

THE UNSPOKEN FAMILY: SILENCE, SECRECY AND EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) presents family relationships through apparently ordinary situations in which affection, resentment, grief, guilt, desire, and responsibility remain only partially articulated. Existing scholarship has extensively examined Lahiri's collection through diaspora, cultural identity, migration, gender, memory, space, and family relations. This paper develops a more focused reading of silence and secrecy as relational practices through which family members protect vulnerability, preserve privacy, negotiate changing roles, and sometimes communicate what cannot be spoken directly. Drawing on selected stories including "Unaccustomed Earth," "A Choice of Accommodations," "Only Goodness," "Nobody's Business," "Hell-Heaven," and the Hema-Kaushik sequence, the study argues that silence in Lahiri is not simply the absence of communication. It can operate as emotional restraint, protection, resistance, privacy, or evidence of unresolved conflict. Secrecy similarly has an ambivalent function: it may create distance and misunderstanding, but it may also preserve individual autonomy within intimate relationships. The paper combines close textual analysis with insights from the sociology of secrecy and communication studies, particularly Simmel's account of secrecy, Acheson's conceptualization of silence as gesture, Vangelisti's research on family secrets, Afifi et al.'s work on protective concealment, and recent scholarship on secrecy and intimacy. Particular attention is paid to the 2008 Knopf edition of *Unaccustomed Earth*, with page-specific citations for the primary text. The study argues that Lahiri's restrained narrative technique makes the reader an interpreter of unspoken communication and thereby reproduces, at the level of form, the partial knowledge characteristic of intimate family relationships.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri; *Unaccustomed Earth*; silence; secrecy; emotional communication; family; intimacy; memory; diaspora; close reading

1. Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) is a collection of eight stories concerned with families, marriages, friendships, migration, memory, grief, and changing relationships across generations. Although the collection is frequently discussed within the framework of Indian-American diaspora literature, its most powerful effects often arise from situations that are neither spectacular nor overtly political. Lahiri's characters encounter one another in kitchens, gardens, bedrooms, restaurants, family gatherings, rented apartments, and hotel rooms. Within these ordinary spaces, important emotions are frequently left unspoken.

The collection's title story begins with a daughter, Ruma, who worries about her widowed father while he travels through Europe. The postcards he sends are brief and impersonal, and Ruma has little sense of his emotional life (Lahiri, 2008, p. 3). The narrative later reveals that her father has developed a private relationship with Mrs. Bagchi, a fact he does not

directly disclose to Ruma. His secrecy is therefore embedded in an otherwise affectionate family relationship. The story raises a question that extends throughout the collection: does intimacy require complete disclosure?

This question becomes especially important because silence and secrecy in Lahiri are not consistently destructive. They can produce distance, but they can also protect privacy, prevent immediate injury, or allow a character to maintain an identity that is not reducible to a family role. Recent sociological work similarly challenges the assumption that secrecy is simply the opposite of intimacy. Klesse and van Hooff (2025), for example, argue that secrecy can be constitutive of intimate practices rather than merely a failure of transparency. Earlier research by Vangelisti (1994) found that family secrets can serve functions including bonding, privacy, defense, maintenance, and communication management. These perspectives are particularly productive for interpreting Lahiri's characters.

The present study therefore moves beyond the broad claim that Lahiri represents "alienation" or "lack of communication." Instead, it asks what silence itself communicates. The central proposition is that Lahiri's families constitute "unspoken families": families in which emotional communication frequently takes indirect forms through gesture, memory, objects, action, avoidance, and selective disclosure.

The argument also responds to existing Lahiri scholarship. Bahri (2013) examines alienation and familiarity within family relationships; Rogobete (2016) emphasizes the conflicting emotions, attachment, resentment, and displacement shaping family life; Stoican (2013) examines memory and transcultural reconstruction; and Gámez-Fernández (2016) focuses on belonging, loss, and failed relationships in the Hema-Kaushik sequence. These studies establish the importance of family, memory, and displacement in *Unaccustomed Earth*. The present study adds a more specific question concerning the communicative function of what remains unsaid.

