



The Theme of 'Reinventing America' in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth"

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Objective

The core objective of this paper is to exhibit that Jhumpa Lahiri's characters from the first five chapters of her **Unaccustomed Earth** reflect the American indigenes; nevertheless they are pertaining to Indian background.

INTRODUCTION:

Identity is a common theme in fiction, but it takes on a special charge in the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, because, in each story a character or family is caught between cultures, and often between generations. The result is an active and ongoing questioning as to whom each person is. What is more, a change in one person, or even in one person's understanding of another, changes the other characters here. This can be seen in *Unaccustomed Earth*. The eight stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* fall into two groups. The first five share only themes; the characters and settings are self-sufficient of one another. The last three can be read independently, but work well as they are designed: as a triptych telling the story of Hema and Kaushik. The first story focuses on their meeting as children; the second follows Kaushik when his father remarries; the third focuses on their gathering as adults.

The gap between India and America, or to a certain extent, between traditional India as it was, and America as it is coming to be, is brought gaudily to life. The result is a set of lovely and nearby stories that blend the cultural and the individual, the unusual and the conspicuously domestic.



The Theme of Reinventing America

The fact that America is still a place where the rest of the world comes to reinvent itself—accommodating with enthusiasm and apprehension the necessity of leaving behind the constrictions and comforts of distant customs—is the fundamental theme of Jhumpa Lahiri’s insightful new collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*. Lahiri delves deeply and richly into the lives of immigrants though the immigrants may be the stories’ protagonist, their doubts, insecurities, losses and heartbreaks belong to all of us. Never before has Lahiri mined so perfectly the secrets of the human heart. In part, Lahiri’s gift to the reader is beautiful prose that bestows greatness on life’s routine events and activities. But it is her study of lost love and lost loved ones that give her stories an emotional accuracy few writers could ever hope to match.

Lahiri’s fiction delves deep into the universal theme of separation. Lahiri is a verdant writer bringing to life worlds through a pile-up of detail. But somehow all that richness electrifyingly evokes the void. It’s usual when reviewing short story collections to adopt a structure. The title of the story always gets a ritual nod, followed by a run-down of which stories are the strongest, which have just been included for filler. *Unaccustomed Earth* certainly makes a gift to the literature of immigration, but it also takes its rightful place with modernist tales from whatever culture in which characters find them predestined to try and fail to only connect.

Each of the five stories in the book’s first section is self-contained. In “*Hell-Heaven*,” the assimilated Bengali-American narrator considers how little thought she once gave to her mother’s sacrifices as she reconstructs the worrying, unrequited passion her young mother had for a graduate student during the narrator’s childhood. In “*Only Goodness*,” an older sister learns a sharp lesson about the limits of her responsibility to a self-destructive younger brother. “*A Choice of Accommodations*” shows a shift in power dynamics between a Bengali-American husband and his workaholic Anglo wife during a weekend away from their kids — at the wedding of the husband’s prep-school defeat. And the American graduate student at the center of “*Nobody’s Business*” pines for his Bengali-American roommate, a graduate-school dropout who entertains no romantic feelings for him, spurns the polite advances of “prospective grooms” from the global Bengali singles circuit and considers herself occupied to a selfish, foul-tempered Egyptian historian.



In the title story, Ruma, a Bengali-American lawyer, repeats her mother's life pattern when she gives up her job and follows her husband to a distant city as they await the birth of their second child.

"Growing up, her mother's example — moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household — had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now."

The nurturing force field of pregnancy shields Ruma from the sting this reflection might be expected to provoke, but it doesn't protect her widowed father. When he visits her in Seattle from his condo in Pennsylvania, he asks her a very American question:

"Will this make you happy?" Urging Ruma not to isolate herself, to look for work, he reminds her that self-reliance is important".

Thinking back on his wife's despondency in the early years of their marriage, he realizes that he had always tacitly Ruma's life would be different. But if his daughter chooses a life in Seattle that she could have led in Calcutta, who's to say this isn't evidence of another kind of freedom? Ruma is struck by how much her father: *"resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere."*

Seeing his daughter, Ruma's father has the opposite reaction: *"She now resembled his wife so strongly that he could not bear to look at her directly."* Ruma's character, as Lahiri suggests, is affected less by her coordinates on the globe than by the internal indices of her will. She is a creature of the American soil, but she carries her own poignant bearings within her. What are the real possibilities for change attached to a move? Lahiri seems to ask what the limits are.

Lahiri's final three stories, grouped together as *"Hema and Kaushik,"* explore the overlapping histories of the title characters, a girl and boy from two Bengali immigrant families, set during major moments of their lives. *"Once in a Lifetime"* begins in 1974, the year Kaushik Choudhuri and his parents leave Cambridge and return to India. Seven years later, when the Choudhuris return to



Massachusetts, Hema's parents are baffled to find that "*Bombay had made them more American than Cambridge had.*" The next story, "*Year's End,*" visits Kaushik during his senior year at Swarthmore as he wrestles with the news of his father's remarriage and meets his father's new wife and stepdaughters. The final story, "*Going Ashore,*" begins with Hema, now a Latin professor at Wellesley, spending a few months in Rome before entering into an arranged marriage with a parent-approved Hindu Punjabi man named Navin. Hema likes Navin's traditionalism and respect: "*It touched her to be treated, at 37, like a teenage girl.*"

Except for their names, "Hema and Kaushik" could evoke any American's '70s childhood, any American's bittersweet receipt of the compromises of adulthood. The generational conflicts Lahiri depicts cut across national lines; the waves of admiration, competition and criticism that flow between the two families could occur between Smiths and Taylors in any inhabited town; and the fight for connection and control between Hema and Kaushik — as children and as adults — replace the struggle that has gone on ever since men and women lived in caves.

Conclusion

All stories center on members of Bengali families dealing with England or America. All are richly detailed, painting portraits of the complexity of these families' lives; all deal with making and remaking lives, loves, and identities in the wake of essential disruptions. It is the fact that America is still a place where the rest of the world comes to reinvent itself—accommodating with excitement and anxiety of the necessity of leaving behind the constrictions and comforts of distant customs—is the underlying theme of Jhumpa Lahiri's insightful new collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*. . Lahiri's epigraph from 'The Custom-House,' by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is an appropriate and rich metaphor for the transformations. Lahiri oversees in these pages, in which two generations of Bengali immigrants to America—the newcomers and their hyphenated children—struggle to build normal, secure lives. Lahiri handles her characters without leaving any fingerprints. She allows them to grow as if untraced, as if she were associated them rather than training them through the espalier of her narration. Reading her stories is like watching time-lapse nature videos of different plants, each with



its own inherent growth cycle, breaking through the soil, spreading into bloom or collapsing back to earth.

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