

## III B.A English

### Semester-V

Subject & Code: Women's Writings in English(17UENC52)

### Unit –V – Short Story

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#### *Year's End*

- Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most eminent Indo – American writers. She is one among the diasporic writers who carries with her the strikingly fresh Indian sensibility abroad and lets it out through her fiction in an impressive form. Since she herself is the child of immigration and multiculturalism, she is able to portray the characters both in the light of native and alien culture. Deeply felt by the importance of family relationship and attachment with the relatives in the home country, Lahiri has experienced the trauma of failing to find her identity in the new land where she could never have a sense of belonging. Though these displaced realities and self – imposed exile are in many ways a calamity, this existence acts as a stimulus and enables Jhumpa Lahiri to excel in fiction writing. As a popular young writer of Indian background, she is a sort of representative figure for the female predicament in Diaspora. She explores the ideas of cultural and personal isolations and identities.

*Year's End* is one of the stories in Lahiri's short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. The story is narrated by Kaushik. It begins with Kaushik's father Mr. Choudhry, finding refuge in a second marriage after losing his first wife, Parul, to cancer. Mr. Choudhry marries Chitra, a school teacher in Kolkata, who had lost her spouse two years back to encephalitis. Chitra is thirty five years old, nearly twenty years younger to Mr. Choudhry. She has two daughters – her elder daughter, Rupa, is ten years old and the younger one, Piu is seven years old.

The story explores the Indian diaspora in America, in terms of deracination,

readjustment to a new place, redefinition of identity and impact on family relationships.

As with the other Bengali wives, it seems that staying home with children instead of pursuing a career in America makes integration in society more difficult. At the end of the story, Chitra is described as “chafing” under her solitary existence, and the family moves to a more urban area. Dr. Choudhry is first married to Kaushik’s mother, Parul, and despite their being an arranged marriage it is described as having “a touch of romance about it”. For Kaushik’s father, it was love at first sight, and the public displays of physical and emotional intimacy in their marriage make it stand out. The Choudhry’s came from the same background, both born into privilege, educated and with a keen interest in arts. Thus this arranged marriage was a success and the two were well suited for one another. When Parul dies of cancer, her husband finds it painful to be reminded of her, and solves this by hiding away all her photographs in order to suppress her memory. However, the final solution to his grief only emerges three years after her death, when he is introduced to the young widow, Chitra, and marries her in a ceremony arranged by relatives. Where his first wife was similar to him in age, background and taste, his new wife is younger and seems to come from a less privileged background. Chitra fulfils the role of a traditional Indian American wife in her cooking and adherence to Indian traditions. Here she poses a contrast to Parul, who was marked by her privileged upbringing and was not the typical upholder of Indian tradition that is often expected of Indian American mothers. Choudhry’s Indian choice in the second marriage is an acknowledgement of the importance of his cultural roots. His need for having a wife to come home to not only illustrates the acceptable Indian American social pattern, but also the universal need for someone to love and care for.

When Choudhrys return for America after seven years in India, Mrs. Choudhry no longer dresses in traditional Indian attire, and instead wears elegant, western fashion. She is no longer a passionate cook and her son does not seem to care for Indian food. The Choudhrys taken to drinking alcohol and the bottle of Johnnie Walker becomes a symbol of how they have distanced themselves from Indian culture and tradition. To Kaushik his family’s home is forever inscribed by his mother, and it pains him to see his father’s new wife, Chitra, touch and use the various artefacts that he remembers to have been touched by his mother. When he

enters the kitchen, he seems to feel his mother's mark on the room, in spite of how little she eventually used it, due to the decline of her health. Looking around him, he notices the plants that she tended there, that are still thriving, and the clock on the wall which she chose, still ticking. The contrast between his dead mother and these inanimate things indicates his grief and how unfathomable it is that his mother, the maker of the space, no longer inhabits it, and that the objects that she cultivated outlive her. Kaushik himself lives on, he finds his life increasingly meaningless and on some level wishes that he could join his mother in death.

At the end of *Year's End*, Kaushik seems to be flirting with death. He finds himself drawn to the sea at its darkest and most dangerous, and imagines that travelling on his own amongst strangers like being dead. Ultimately Kaushik sees himself as a proof that his mother had once existed. This might be the reason behind his father maintaining very little contact with him. Sharing a home with his father's family is too painful to Kaushik and upon escaping the Choudhry house at Christmas goes on a trip. He brings with him the only undisputable evidence of his mother from the house – the box of photos that his father sealed up and hid after her death. When Kaushik buries her photos, it signifies a new and personal funeral, where he is able to bury her in a new place and manner that he is comfortable with, rather than simply scattering the pictures like her ashes were once scattered. After burying the memory of his mother in the American soil, a further final closure with the memory of Parul comes about when his father decides to sell the house.

Kaushik is the epitome of an unhomey subject, not only because he is cut across two homes or homelands, but also because he is stuck in between the past and the present while displaced in both and belonging in neither. In *Year's End*, his mother is already dead and his father's attitude towards their present is shown not only by their adjustment to the host nation but also by their reactions to the past. While his father seeks to put his traumatic past behind and negotiate a space for himself in his new homeland, Kaushik is unable to come to terms with either his past or present. Instead, he chooses to run away from both.