The study uses the Alfred A. Knopf 2008 edition of *Unaccustomed Earth* as its primary textual reference. Page numbers cited in this paper correspond to that 352-page edition. Readers using another edition should verify pagination before submission to a journal.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Family, diaspora and emotional distance

Bahri (2013) places family at the centre of Lahiri's fiction and argues that alienation and familiarity operate as mobile categories through which the emotional consequences of transnational migration can be understood. Rogobete (2016) similarly emphasizes the "complex web of feelings and resentments, longing and attachment" that constitutes family life in *Unaccustomed Earth*. These studies are important because they demonstrate that Lahiri's family relationships cannot be reduced to either intimacy or estrangement: the two conditions often coexist.

Akter (2014) discusses "*Unaccustomed Earth*" and "*Hell-Heaven*" in terms of distant ties and troubled bonds, emphasizing the transformation of family relations in trans-cultural contexts. Islam (2017) addresses gender, motherhood, cultural and generational conflict, marital tension, and lack of communication. These studies make communication a visible component of Lahiri's fiction, but the present paper differentiates between communication failure and meaningful silence. Silence may be a symptom of conflict, but it may also be a deliberate or semi-deliberate communicative practice.

2.2 Memory, place and transnational experience

Stoican (2013) reads the title story through communicative and cultural memory, showing how Ruma, her father, and Akash relate differently to the memory of the deceased mother. Filipczk (2019) examines space and place, distinguishing between the first generation's experience of movement and dislocation and the second generation's attempt to establish roots. Mianowski (2020) explores place and placelessness in the Hema-Kaushik sequence, while Gámez-Fernández (2016) examines the characters' pursuit of belonging, fulfilment, and interconnectedness. These studies help establish that silence in Lahiri is often spatial and temporal: what characters cannot say in one place may remain meaningful years later in another.

2.3 Gender and the politics of visibility

Islam (2017) identifies motherhood, subjugation, cultural conflict, and communication problems among the gendered concerns of *Unaccustomed Earth*. Pourya Asl, Abdullah, and Yaapar (2019) examine the gaze and visibility of migrant women, showing how gendered power structures shape looking and being looked at. Their analysis is relevant to silence because visibility and voice are related: characters who cannot easily articulate their needs may nevertheless express them through actions, withdrawal, or other indirect signs.

2.4 Secrecy and silence as communication

Communication scholarship provides a useful conceptual foundation for the present study. Acheson (2008) challenges the binary opposition between speech and silence and argues that silence can itself function as a gesture. Vangelisti (1994) identifies several functions of family secrets, including privacy, defense, bonding, and communication problems. Vangelisti, Caughlin, and Timmerman (2001) examine criteria for revealing family secrets and demonstrate that disclosure decisions are relational rather than automatic. Afifi, Olson, and Armstrong (2005) show that protection of self and others can motivate continued concealment. Bostwick and Johnson (2018) connect family communication patterns and conflict styles to disclosure between parents and young adult children. These findings are especially useful for interpreting Ruma and her father, Sudha and Rahul, and Kaushik and his father.

Fivush, McAnally, and Reese (2019) demonstrate how families preserve and rewrite history through what can and cannot be told. Their emphasis on intergenerational family stories is particularly relevant to Lahiri, where parents and children frequently possess different versions of the same past. Klesse and van Hooff (2025) further complicate the transparency model by arguing that secrecy can be constitutive of intimacy. The present study brings these insights into dialogue with literary close reading.

3. Research Gap

The scholarship reviewed above demonstrates that *Unaccustomed Earth* has been extensively examined in relation to diaspora, identity, family, gender, memory, place, and belonging. The collection has also been discussed in relation to secrecy and communication. Consequently, an argument that simply states that “silence causes alienation” would not provide a sufficiently distinctive contribution.

The research gap addressed here is narrower: the paper examines the different relational functions of silence and secrecy and distinguishes among protective silence, autonomy-preserving secrecy, conflict-producing concealment, and delayed communication. It also connects the content of silence to Lahiri’s narrative form. The reader, like the characters, often receives incomplete information and must interpret gestures, objects, memories, and omissions. Thus, the paper argues that Lahiri does not merely describe unspoken family relationships; she makes the reader experience their interpretive difficulty.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Simmel and the sociology of secrecy

Simmel’s classic essay “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies” argues that secrecy is embedded in social relationships because individuals inevitably control access to knowledge about themselves (Simmel, 1906). Secrecy can therefore produce both separation and connection. A secret establishes a boundary between those who know and those who do not know. Within families, this boundary can be especially significant because families often presume a high degree of mutual knowledge.

