

Unaccustomed earth book review

[Environment](#), [Earth](#)



Jhumpa Lahiri plays upon and wrote about the most vital human emotions: life, death, self discovery and love and in doing so, Lahiri wrote a truly unforgettable novel that examines the life of a family over several generations. *Unaccustomed Earth* is divided up into eight stories and as each story unfolds they reveal layers of life and culture in their context. Somewhere buried beneath the Bengali family's wild displays of emotions and cries for attention there's a story about finding acceptance and moving on and looking past the rooted cultural boundaries.

Along with the theme of acceptance the book also has an overflowing theme finding one's self, not just spiritually but accepting one's identity in a new land. All these characters possess a desire, an urge to discover themselves, even in the most unorthodox mannerisms and the discovery happens over time and generations. While *Unaccustomed Earth* runs rapid with themes of culture, the book takes the reader to a time where America represented somewhere where communities were active and tightly bonded, a time where one could build a new identity and explore freedom.

With that freedom, each story has a character or family member torn between their culture and new chances America can offer. The characters face a turmoil of acceptance between their old heritage and trying to conform to norms of a western civilization. Early on the reader sees that Ruma (a lawyer) is starting to become a mirror image of her mother taking the path she once did in her homeland, " Growing up... 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" (11). While there is freedom in her choice to follow her husband and be a house wife, Lahiri metaphorically tells the reader through this passage that while America offers freedom, it's not necessary to make drastic changes but to be true to one's own self. In that same page the metaphor is explored deeper when Ruma sees her father in a different light, " He was wearing a baseball cap that said POMPEII, brown cotton pants and sky-blue polo shirt, and a pair of white leather sneakers.

She was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American" (11). From this the reader can sense the parallels from the generations, on one hand there's the foreigner consuming American so much he resembles it, and on the other an American born citizen reverting to a life she could have had in Calcutta. Overall the message become apparent that one's identity is not defined by a geographical location but by one's free will and is not limited by heritage and cultural stereotypes.

Lahiri seems to often play with the notion of gender roles. At the forefront Ruma's decision to abandon her career and opt to be a homemaker is met with much displeasure from her father, as he seems to meet this decision with the initial thought that America was supposed to bring new ideologies, he envisioned a different life for his daughter. There is a strong urging from Ruma's father to get back into legal work and make the best of her life, " Now is the time for you to be working, building your career" (36).

Ruma's father only wishes to see his daughter happy and successful and not reliant on a man. With gender roles we see Ruma's Indian heritage come in to play as she feels due to her heritage she has a prime role in taking care of her father and have him live with her. In much of the story we see Ruma

often trying to find her cultural identity balancing being a mother and her once promising job. While her father often appears discontent with the traditional lifestyle he was raised in, Ruma eventually finds freedom in her lifestyle choice.

The reader can further see gender roles come in to play with Lahiri writes Hell-Heaven we see the narrator showing regret for the unappreciative nature they had towards the hard working mother and her sacrifices. Despite gender roles the future is often unclear for most characters and there is always insecurity no matter what situation arises, “ Even as an adult, she wished only that she could go back and change things: the ungainly things she’d worn, the insecurity she’d felt, all the innocent mistakes she made” (137).

Lahiri explores the aspect of death and the Indian culture that surrounds it throughout much of the novel. Whenever there is a death in Unaccustomed Earth it seems to bond the family closer together and bridge the generation gaps. Universally death is in every culture and it becomes apparent that no matter what continent someone is from one can not escape their fate, “ There were times Ruma felt closer to her mother in death than she had in life, an intimacy born simply of thinking of her so often, of missing her.

But she knew that this was an illusion, a mirage, and that the distance between them was now infinite, unyielding” (27). There is a commemoration that happens that bonds the whole family together and they must rework and an alteration occurs as they recover as a unit. Yet, although death is ever luminous upon humanity the Bengali families seem to take with a grain of salt, “ The knowledge of death seemed present in both sisters-it was

something about the way they carried themselves, something that had broken too soon and had not mended, marking them in spite of their lightheartedness” (272).

Unaccustomed Earth seems to present death the way Bengali's are influenced by the Muslim and Hindu influence it has in the region. Overall Unaccustomed Earth is a great representation of Bengali culture and to show just how diverse the families are. While there are universal and cultural themes throughout the novel, all eight stories share a common theme: identity.

Without identity there wouldn't be Bengali or Native American, it's one's identity that makes them what they are, it's their soul encompassed in relation to who they are, the philosophical thought in relation to gender, culture, and ethnicity. All the Bengali families deal with life and finding a place in their situation or country to try to fit in, to try to belong. From Seattle to Thailand these stories tell a heartwarming account of what makes us human. Works Cited Lahiri, Jhumpa. Unaccustomed earth. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Print.