
Transnational Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* offers a sensitive portrayal of transnational identity as experienced by Indian immigrants and their American-born children. The collection presents characters who live between cultural worlds and attempt to reconcile inherited traditions with the demands of contemporary American life. This paper examines Lahiri's representation of transnational identity through displacement, loneliness, cultural adaptation, generational conflict, family expectations, memory, and nostalgia. The study argues that transnational identity in Lahiri is not a stable state but an ongoing process shaped by emotional negotiation and social pressure. Many characters experience isolation even within family structures, and this inner distance becomes a lasting feature of diasporic life (Mehta and Sharma page). By analysing selected stories—"Unaccustomed Earth," "Only Goodness," "Hell-Heaven," "Hema and Kaushik," and "A Choice of Accommodations"—the paper shows how identity is shaped and reshaped across generations. Using close reading alongside relevant diasporic criticism, this study places Lahiri's narratives within wider discussions of migration, belonging, and the role of memory in identity formation (Carreira page). In this way, *Unaccustomed Earth* emerges as an important text in contemporary diasporic literature and offers insight into the lived realities of transnational identity.

Keywords: Transnational identity; Diasporic experience; Displacement; Assimilation; Memory and nostalgia; Jhumpa Lahiri

Introduction

Migration literature frequently addresses questions of identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation. In a globalized world, individuals and families often move across national and cultural boundaries, resulting in identities that become layered and uncertain. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* captures this condition with clarity. The collection presents Bengali immigrants and their children who inhabit more than one cultural space, yet struggle to feel fully at home in any single one. *Unaccustomed Earth* consists of eight interconnected short stories that explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of immigrant life. Lahiri focuses closely on second-generation Indian Americans who inherit cultural traditions from their parents while being shaped by American social values. The stories show how cultural continuity becomes difficult in unfamiliar environments and how identity turns into a space of everyday negotiation (Karthik). This paper examines Lahiri's portrayal of transnational identity through close textual reading and engagement with selected secondary sources. It argues that Lahiri builds her themes through ordinary experience: family duties, marriages, unspoken disappointments, and private memories. The analysis focuses on five key narratives from the collection and shows how identity is shaped through displacement, cultural adaptation, family relationships, and emotional self-understanding.

Transnational Identity: Conceptual Framework

The term transnational identity refers to a condition in which individuals maintain emotional, cultural, and social connections across more than one nation or cultural space. Unlike older models that emphasized permanent settlement and full assimilation, transnational identity recognizes movement, continuity, and dual belonging. Identity, in this framework, is not fixed. It is shaped by the interaction between past and present, homeland and hostland, memory and adaptation. Scholars of diaspora have noted that migration often produces identities that are layered rather than singular. Individuals who live across cultures carry inherited memories, cultural habits, and emotional attachments from their place of origin while adapting to the expectations of a new society. Transnational identity therefore involves negotiation rather than final resolution. This is especially visible among second-generation immigrants who inherit cultural traditions without a full lived experience of the homeland. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri presents transnational identity as an everyday lived experience rather than an abstract idea. Her characters do not describe their identity in theoretical language. Yet their actions, silences, and emotional conflicts reveal the strain of living between cultures. They speak one language at home and another outside. They follow some traditions and abandon others. They carry guilt when cultural continuity weakens. Several critics have emphasized that Lahiri's work relies less on dramatic cultural clashes and more on quiet emotional negotiations. The isolation her characters feel is closely tied to their transnational condition. Even when surrounded by family, they often feel emotionally distant, suggesting that migration reshapes not only geography but also intimacy and belonging (Mehta and Sharma). Generational difference is another key aspect of transnational identity. First-generation immigrants often hold strong ties to the homeland

