons why the father is so casual about food now; the simplest is that he really appreciates his daughter's efforts and tries to be supportive of her since he sees that she is having a rough time. This is all the more remarkable when we think of his former attitude towards food. Following Ruma's train of thought, the narrator informs us that her father had been rather fastidious about meals cooked by people other than his wife: whenever they were invited at some friends', he would complain about the food on the way home. However, through a conversation on what he ate during a trip to Italy, he again appears uninterested in any particular delicacy; indeed, he admits bluntly that he mostly ate pizza. His lack of interest for food should then be searched in his new predicament as (Non-Resident) Indian retired widower. Since he is no longer a family man (*grihastha*), he does not care to establish his position within the family hierarchy or even to show appreciation for his feminine counterpart, *grihalakshmi*. The third reason, not unconnected with the foregoing, has to do with the *ashrama* system; *ashrama* means step, and refers to the different stages of a man's life, as student (*brahmacharya*), family man (*grihastha*), retired (*vanaprastha*) and ascetic (*sannyasin*). The *vanaprastha* retains some family obligation, but with a view to his final liberation from earthly objects; this is a preparation phase like the *brahmacharya*: a man must train himself to become a renouncer. He is still part of the family, but he has given up all major responsibilities; in the next phase he will leave the family altogether. As Patrick Olivelle (2011) points out, for renouncers food should only come in the form of alms, in some cases even raw, in order to afford bare nourishment, but not physical pleasure. Therefore, *sannyasins* who live on alms cannot expect to eat what they want, nor can they be fastidious about what they get. Similarly, as though in



preparation, Ruma's father now cares little for the pleasure of food even when he is on his own or on holyday.

Before leaving at the end of his sojourn in Seattle, Ruma's father briefs the daughter about the work he has been doing in the garden, giving advice on how often to water the flowers and how to use the fertilizer. Eventually he warns her about the hydrangea, which «won't bloom much this year. The flowers will be pink or blue depending on the acidity of the soil. You'll have to prune it back eventually» (UE, 51). It is hard not to think of the hydrangea as a metaphor for young Akash, the grandson, or for any second generation migrant, whose roots have stricken into a new, unaccustomed earth, and whose future is therefore unpredictable. The story, however, provides insights also on the transformative power of alien soils for those who reach them after their maturity; Ruma's father has certainly been changed by the new surroundings, so much so that his frugality could be read as nihilism or individualism, or puritanism. I believe that through this character the story hints at a fecund encounter between Indian and American philosophical systems. The story itself is a kind of non-academic essay in comparative philosophy, which examines different systems not within their own milieu, but at work – in the actuality of people's lives. Ralph Waldo Emerson was aware of the analogies between Transcendentalism and the Vedantic tradition, so that he found the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* a most interesting reading. However, it should be said that he became aware of the analogies only after developing his own system (Goodman 1990). Similarly, at the end of the century, Gandhi would develop his Satyagraha before reading Thoreau's seminal essay *Civil Disobedience* (1849), written on the occasion on the Mexican war. In both cases, one cannot talk of any direct influence, but rather of convergence.<sup>6</sup> The latter may well be disappointing to historians, but is of paramount importance to humanists. Such is Jhumpa Lahiri, who, in her text, offers an insight into a successful migration story that is deeply grounded in culture and not simply – as it more often happens – in personal success. If ever migration was traumatic (Ling 2014) to Ruma's father, he has been able to overcome it by relying on himself.

6. In fact, Emerson had a very limited contact with original Hindu texts, but was an avid reader of English and German philosophers, who did know them. Thus he was acquainted with at least part of the *Book of Manu* at an early phase. Also when he could read further into Hindu writings, his attitude was never that of a scholar interested in another civilization, but that of a "practical" philosopher who would re-interpret and re-use others' ideas. Incidentally, this is another point of contact with Gandhi.



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