This framework allows the father in “*Unaccustomed Earth*” to be read not simply as dishonest. His relationship with Mrs. Bagchi belongs to a private domain of adulthood that exists beyond his role as Ruma’s father. The secret is simultaneously a source of distance and an assertion of individual autonomy.

4.2 Silence as gesture

Acheson (2008) argues that silence should not automatically be treated as a lack of speech. It can function as an embodied communicative gesture. This idea is particularly productive for literary analysis because narrative can make silence visible through pauses, gestures, spatial arrangements, omitted dialogue, and the reactions of other characters.

4.3 Family secrets and protective concealment

Vangelisti (1994) identifies privacy, defense, maintenance, bonding, and communication problems among the functions of family secrets. Afifi et al. (2005) similarly demonstrate that individuals may conceal information to protect themselves or others. These frameworks help avoid a moralistic reading of Lahiri's characters. A secret may be harmful, but the motivation behind it can still be protective.

4.4 Relational secrecy and intimacy

Recent work by Klesse and van Hooff (2025) challenges the assumption that intimate relationships require complete transparency. Their argument that secrecy can be part of intimate practice is useful for Lahiri because her characters frequently retain private emotional spaces even within loving relationships. The present study therefore treats secrecy as ambivalent rather than inherently good or bad.

5. Objectives

- To examine the representation of silence and secrecy in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*.
- To analyse the relationship between silence and emotional communication in selected stories.
- To examine how secrecy allows characters to negotiate family expectations and personal autonomy.
- To investigate how withheld information contributes to intimacy, misunderstanding, conflict, protection, and reconciliation.
- To examine how Lahiri's narrative technique makes readers interpret what remains unspoken.

6. Research Questions

- How does Lahiri represent silence as a form of communication?
- Why do characters conceal emotionally significant information from family members?
- Does secrecy always produce alienation, or can it also protect relationships and autonomy?
- How do generational and familial expectations shape disclosure and concealment?
- How does Lahiri's restrained narrative style make the reader an interpreter of unspoken communication?

7. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative textual-analysis methodology based on close reading. The primary source is Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2008). The analysis focuses on "Unaccustomed Earth," "A Choice of Accommodations," "Only Goodness," "Nobody's Business," "Hell-Heaven," "Once in a Lifetime," "Year's End," and "Going Ashore." Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly publications dealing with Lahiri, diaspora literature, family relationships, silence, secrecy, memory, and intimacy.

The analytical categories are: (1) protective silence, (2) autonomy-preserving secrecy, (3) conflict-producing concealment, (4) intergenerational silence, (5) material/embodied communication, and (6) delayed disclosure. Primary-text page references follow the Knopf 2008 edition. Because pagination differs across editions, these references should be checked against the physical or authorized digital copy used for final submission.

8. Analysis and Discussion

8.1 The title story: postcards, garden and private life

The opening of “Unaccustomed Earth” establishes a pattern of incomplete communication. After the death of Ruma’s mother, Ruma’s father begins travelling in Europe. Ruma keeps his flight information on the refrigerator and worries about his safety, while his postcards provide factual descriptions of places rather than an intimate account of his experience (Lahiri, 2008, pp. 3–4). The postcards therefore communicate information while withholding emotional presence. As Ranasinha (2015) observes, the postcards are part of Lahiri’s broader representation of family communication and migration.

The father’s communication is therefore simultaneously present and absent. He writes to Ruma, but his writing does not fully reveal him. The sign-off “Be happy, love Baba” provides affection without explaining his inner life (Lahiri, 2008, p. 4). The emotional economy of the story is established through this gap between factual communication and emotional disclosure.

The garden provides a different form of communication. When the father arrives in Seattle, he begins cultivating Ruma’s garden. The activity recalls the vegetable garden of the family’s earlier home and the work through which he once contributed to family life. Lahiri connects his earlier gardening with his ability to cultivate plants in unfriendly soil (Lahiri, 2008, p. 16). The new garden similarly becomes a language of care. The father does not make a formal declaration of affection; he plants, waters, and tends.