through memory, language, and ritual. Second-generation individuals grow up inside the host culture and interpret those traditions differently. As a result, families experience tension around duty, language, marriage choices, and cultural expectations (Karthik). Family expectations play a major role in identity formation. Cultural responsibility is often transmitted through parental expectations regarding education, behavior, language, and marriage. However, these expectations frequently conflict with individual autonomy. Lahiri portrays this tension with restraint, showing how characters internalize guilt even when they outwardly appear independent (Thakur and Kumari). Memory also shapes transnational identity. For first-generation immigrants, memory can provide continuity and emotional stability. For their children, memory is often inherited, fragmented, or incomplete. The tension between remembering and forgetting shapes how characters understand themselves. Studies of Lahiri's work suggest that memory does not only preserve identity. It also transforms identity by selecting what is kept and what is allowed to fade (Carreira). Transnational identity in Lahiri is therefore marked by contradiction. Characters seek belonging but resist confinement. They value heritage but struggle with its demands. They desire independence yet remain bound by familial and cultural obligations. This framework guides the story-wise analysis that follows.

Displacement and the Absence of Home in “*Unaccustomed Earth*”

Displacement is central to the story “*Unaccustomed Earth*.” Lahiri presents displacement not merely as physical movement from one place to another but as a sustained emotional and psychological condition. The characters experience a sense of rootlessness that continues even after years of settlement in the United States. Home becomes less a stable shelter and more a space where cultural and emotional pressures quietly accumulate. The story focuses on Ruma, a second-generation Bengali American woman, and her widowed father. Ruma lives in Seattle with her American husband and young son. Although she appears settled, her life is marked by unease. Her father's visit after her mother's death intensifies this unease and brings forward questions of responsibility, cultural inheritance, and belonging. Ruma's displacement is closely connected to her position as a second-generation immigrant. She has grown up in America, yet she carries the emotional weight of parental expectations. After her mother's death, she feels pressure to assume traditional responsibilities linked to daughterhood. At the same time, she fears losing the independence she has built in her American life. This conflict creates emotional dislocation. She belongs neither fully to her parents' cultural world nor entirely to the life she has constructed. Critics have observed that Lahiri's characters often experience loneliness as a result of such displacement (Mehta and Sharma). Ruma's loneliness is expressed through hesitation and self-questioning rather than open complaint. She worries that her son is drifting away from Bengali culture, yet she lacks the confidence and discipline to transmit it consistently. Her worry becomes a form of grief. Ruma's father represents a different form of displacement. As a first-generation immigrant, his relationship to home is shaped by memory and adaptation. After his wife's death, he chooses travel rather than permanent dependence on his children. His movement across places suggests a quiet refusal to be confined by social

expectations. His displacement is voluntary, but it is also shaped by loss. The contrast between Ruma and her father highlights generational difference. Ruma feels trapped between duty and desire, while her father appears to accept impermanence as a way of life. This difference supports the larger pattern seen in Lahiri, where second-generation characters often struggle more sharply with identity conflict than their parents (Karthik). A key symbol in the story is the neglected garden behind Ruma's house. The garden represents cultural memory and the possibility of renewal. Ruma sees the garden as abandoned, much like her weakened connection to cultural roots. Her father chooses to cultivate it. By planting seeds in unfamiliar soil, he demonstrates that life can take root even in a new environment. The garden thus becomes a quiet metaphor for transnational identity itself. Memory deepens the theme of displacement. Ruma's memories of her mother intensify guilt and loneliness. She remembers her mother's devotion to family and home and realizes that she has unconsciously stepped into a similar role after giving up her career. Critical studies emphasize that memory actively shapes present identity in immigrant contexts, rather than simply preserving the past (Carreira). Ruma's memories therefore complicate her present rather than settling it.

