

IDENTITY CRISIS COUNTRY IN THE *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH* BY JUMPHA LAHRI

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Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* explores the complexities of identity and the struggles of second-generation immigrants in a multicultural world. Set against the backdrop of diasporic experiences, the stories examine the intergenerational tensions and cultural dissonance faced by Bengali families settled in the United States. Lahiri delves into the characters' identity crises, as they grapple with balancing traditional values from their Indian heritage and the Western ideals of individuality and freedom. Themes of alienation, belonging, and self-discovery are interwoven throughout the narratives, highlighting how the characters navigate their dual identities. The stories underscore the emotional toll of displacement, familial expectations, and the search for personal meaning in an unfamiliar cultural landscape. Lahiri's nuanced portrayal of identity crises emphasizes the profound effects of immigration on individual and collective identity, presenting a poignant exploration of cultural hybridity and the human desire for connection.

Through intimate storytelling and richly developed characters, *Unaccustomed Earth* becomes a microcosm of the broader immigrant experience, offering insight into the challenges and triumphs of forging a multifaceted identity in a globalized world. Lahiri ultimately illustrates that the journey of self-definition is universal, transcending cultural boundaries, while being deeply rooted in the unique context of diasporic lives.

Keywords: alienation, cultural hybridity, diaspora, Identity crisis, second-generation immigrants, self-discovery etc.

Introduction: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* delves into the intricacies of identity, belonging, and cultural displacement experienced by Indian immigrants and their descendants in the diaspora. Set against the backdrop of a transnational existence, the collection of stories explores the psychological and emotional struggles that arise when individuals are caught between the cultural values of their homeland and the norms of their adopted countries. The theme of identity crisis is a recurrent undercurrent in the lives of Lahiri's characters, as they grapple with questions of cultural heritage, generational differences, and personal aspirations.

Lahiri's portrayal of identity crisis is deeply rooted in the complex intersections of ethnicity, gender, and familial expectations. Through her nuanced storytelling, she captures the subtle tensions between the first-generation immigrants, who cling to their traditional roots, and the second-generation characters, who often struggle to reconcile their hybrid identities. The title story, *Unaccustomed Earth*, epitomizes this struggle, depicting characters who navigate fragmented identities while striving for a sense of belonging in an alien landscape.

In the title story, "*Unaccustomed Earth*," the main character Ruma is a 38-year-old woman who feels both physically and culturally displaced. She cares for her toddler son Akash

while hosting her widowed father. During his visit, Ruma's sense of cultural and personal identity becomes more complex, resulting in feelings of alienation. The story reveals Ruma's emotional connection to her heritage as she contends with the inherited sense of exile and grief that her parents experienced. Her mother's passing left her feeling unprepared for life without her, while her father, by contrast, seems to adapt with ease.

Ruma's relationship with her father is strained, in contrast to her close bond with her late mother, a traditional Bengali woman. Despite her parents' initial objections, Ruma married Adam, her American boyfriend, a decision that highlights her attempts to mitigate her feelings of alienation. However, she finds herself still reeling from her mother's death, while her father remains relatively unaffected. Her own inclination towards solitude and isolation contrasts with her father's newfound social pursuits, and a discovery of a letter intended for his girlfriend, Mrs. Bagchi, forces Ruma to reassess their relationship. She grieves her mother's absence and realizes that she must stop intervening in her father's life.