This is consistent with Acheson’s (2008) proposition that communication is not limited to speech. The garden is an embodied gesture. It allows the father to care for his daughter while avoiding direct emotional discussion. His silence is therefore not empty. It is materially expressed.

The father’s private relationship with Mrs. Bagchi introduces a second layer of secrecy. Ruma eventually discovers that he has been corresponding with Mrs. Bagchi and that he has a private emotional life outside the family. His postcard, written in Bengali and hidden inside a guidebook, becomes an especially important object of concealed communication (Lahiri, 2008, p. 50). Ruma later sends the postcard to Mrs. Bagchi, transforming a secret object into a completed communicative act (Lahiri, 2008, p. 59).

The postcard is therefore paradoxical: it is both hidden and communicative. It belongs to the father’s private world, yet it ultimately enables Ruma to acknowledge that world. The disclosure is indirect, but it changes Ruma’s understanding of her father.

Ruma’s own life is similarly marked by unspoken tension. She has moved from New York to Seattle with her husband and son and has become a stay-at-home mother. She initially understands her mother’s domestic life as a warning, yet she finds herself approaching a similar arrangement (Lahiri, 2008, pp. 36–37). Her statement that she is “working” through caring for two children reveals the difficulty of explaining domestic labour within a professionalized model of identity. The family therefore contains not only secrets but competing definitions of work, duty, and autonomy.

The story ultimately resists the assumption that disclosure is the only route to intimacy. Ruma’s father does not give her a complete account of his relationship with Mrs. Bagchi, yet Ruma’s decision to send the postcard suggests a form of acceptance. Their relationship remains incomplete but not necessarily broken. This is precisely the ambivalence that the present study identifies as characteristic of Lahiri’s unspoken family.

8.2 “Hell-Heaven”: emotional knowledge arrives late

“Hell-Heaven” provides an important example of how silence can obscure emotional suffering. Usha narrates her childhood relationship with her mother, Aparna, and with Pranab Chakraborty, a Bengali family friend. Aparna’s arranged marriage has left her emotionally isolated, while Pranab’s arrival temporarily changes the emotional atmosphere of the household. Pranab becomes part of the family’s everyday life, occupying the fourth chair at the kitchen table (Lahiri, 2008, p. 63).

The relationship between Aparna and Pranab is never fully articulated to the child narrator. Instead, Usha gradually reconstructs its emotional significance as an adult. She retrospectively understands that Pranab may have brought her mother a rare form of happiness (Lahiri, 2008, p. 67). The narrative therefore makes retrospective knowledge itself a form of delayed communication.

Aparna's suffering is expressed indirectly through objects and actions. After Pranab announces his marriage to Deborah, Usha discovers the broken teacup and bandaged hand (Lahiri, 2008, p. 71). The mother does not need to explain her pain; the object and bodily sign communicate it. Later, Usha recognizes how serious her mother's emotional crisis had been, including the suicide attempt that she had not understood as a child (Lahiri, 2008, pp. 81–82).

The story demonstrates that silence can protect a child from adult knowledge in the short term while producing incomplete understanding in the long term. Usha's adult narration becomes an act of reconstruction. The family's past is therefore communicated retrospectively rather than contemporaneously.

8.3 “Only Goodness”: secrecy, guilt and protective concealment

“Only Goodness” presents secrecy in a more destructive form. Sudha's relationship with her younger brother Rahul begins in intimacy, but her attempt to give him greater freedom contributes to his access to alcohol. Early in the story, Sudha and Rahul conceal beer from their parents, establishing secrecy as part of their sibling relationship (Lahiri, 2008, pp. 128–129).

Sudha subsequently becomes the dependable child in the family. Her parents rely on her for practical and linguistic mediation (Lahiri, 2008, p. 138). This responsibility contributes to her belief that she must manage Rahul's life. Her internal guilt is therefore connected to a broader family structure in which responsibility is unevenly distributed.

The family's difficulty in speaking openly about Rahul's alcoholism is intensified by cultural expectations of achievement. Other Bengali families view him as a failure, while his parents interpret his problems partly through American freedom and permissiveness (Lahiri, 2008, pp. 143, 151). The secret is therefore not only personal; it is socially produced by the fear of family shame.