Cultural Adaptation and Assimilation in "Only Goodness"

Cultural adaptation and assimilation form another major aspect of transnational identity in *Unaccustomed Earth*. In "Only Goodness," Lahiri shows how pressure to adapt can affect individual identity and family relationships. Assimilation appears not as a smooth journey but as an uneven process shaped by emotional strain and unequal outcomes. The story centres on Sudha and her younger brother Rahul. Both are second-generation Indian Americans raised under strong parental expectations. Their parents believe that educational success and professional achievement will secure stability and respect in American society. Yet Sudha and Rahul respond differently to these pressures, revealing that assimilation can produce very different results within the same family. Sudha represents outwardly successful adaptation. She performs well, builds a stable life, marries, and becomes a mother. Yet Lahiri shows that her success carries psychological cost. Sudha internalizes responsibility for Rahul's failures and lives with a heavy sense of guilt. Assimilation does not free her from cultural obligation. Instead, it reshapes obligation into private emotional burden. Rahul's experience is darker. He begins as gifted and promising but gradually collapses into alcoholism. His rejection of rigid expectations takes destructive form. His inability to meet cultural and family standards leads to isolation rather than freedom. Critics note that Lahiri's characters often reveal how assimilation can intensify alienation when inner stability fails to develop alongside social adaptation (Mehta and Sharma). Lahiri shows assimilation as a process shaped by family pressure and silence. Sudha tries to protect Rahul from parental control, believing American freedom will help him. Yet her protection removes structure without creating support. The story suggests that freedom without emotional grounding can become a form of abandonment. Karthik observes that Lahiri's characters undergo gradual identity shifts that create inner conflict rather than resolution (Karthik page). Rahul's failure should therefore be read not only as personal weakness but also as a symptom of competing cultural demands. Family relationships in "Only Goodness" reveal the cost of this struggle.

Sudha's marriage and motherhood create distance between her and Rahul. Her silence about his alcoholism reflects fear of exposing family weakness. Studies of Lahiri's diasporic families often point out that silence and emotional suppression intensify guilt and fragmentation (Thakur and Kumari).

Identity, Memory, and Relationship in “Hema and Kaushik”

The stories grouped under “Hema and Kaushik” present identity shaped by memory, loss, and emotional distance. These narratives explore transnational identity through personal relationships and private experience. Lahiri shows how cultural background forms a shared ground, yet shared ground does not guarantee stability. Hema and Kaushik are both children of Bengali immigrants raised largely in the United States. They recognize in each other a similar sense of being out of place. Their later reconnection reveals that transnational identity continues to shape emotional life long after childhood. Lahiri suggests that identity is often experienced through moments of recognition rather than complete belonging. Memory shapes both characters differently. Hema's identity is tied to discipline, academic achievement, and social responsibility. She builds a careful life that appears stable. Yet her stability is emotionally restrained. Her memories of childhood and her awareness of unrealized possibility remain present beneath her controlled surface. Kaushik's identity is shaped by loss and movement. His mother's illness and death disrupt his childhood and weaken his capacity for attachment. Critics note that repeated loss can erode rooted identity and encourage emotional detachment (Mehta and Sharma). Kaushik learns early that stability is temporary, and this lesson shapes his adult life. Memory and forgetting operate together here. Hema remembers selectively and chooses continuity. Kaushik attempts to escape memory through movement and photography. His profession allows him to record life while remaining emotionally distant from it. Studies of Lahiri often stress that memory can burden identity, especially when tied to displacement (Carreira). Kaushik's refusal to settle reflects this burden. Gender also shapes their identity outcomes. Hema carries cultural expectation and social restraint more heavily, while Kaushik retains greater mobility. Lahiri presents this contrast quietly, without direct commentary, but it remains visible in the structure of their choices. Kaushik's death underscores the fragility of identity shaped by impermanence. Lahiri does not treat this ending as mere tragedy. She presents it as a consequence of a life shaped by displacement and emotional withdrawal. These stories move beyond cultural conflict to show the emotional interior of transnational life, where identity emerges through experience, loss, and silence.