This story illuminates the challenges of intergenerational relationships from a migrant perspective. As a second-generation immigrant, Ruma embodies the typical signs of cultural integration and growing detachment from her Bengali roots, a shift her father observed as she grew up. While she distances herself from her cultural heritage, she remains aware of certain emotional and cultural losses. Even Adam, her affluent American husband, cannot offer the solace she needs. Ruma perceives a disconnect, feeling that "she and Adam were separate people leading separate lives.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri weaves a tapestry of imagery, metaphors, characters, and interlinked experiences that portray deep-seated alienation and discontent. Her use of race as a marker of identity highlights how estrangement and cultural displacement shape South Asian American identity. While Lahiri doesn't explicitly tackle race, her narratives reflect how rapid modern social shifts disrupt simplicity in life and economy. Though her early works focus on Bengali immigrants in America, *Unaccustomed Earth* broadens this scope to include characters who relocate within America and even venture to London, Italy, and other global destinations. Lahiri continues to explore the cultural dissonances, alienation, and inner conflict experienced by immigrants straddling Indian heritage and the unfamiliar customs of their adopted countries. In a world that has grown increasingly interconnected, Lahiri's examination of isolation and identity feels even more pertinent. Her novels depict protagonists struggling with alienation from themselves, society, and others, capturing the modern human condition.

The theme of gardening reinforces this idea throughout the story. Ruma's father, a passionate gardener, revives the neglected garden at her home, planting flowers that were favorites of Ruma's mother. Through this act, he honors past relationships while creating new connections in the unfamiliar environment of *Unaccustomed Earth*.

In the words of Juhari and Agrawal: Until "*Unaccustomed Earth*", Jhumpa Lahiri's concerns were confined for the most part of the Indian immigrant parents to America and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. She wrote about how the parents struggle to keep their children close to them even after they have grown up in Indian tradition of joint family. In this story she steps forward to scrutinize the fate of the second generation and their children. (23). Sravani Biswas points out: Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* reveals a yawning gap between two generations. If pain of alienation and an acute consciousness of it glorify and enrich experience on this earth, then Lahiri's quotation from Hawthorn's "*the custom- House*" is an appropriate prologue.... There is a wish for children to strike their roots into unaccustomed earth, but the hope of their fortunes remains within the control of the parents is a far cry. (136-143) misses his native

people and food a lot, is not the only person who got benefited from his regular visits to Usha's house. Aparna, Usha's mother, too took a liking for the young man and his visits to their apartment. He brought a new lease of life to her as both of them have many things in common. Friendships or familiarities continue only when the wavelength of the people concerned are nearly the same. Usha's father married only to console and pacify or rather placate his parents: "*He has wedded to his wife, his research, and existed in a shell.*" (65)

Therefore, Aparna tried to fill the emotional gap in the endearing companionship of pranab. Cooking delicacies for him, changing into a new sari, anticipating Pranab's arrival substantiates her eagerness and interest in him. "He brought it to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt. I don't think only pure happiness she ever felt. I don't think even my birth made her so happy." (67)

Lahiri's characters navigate cross-cultural Indian American values, utilizing their roles as mothers to improve their own lives and those around them. Indian women, generally sociable and adaptable, engage with people of all backgrounds, yet in Western society, they are often perceived as outwardly powerless. Lahiri, however, illustrates their adaptability in daily life. Unlike others who may be overly assimilative, characters like Ashima in *The Namesake* and Ruma in *Unaccustomed Earth* reveal nuanced forms of resilience and cultural negotiation. Ruma, a former lawyer and Bengali American woman is a stay-at-home mom expecting her second child at the start of her story. In a sense, she mothers not only her son, Akash but also her newly widowed father, navigating both physical and cultural caretaking. Reflecting on her own mother's dedication, Ruma recalls her mother's response to traditional expectations, as she would hold dinner until late for her husband: "Go ahead and eat," Ruma would say, but her mother, trained all her life to serve her husband first, would never consider such a thing" (16)

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, she navigates the complex identities of first-generation immigrants, illustrating how characters like Ruma face layered cultural and gendered expectations. Ruma's role as both a daughter and the eldest child brings additional pressures, especially compared to her brother Romi, who is physically distant and seemingly free from familial obligations. Lahiri uses this sibling contrast to highlight the differing cultural expectations based on gender, emphasizing that, unlike Romi, Ruma feels the weight of traditional caregiving responsibilities.