Sudha repeats this pattern after marriage. She conceals the extent of Rahul's alcoholism from Roger, her husband. When Rahul later endangers her infant son, Roger realizes the seriousness of the information that had been withheld. He tells Sudha that he would not have kept such information from her (Lahiri, 2008, p. 171). The story closes with the family relationship cracked open (Lahiri, 2008, p. 173).

This episode illustrates the difference between protective and harmful secrecy. Sudha initially conceals information because she wants to protect Rahul and perhaps protect her new family from the burden of his problems. Yet concealment eventually becomes dangerous because Roger cannot make informed decisions about his own family. Afifi et al.'s (2005) finding that people conceal secrets to protect themselves or others is therefore particularly applicable, but Lahiri also demonstrates the limits of such protection.

The story's central tension is consequently not simply “communication versus silence.” It is the problem of determining when protection becomes concealment and when concealment becomes a threat to intimacy.

8.4 “A Choice of Accommodations”: marriage and emotional opacity

In “A Choice of Accommodations,” Lahiri shifts attention from parent-child relationships to marriage. Amit and Megan occupy the same social and physical environment, but their emotional relationship is burdened by unresolved dissatisfaction. Ranasinha (2015) notes that the story exposes class and relationship tensions through Amit's reflections on Megan and his social background. Amit recognizes that Megan might not have chosen someone from his privileged background were he not Indian (Lahiri, 2008, p. 95).

The story demonstrates that emotional silence can exist within physical intimacy. The couple's shared weekend does not automatically generate communication. Instead, memories, resentment, attraction, and disappointment remain layered beneath everyday interaction. The absence of an explicit confrontation becomes part of the story's meaning: the reader must infer the condition of the marriage from gestures and recollections.

This supports Acheson's (2008) argument that silence can function as a communicative gesture. What is not said between Amit and Megan becomes evidence of the relationship's unresolved emotional structure.

8.5 "Nobody's Business": privacy and the limits of knowing another person

"Nobody's Business" further complicates secrecy by asking how much one person can legitimately know about another. Sang's emotional and romantic life becomes an object of observation and interpretation. After she leaves Harvard, her parents react with silence: her mother locks herself in her bedroom while her father refuses to speak to her (Lahiri, 2008, p. 181). The family's silence is punitive as well as protective; it communicates disappointment without direct dialogue.

The title itself is significant because it establishes a boundary around private life. The story suggests that attempts to discover the truth about another person can become intrusive. Secrecy can therefore be an assertion of personal boundaries. This is consistent with Vangelisti's (1994) finding that privacy is one of the functions of family secrets.

The story also positions the reader as an observer who must interpret incomplete information. Lahiri therefore reproduces the epistemological uncertainty of intimate relationships: knowing someone well does not mean knowing everything about them.

8.6 "Once in a Lifetime": childhood silence and retrospective knowledge

The Hema-Kaushik sequence develops the connection between silence and memory. "Once in a Lifetime" is narrated retrospectively by Hema, who looks back on her childhood relationship with Kaushik and his family. The two families initially appear connected through shared Bengali-American experience, but differences gradually emerge.

The most important disclosure concerns Kaushik's mother's illness. The family does not immediately tell Hema the full reason for returning to Boston. Kaushik eventually reveals that his mother has terminal cancer. Ranasinha (2015) identifies this delayed disclosure as part of the collection's larger pattern of fragile families that conceal information as a means of support and love. The secrecy is therefore not simply deceptive; it protects the family from premature exposure of grief.

Gómez-Fernández (2016) interprets the Hema-Kaushik sequence through loss, belonging, and the characters' search for emotional fulfilment. The present reading adds that their inability to speak openly about illness and grief contributes to the relationship's emotional incompleteness. Hema's adult narration supplies knowledge that the child Hema did not possess at the time.

Silence therefore becomes temporal. The meaning of an earlier silence may only become available after years of reflection.

8.7 "Year's End": grief and the unspoken family

"Year's End" intensifies the problem of grief within a reorganized family. Kaushik returns to a household in which his father has remarried and now lives with Chitra and her daughters. His emotional resistance to the new family is closely connected to his inability to reconcile his father's new life with his own memory of his mother.