In *Year's End*, Kaushik is a college student and is going home to spend the Christmas vacation with his father's new family, including his stepmother and two stepsisters. On his way, he tries to imagine his father's new household because as

far as he could remember, after his mother's death, his father decides to get rid of everything that reminds him of her. First, he removes all her photographs from the frames and albums and puts them in a shoebox. He also gives away her jewels, clothes, bags, cosmetics and colognes. He even gives away his Audi car to his son Kaushik as his wife had sat in it many times. Kaushik also observes that his father has given up lots of his old habits since his mother's death: he no longer drank his late wife's favourite liquor and has stopped writing Bengali poetry. Yet, his new marriage is the best indicator of his sign of adjustment. The fact that he chooses to remarry an Indian woman and to bring her to the United States signifies his willingness to negotiate (i.e.) an Indian home in an American homeland.

Unlike his father, Kaushik is unable to adjust himself to the present. He feels repulsed by the presence of his stepmother. He tries to ignore his family as far as possible, excusing himself from every trip and entertainment: for Christmas, his father arranges for a family trip to Disney World, but Kaushik refuses to accompany them, making up something about there being a winter session at his college. It is after uncovering his mother's photographs that he leaves home without having any idea of where to go. He wanders several days spending the nights in motels. At the end of the story Kaushik plans to travel across the world after graduation.

Thus it could be said that *Year's End* is from Kaushik's point of view and tells about his life after his mother's death as he deals with unwanted change and navigates complicated relationships with his recently remarried father, stepmother, and two young stepsisters – a situation that ultimately influences Kaushik to lead the life of a wanderer.

The main focus in the story is on the three displaced female characters – Chitra, Rupa and Piu, who on account of the matrimonial alliance, have to leave Kolkata and move to Massachusetts. These characters pass through multicultural or assimilatory phases during their identity crisis. Throughout the narrative, Chitra's expatriate sensibility is compared with Parul's immigrant nature such as the dining table left uncovered by Parul but covered with a cloth similar to a bedspread by Chitra and the arrangement of a cluster of fresh fruits or flowers by Parul against the lidless jars of pickles in the centre of the table. These minute changes brought about by Chitra in Mr. Choudhry's house are indicative of Chitra's steady attempts at

asserting her 'self' in the American ambience. She continues to dress in a Bengali saree, declines to learn English, and is unwilling to drive. This attitude is suggestive of her inclination towards Indian values and traditions. Although Chitra's life is split between the past and the present, she tries to regenerate her past by creating and preserving the Indian atmosphere in her American home. Chitra is one of those expatriates who are neither capable to cast off their inherited cultural legacy nor are they able to encapsulate themselves into a new socio – cultural environment. As a result of which they experience a contra – acculturation and hybridization in their attempt to amalgamate the two. They take refuge in their native culture as an antidote or a moral resource to checkmate their decentred consciousness. Through every little detail, one can assess the extent to which Chitra values her ethnicity and wants to transmit it further to her daughters and husband. Therefore, one observes that it is not Chitra whose identity is degenerated but Mr. Choudhry who is reverting back to his roots under the influence of Chitra. She succeeds in altering Mr. Choudhry's life from an independent immigrant into a multicultural ghetto existence. Piu and Rupa, on the other hand, are on a cross – cultural borderland where the border is a crucial if ambiguous site of vital reconstruction, a position replete with contradictions and difficulties, but regenerative promise.

Jhumpa Lahiri in this short story *Year's End* seems to have attempted to make it clear to the world at large that the humanity in its custom of perpetuating differences and hatred in all ways possible has the need today to set up the culture of cultures in love only. It is love to which the world has to both heed and hold. It is love that has to be realized in the form of the global culture of the humanity in our times. It is for this perhaps that she has in her own characteristic way shown how love heals and ensures a happy home and happy life, and when love's basic needs in the form of sincerity, honesty, openness of dealing with each other etc. are not fulfilled, there could be only deluge and destruction.

Hence the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri are the evidence of immigrant lives, their displeasures, disenchantment, struggles, dreams, integrations etc. Her characters go to the very different way of inferences of marginality and otherness in distant lands. Cultural alienation and consequent loss of identity form central issues in the diasporic discourse. The pain of displacement continues to pinch not just the immigrants but also their children who are rendered incapable of belonging to the

country of their birth. The tragedy of alienation is felt as much by the immigrants as the next generation due to the reason that the sense of estrangement is significantly more intense in proportion to the sense of affinity along with roots. Immigrants find that they are unable to adapt to their adopted country failing to adjust to the foster culture; nonetheless, their dilemma is not as pathetic as that of their children. They are half – lost as there is a minimum of at least one place where they wholly and absolutely belong, but their children do not belong to any place becoming truly and pitifully nowhere persons. Through the character of Chitra, Lahiri makes us acquainted with the dirty facet of materialistic attitude as an aftermath of the globalization. The confluence of various cultural and social issues under the aegis of globalization, unfortunately, transfers man to the level where individual materialistic concern matters more than anything else.

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