

Cultural identity:
connecting to the
indian roots in
jhumpa lahiri's
"unaccustome..."



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In the story "Unaccustomed Earth" by Jhumpa Lahiri, the main character Ruma and her son Akash, are visited in Seattle by her father. Her husband, Adam, "would be away that week, on another business trip" (5). Ruma and her father's relationship is presented as a less close one than the one she had with her mother, who was very helpful and active in her communication with Ruma while with the father, "[she] had never spent a week alone" (6). The father has been traveling in Europe since his wife's death and his relationship with Ruma weakened as after the mother's death, Ruma assumed the duty of calling her father and "[T]he calls were less frequent now" (4). Throughout the visit, the story explores the issues that Ruma and her father face in communicating with each other while struggling with their cultural identities. As many researchers argue that Ruma is an Americanized character, it is interesting to discuss the possibility of Ruma expressing a connection to the culture she learned about from her Bengali parents. Therefore, while it appears in the story that Ruma is more connected to her American identity. As such we may ask if it is possible to argue that she is also connected to her Indian roots? Yes, as this essay argues that Ruma is connected to the Indian culture.

American Identity

For a start, before presenting the Indian culture in Ruma's identity, it is important to observe how she adapted to the cultural traditions of the country where she grew up. As many analyses of *Unaccustomed Earth* observed, Ruma is Americanized because she grew up and lives in America, her life went a different path from the one her Indian parents had - she traveled in Europe with friends when she was young, applied to the top

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universities, dedicated most of her life to career – working “ fifty-hour weeks for years” (36), and married Adam who isn’t Indian despite her mother “ saying that he would divorce her, that in the end, he would want an American girl” (26). In addition, according to Ruma’s American lifestyle, she also prefers American common clothing style such as “ pants and skirts” (17), rather than her mother’s saris and used to insist on working in the summers at jobs that many American teenagers work at regularly, which “ her relatives in India would have found disgraceful” (40). Thus, representing Americanization as a “ culture of individualism as opposed to traditional Bengali culture of interdependence, familial protection, and attachment” (Akhter 102). From the examples above, it appears that Ruma’s cultural identity has fully adapted to the culture into which she grew outside of her family. However, this essay will show that Ruma is connected to her Indian roots and not only American.

Parenting and motherhood

Firstly, Ruma’s connection to the Indian culture is seen through the theme of parenting in the story, as in Ruma’s relationship with her parents and her child the Indian culture is being expressed. The story is focused on the father visiting Ruma and their present relationship while exploring their relationships as with the deceased mother in the past as well. The origin of the connection to the Indian culture is “[the] shadows of Bengal [that] fall on... characters’ lives mostly through their parents’ generation” (Akhter 99), as they are who taught her of it. It appears that even though Ruma is happy with her new life in Seattle according to when she and Adam saw the house it “ was impossible to resist” (2008), she gets very emotional when her <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-identity-connecting-to-the-indian-roots-in-jhumpa-lahiris-unaccustomed-earth/>

father mentions selling the house in which she grew up, “ when she pictured that house in her mind, her mother was always alive in it, impossible to see” (46), thus showing that Ruma has a strong emotional connecting to the family surroundings in which she grew up, which even though was located in America, was functioning according to Indian culture where they spoke Indian and ate Indian food. Thus, expressing an opening to the possibility of the culture still being present in her identity.

Another aspect in Ruma’s relationship with her parents that presents a connection to Indian culture is that throughout the whole story Ruma’s parents’ names aren’t mentioned as they are only referred to by their roles in Ruma’s life – mother and father. The omission of the parents’ names represents how in Ruma’s point of view on which the story mostly focalized, Ruma as the daughter of immigrants who taught her of Indian traditions, struggles to see her parents’ true personalities outside of their role as Bengali parents. The story presents Bengali traditions as a culture where parents’ self-expression is limited by their responsibilities to their family. As the mother whom Ruma remembers as a very traditional Indian woman has dedicated her life to taking care of her husband and children. For instance, “ her mother, trained all her life to serve her husband first, [and] would never consider such a thing” (16) as eating dinner without him. This way while the “ husband is outside the home... she strives to preserve her household’s Indian identity” (Alfonso-Forero 834). In addition, the story describes the mother through Ruma’s point of view that presents her Bengali appearance which “ would have stuck out in this wet Northern landscape” (11). Thus, by viewing the mother only through her traditional identity and as a mother, her

subjective identity outside of these roles of which she was trained from a young age in India is omitted and is absent from Ruma's view.