Ranasinha (2015) observes that Kaushik's relationship with the new family is characterized by emotional distance and that the collection repeatedly represents families that hide things from one another as a form of support or love. The story demonstrates that grief may produce silence because direct speech would force characters to confront incompatible emotional realities.

The daughters also become recipients of incomplete information. Their relationship with Kaushik is shaped by things they do not fully understand. The resulting silence is not simply interpersonal; it is intergenerational. Different family members occupy different positions in relation to the same loss.

Gómez-Fernández (2016) shows how the Hema-Kaushik sequence transforms a particular failed relationship into a broader meditation on belonging and loss. The present analysis suggests that the failure of communication is central to that transformation: the characters cannot fully share the emotional histories that define them.

8.8 “Going Ashore”: delayed intimacy and the limits of time

In “Going Ashore,” Hema and Kaushik meet again as adults in Rome. Their relationship is marked by the accumulation of years, previous loss, and unfinished emotional knowledge. The story’s setting outside both India and the United States reinforces the transnational movement already characteristic of the collection.

Mianowski (2020) interprets the Hema-Kaushik stories through place and placelessness, while Gámez-Fernández (2016) emphasizes the characters’ search for belonging and fulfilment. The present reading highlights another dimension: intimacy arrives after long periods of silence and separation. By the time Hema and Kaushik are able to approach one another emotionally, their lives have already been shaped by information withheld, grief unshared, and choices made independently.

The tragedy of the final story is therefore partly a tragedy of timing. Silence is not only a present condition; it accumulates across time. What is not communicated at one moment may become decisive later.

9. The Functions of Silence and Secrecy in Unaccustomed Earth

The close readings suggest six overlapping functions of silence and secrecy in Lahiri’s collection.

Function	Illustration	Primary effect
Protection	Father’s delayed disclosure; family concealment around illness	Reduces immediate emotional injury
Privacy/autonomy	Father’s relationship with Mrs. Bagchi	Preserves an independent adult identity
Conflict avoidance	Family responses to Rahul’s alcoholism	Temporarily maintains family stability
Emotional expression	Garden, objects, gestures, silence	Communicates feelings indirectly
Intergenerational filtering	Hema and Kaushik; Usha and her mother	Controls what children know and when
Delayed recognition	Adult narrators reinterpret childhood events	Creates retrospective emotional knowledge

The table demonstrates why a single moral interpretation of secrecy is inadequate. The same strategy can protect a relationship in one context and damage it in another. The decisive factor is not secrecy alone but its purpose, duration, relational consequences, and eventual disclosure.

10. Silence, Objects and Embodied Communication

One of Lahiri’s most distinctive techniques is to transfer emotional meaning from speech to objects and actions. The postcard in “Unaccustomed Earth,” the garden, the broken teacup in “Hell-Heaven,” family belongings in the Hema-Kaushik sequence, and domestic spaces throughout the collection frequently communicate what characters cannot or will not say.

The postcard is especially important because it contains a secret while simultaneously making communication possible. The father writes to Mrs. Bagchi in Bengali and hides the postcard in a guidebook (Lahiri, 2008, p. 50). Ruma later sends it, transforming private communication into acknowledged communication (p. 59).

The garden performs another form of embodied communication. It connects the father’s past with Ruma’s present. His gardening recalls the earlier family home and his wife, but his work in Ruma’s garden creates a new relationship with his daughter and grandson. The action therefore communicates across generations without requiring explicit discussion.

In “Hell-Heaven,” the broken teacup and bandaged hand communicate Aparna’s distress before the child narrator understands it (Lahiri, 2008, p. 71). Such objects function as emotional evidence. They permit the adult narrator and the reader to reconstruct meanings that were unavailable to the child at the time.

Lahiri therefore creates a material vocabulary of emotion. Objects become extensions of silence.

11. Silence and Gendered Emotional Labour

Silence in *Unaccustomed Earth* is also shaped by gender. Women frequently carry responsibility for maintaining family relationships, interpreting behaviour, mediating between generations, and absorbing emotional burdens. Sudha’s role in “Only Goodness” is particularly revealing. She becomes responsible for Rahul and is relied upon by her parents for practical assistance (Lahiri, 2008, p. 138).