This conflict is further complicated by Ruma's internal struggle between American values of independence and Indian values of familial duty. As scholar Akhter notes, "Asian American 'success' seems to favour men who are not necessarily expected to care for elderly parents, while for second-generation South Asian women, traditional caregiving expectations are embedded in female happiness, social success, and familial obligations" (181). Ruma's awareness of her father's self-sufficiency ironically intensifies her guilt, as Lahiri writes, "In India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her" (6). This moment captures Ruma's dual loyalties and highlights how, for her, gender influences the diasporic identity she must reconcile.

The generational divide between immigrant parents and their children becomes evident through the parents' limited understanding of the unique hardships their children encounter. Lahiri notes that "her parents had always been blind to the things that plagued their children: being teased at school for the color of their skin or for the funny things their mother occasionally put in their lunch boxes. What could there possibly be to be unhappy about? 'Depression' was a foreign word to them, an American thing". This difference in perspective creates tension in the family, especially when Rahul begins to struggle with alcoholism. His parents, unable to comprehend his difficulties,

dismiss his issues, reasoning that he hasn't endured the same adversities they did as immigrants. Sudha reflects on her father's refusal to acknowledge Rahul's problem, as well as her mother's tendency to blame American culture, demonstrating the family's inability to bridge this gap in understanding. Unlike her parents, Sudha grasps the nature of Rahul's struggle with alcohol, having been raised with American perspectives on mental health and addiction.

Unaccustomed Earth profoundly captures the psychological struggle faced by Indians living abroad, portraying a deep craving for the cultural richness and heritage of India—something that, though longed for, remains elusive. Lahiri's Indian-origin characters oscillate between alienation and assimilation, torn between the country they left behind and the foreign lands they inhabit. Even those who consider returning to India, often after retirement, find no assured happiness, which intensifies the internal conflict of Jhumpa Lahiri's characters as they look back to India for a simpler, more familiar life. Lahiri's stories evoke this sense of ambivalence, which echoes Nathaniel Hawthorne's sentiment in *The Scarlet Letter*: "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato; if planted and replanted for too long a series of generations in the same worn-out soil." Like Hawthorne's ideal, Lahiri's characters seem fated to establish their roots in "unaccustomed earth." Yet, this ideal is far from easy to achieve. Lahiri's protagonists, who distance themselves from their homeland for personal, professional, or family reasons, find themselves unable to fully embrace their new environment or abandon their heritage, remaining conscious of their cultural roots. In this way, her stories resonate with autobiographical elements, portraying characters caught between their Bengali heritage and the demands of their present circumstances.

The themes of alienation and assimilation are deeply explored in this story, the two concepts presented as two sides of a coin. Snow becomes a symbol of alienation, particularly at a farewell party that recalls the Chaudhuris' departure from America seven years ago. Lahiri's narrative links snow with the family's emotional estrangement, which culminates before their move to a new house and the impending death of Mrs. Chaudhuri. In this story, Lahiri illustrates the constant relocation of the Chaudhuri family, reflecting her own diasporic experience and the challenges of cultural duality. The story unfolds in continuity, eventually transitioning to Part Two, where we learn Kaushik's father has remarried a widow with two daughters.

Conclusion:

Lahiri's nuanced portrayal of identity crises in *Unaccustomed Earth* underscores the challenges faced by immigrant families in preserving their cultural identity while integrating into a new society. For first-generation immigrants, the conflict arises from the need to adapt without losing their roots. For their children, the challenge is reconciling inherited traditions with the values of the dominant culture they inhabit. This duality often results in a fragmented sense of self, a theme Lahiri brings to life through deeply personal narratives. Through her characters' experiences, Lahiri illustrates that identity is not static but fluid, evolving as individuals interact with their environments and navigate personal and societal expectations. The resolution of these crises lies not in the erasure of one identity for another but in the reconciliation of both, creating a hybrid identity that allows for the coexistence of multiple cultural influences. Ultimately, Lahiri advocates for embracing complexity and hybridity as a path to self-acceptance and harmony.

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