Similarly, the father's personality outside of his role as the father is omitted from Ruma's point of view when the story focalizes on her point of view, expressing a Bengali traditional view of the father. As the father isn't expected to help around like the mother who would have been helpful around the house, unlike the father who at the while behaved "as if he were waiting for the time to pass" (6). Thus, representing the Indian expectation of the Mother to take care of the family while the father being the one who works hard outside of the home sphere, that is shown through Ruma's point of view. Moreover, when the father started to live alone, Ruma "could not picture his surroundings when they spoke on the phone" (6) which emphasizes her not being able to see her father outside of the family structure without the mother and the house in which she grew up, but as an individual. Meaning, Ruma has difficulty seeing her family members outside of their Bengali family identity, thus in contrast to the Americanized view which prioritizes the individual.

Accordingly, to Ruma's relations to her parents, her bicultural identity is evident in the sphere of motherhood as her life transforms around the way she cares for Akash and the upcoming child. Because of Ruma growing up with a mother who is very connected to her Indian identity, while living in America, Ruma finds a connection to the motherhood style that her mother had when she was a child. At first, when Ruma became a mother she "negotiated a part-time schedule at her law firm...[which] seemed like the perfect balance" (5), which is more of an American kind of motherhood that <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-identity-connecting-to-the-indian-roots-in-jhumpa-lahiris-unaccustomed-earth/>

presents individualistic reliance on one's self rather focusing on the family, as her Indian mother would have been more supportive of her staying at home (36). However, after the mother's death, Ruma moves to a new place and quits her job to stay with her son at home while the only provider is her husband. Since going to work after the mother's death "felt ridiculous to her, and all she wanted was to stay home with Akash" (5). This reminds of her mother's style of living which included "moving to a foreign place... caring exclusively for children and household" (11). While her father was most of the day outside - working and gardening. This way of living represents a "division between... the home, an inherently spiritual and female space - and ... the outside world, which is inherently male and dominated by material pursuits - determines not only the division of labor in terms of how the Indian home is run, but more importantly, it positions woman as the guardians and propagators of Indian culture" (Alfonso-Forero 853-854). Thus, Ruma deciding to dedicate herself to the household and the role of a mother is a way of connecting to her Indian identity.

Bengali Traditions

Another aspect in which Ruma can be observed connecting to her Indian heritage is by inviting her father to move in with her. It is an Indian tradition for parents to move in with their children when they get old. Ruma on the one hand is aware that "in India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her" (6), while she fears that her father will become her responsibility and she wouldn't be able to care for him like her mother did, which would be "an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child" (7). She is preferring the American
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cultural preference to a nuclear type of family and here “ her individualistic American self comes into conflict with her inherited knowledge that as a Bengali child, she is expected to tell her father to come and live with her” (Akhter, 104). However, Ruma acknowledges the Bengali traditions and still tries to follow them which presents a connection to the Indian culture.

In addition, Ruma’s father struggles with the same conflict as Ruma as he throughout his life he followed Indian lifestyle accordingly to his wife. When the mother was alive, they used to travel to India to visit their family, the father recalls that these trips were always “ epic” and he used to live for these trips as much as his wife while his parents were still alive (8). However, these trips have provoked anxiety and shame in him each time he returned to his homeland. These ambivalent feelings represent how the father was connected to his Indian roots. However, they concealed his true self which enjoyed much more traveling Europe alone (7). But after his wife’s death, nothing held him back from expressing himself and while he bounded to his wife’s traditions in the past he “ never appreciated the staggering breadth of his adopted land” (7). This shows that the Indian traditions which his wife cared for, prevented the father from connecting to American culture.