Ruma similarly negotiates expectations surrounding motherhood, work, and domestic responsibility. Her recognition that she is reproducing aspects of her mother’s life is emotionally complicated (Lahiri, 2008, pp. 36–37). The inability to define domestic labour in simple terms contributes to a subtle form of communicative tension between her and her father.

Islam (2017) identifies motherhood, subjugation, gender identity, and communication problems in *Unaccustomed Earth*, while Pourya Asl et al. (2019) examine the gendered politics of looking and visibility. Together, these perspectives suggest that silence is not distributed evenly. Characters occupying different gendered positions have different capacities to speak, conceal, and be heard.

Lahiri’s women therefore frequently communicate through emotional labour. What they do for others becomes a form of speech. Yet this can also become a burden because the expectation that women will understand and manage others may discourage them from openly expressing their own needs.

12. The Reader as Interpreter of the Unspoken

The significance of silence extends beyond character relationships to Lahiri’s narrative technique. Readers are repeatedly given partial information and asked to infer what characters cannot articulate. This produces a formal correspondence between the story’s subject and its method.

In “*Unaccustomed Earth*,” the reader knows that the father’s postcards are emotionally incomplete before Ruma discovers his relationship with Mrs. Bagchi. In “*Hell-Heaven*,” adult Usha understands her mother’s suffering in ways that childhood Usha could not. In “*Only Goodness*,” the reader follows Sudha’s evolving understanding of Rahul and her own responsibility. In the Hema-Kaushik stories, later knowledge transforms earlier scenes.

The reader therefore occupies the same interpretive position as Lahiri’s characters. We see signs but must construct meanings. This narrative strategy is central to Lahiri’s understated style. It avoids dramatic exposition and instead builds emotional significance through accumulation.

The result is a form of narrative intimacy based on incomplete knowledge. The reader does not receive a complete psychological explanation of every character. Instead, meaning emerges through inference. Silence is thus both a thematic feature and a formal principle.

13. Findings

- Silence in *Unaccustomed Earth* is multifunctional; it can communicate affection, grief, uncertainty, resistance, privacy, and anger.
- Secrecy can preserve personal autonomy within family relationships, as demonstrated by Ruma’s father.
- Protective concealment can become harmful when it prevents other family members from making informed decisions, as in “*Only Goodness*.”

- Objects and actions frequently operate as substitutes for direct emotional speech.
- Intergenerational differences determine what characters believe should be disclosed and what should remain private.
- Lahiri's narrative form reproduces the interpretive difficulty of intimate relationships by giving readers incomplete information.
- The collection presents intimacy as compatible with partial knowledge rather than complete transparency.

14. Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* presents families in which love and distance frequently coexist. The characters are not silent because they have nothing to communicate. They are silent because emotional life is often too complex, too painful, too private, or too socially constrained to be expressed directly. Silence therefore becomes a language of its own.

The analysis demonstrates that secrecy in Lahiri should not be treated as uniformly destructive. Ruma's father's relationship with Mrs. Bagchi illustrates secrecy as a form of autonomy; the garden illustrates action as emotional communication; "Hell-Heaven" demonstrates delayed emotional knowledge; "Only Goodness" shows how protective concealment can become dangerous; and the Hema-Kaushik sequence demonstrates how silence accumulates across time and shapes later relationships.

The concept of the "unspoken family" therefore refers not to a family without communication but to a family in which communication frequently occurs indirectly. Lahiri's characters speak through postcards, gardens, objects, gestures, memories, absences, and withheld disclosures. This makes her fiction particularly suitable for an interdisciplinary reading that brings literary studies into dialogue with communication theory and the sociology of secrecy.

The paper's principal contribution is the distinction between silence as absence and silence as relational practice. Such a distinction makes it possible to recognize that silence may simultaneously protect and distance, preserve autonomy and obstruct understanding, or express care while concealing pain. Lahiri's achievement lies in sustaining these contradictions without resolving them into simple moral categories.

Ultimately, *Unaccustomed Earth* suggests that complete transparency is neither possible nor necessarily desirable in intimate life. Family members can love one another while retaining private territories. Yet the collection also shows that secrets have consequences. When concealment prevents mutual recognition or endangers another person, the private becomes relationally significant. Lahiri's unspoken families thus inhabit the difficult space between privacy and intimacy, where people must continually decide what to reveal, what to withhold, and what can only be communicated without words.

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