Evidently, Ruma and her father’s conflict with the Indian traditions that violate the order in their lives presents their connection to the Indian culture as a space which will prevent them from growing, for example as the father tells Ruma to find a job because “ Self-reliance is important” (38) which is a quality that is more estimated in the American culture rather than in the Indian. Which also shows how the father loses connection with the Indian culture and searches for self-reliance through his independence that he

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lately acquired that won't be possible by living with Ruma. As a result, America and its traditions which was considered an "adopted land" (7) for the immigrant family actually represents for Ruma and her father ways of living that they consider more suitable for them that will not evoke anxiety in them as a result of a connection that apparently isn't always suitable for them. A reading of this story in geological terms "suggests that humans may initially, indeed, be unaccustomed to the earth, but flourish in unpredictable ways in new soil over time" (Wutz 256), meaning that by accepting their connection to both of their identities, Ruma and her father can flourish in their new way of living.

Another Indian immigrant tradition which appears in Ruma's identity is knowing the Language of her cultural roots. As "first generation Bengalis like Ruma's parents attach great importance to retaining the Bengali language" (Akhter 105), as Ruma's mother has been strict about it and "Ruma had never spoken to her in English" (12). Ruma has as well tried to teach her son Akash Bengali as well but "by now Akash had forgotten the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when he was little" (12). Even though the language had started to slip from Ruma and her son, she did put effort into teaching him some of it and it worries her as it is mentioned that this "was the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life" (12). This shows that Ruma still connects to her parents' language even when her American lifestyle makes it difficult to preserve some of its parts.

Cultural Culinary

Secondly, another cultural sphere through which Ruma's Bengali identity can be observed is the discussion of food in the story - its preparation and eating habits. As Laura Anh Williams states, scenes of cooking and eating develop character's identities when " food as [a] metaphor frequently constructs and reflects relationships to racialized subjectivity and also addresses issues of authenticity, assimilation, and desire" (Williams 70). Williams shows that in Lahiri's works showing " food preparation becomes a way Mrs. Sen can construct her own identity" (73). In a similar way, Ruma's cooking constructs a reflection of her cultural identity by showing that for her husband who is American (26), she " could do away with making dal or served salad instead of a chrochori" (22). Ruma's lazy attitude towards persisting on cooking Indian food shows how much Ruma is connected to her American identity as she doesn't preserve the same cooking habits from her mother who always cooked Indian meals and rather cook simpler, lacking cultural connection meals, such as when her son Akash "[refuses] to eat anything other than macaroni and cheese for dinner" (23). However, the fact that she still has at home supplies of Indian food and from time to time attempts at cooking the meals her mother used to, shows a connection to the Indian roots.

The theme of food is also seen as an evidence to Ruma's connection to her parents' cultural roots through her eating " with her fingers, as her father did" (22) and now as her son Akash saw them do it he wants to eat with his fingers as well, however, Ruma haven't taught him how to. In addition, Ruma used to try to get Akash used to Indian food according to " her mother's advice to get him used to the taste of Indian food and made the effort to poach chicken and vegetables with cinnamon and cardamom and clove" (23)

thus presenting how “ food preparation is linked [to]... ethnic identity and... the ability to forge a connection with others” (Williams 74). Which connects Ruma to her Bengali roots through trying to expose her son to similar culture in which she grew herself and now it creates a connection between Akash and his grandfather.

Connecting to the Roots

As Ruma appears to be Americanized, it is the struggle of a child of immigrants to try and fit in the country where she grows up while still being affected by the culture that her identity in Unaccustomed Earth presents. As she cannot be fully American, she as well has a connection to the Indian identity which makes her an Indian-American. The Discourse of an Indian-American identity is a common subject in Lahiri’s works as they represent her own experience of growing up in America with Indian parents. Lahiri has said that “[she] felt pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new” (Lahiri 43), meaning staying connected to her Indian roots but also adopting the American culture. Thus, according to her own experience, a similar appearance of a feeling is present in Unaccustomed Earth by Ruma’s character.

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