Generational Conflict and Emotional Distance in “Hell-Heaven”

“Hell-Heaven” explores transnational identity through the mother–daughter relationship. Lahiri shows how cultural displacement affects women differently across generations and how emotional frustration can reshape family dynamics. Aparna belongs to the first generation of immigrants who arrive in America through marriage. Her migration is sudden and deeply disorienting. Cut off from homeland, language, and social network, she experiences loneliness and emotional isolation. Critics observe that Lahiri's first-generation women often carry the emotional cost of migration silently, without clear recognition (Mehta

and Sharma). Usha, the narrator, represents the second generation. She grows up shaped by American cultural values and seeks independence as she matures. Aparna views this independence as distance and loss. Usha experiences her mother's expectations as restrictive. Their emotional gap reflects a common diasporic pattern in which parents hold culture as survival, while children view culture as pressure (Karthik). Pranab Chakraborty's arrival temporarily relieves Aparna's loneliness. He shares language and cultural memory. Aparna's attachment to him is rooted in shared displacement and emotional recognition. When Pranab marries an American woman, Aparna experiences renewed loss. His assimilation intensifies her isolation, reinforcing her fear that cultural belonging is fragile in a foreign land. This section reveals how transnational identity can create emotional dependency and disappointment. Aparna's sense of self remains tied to cultural continuity. When that continuity weakens, her emotional life becomes unanchored. Critical discussions of Lahiri's work suggest that such losses deepen alienation rather than resolve it (Carreira). Usha's understanding of her mother changes slowly. As an adult, she recognizes the loneliness that shaped Aparna's strictness and emotional intensity. Yet this understanding comes late, suggesting that generational conflict often delays emotional healing. Marriage also highlights generational difference. Aparna's marriage is marked by adjustment and silence, while Usha's relationships reflect choice and mobility. Scholars note that cultural expectations often press women into sacrifice while children seek autonomy, creating conflict rather than dialogue (Thakur and Kumari). Through "Hell-Heaven," Lahiri presents generational conflict not as loud confrontation but as sustained emotional misunderstanding. Migration reshapes intimacy and communication, and transnational identity becomes a source of distance that persists through time.

Memory, Nostalgia, and Marital Displacement in "A Choice of Accommodations"

"A Choice of Accommodations" shifts attention from parent-child dynamics to adult marriage. Lahiri shows that transnational identity continues to shape emotional life even after professional success and social stability. Through Amit, she suggests that displacement can return through memory, nostalgia, and marital tension. Amit returns to Massachusetts with his American wife Megan for a wedding. The return triggers emotional dislocation. Although he has lived in America for years, he again feels the discomfort he knew as a child. Lahiri presents this as a quiet but persistent feeling, suggesting that identity conflict can remain unresolved even in adulthood. Memory shapes Amit's inner life. The past returns not as comfort but as a reminder of exclusion and insecurity. His memories resurface during the wedding weekend and deepen his isolation. Critics argue that memory in Lahiri often reactivates vulnerability rather than offering closure (Carreira). Amit's experience supports this view. Marriage becomes another site where identity tension appears. Megan does not share Amit's cultural history or memories. Amit therefore struggles to articulate his inner conflict. His silence reflects a repeated pattern in Lahiri, where emotional truth is suppressed in order to preserve surface stability. This silence increases distance within the marriage. The story suggests that cultural difference alone does not explain marital tension. Amit's struggle comes from an unresolved relationship with the past and from the self-image shaped by

earlier marginalization. His nostalgia is not a simple longing for homeland. It is a longing for a lost sense of ease and belonging. Lahiri thus shows nostalgia as emotional stagnation rather than romantic memory. Despite tension, the story does not end in total despair. Lahiri allows space for recognition. Amit becomes aware of his emotional distance and the fragility of his marriage. This awareness suggests the possibility of change, while still keeping the story realistic and unresolved.

8. Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* offers a humane exploration of transnational identity through ordinary emotional life. The collection shows immigrant and second-generation experiences shaped by displacement, cultural negotiation, family pressure, memory, and silence. Lahiri treats identity not as a solved category but as a process that unfolds through relationships, responsibilities, and private reflection. Across the stories analysed here, belonging remains difficult. Characters inhabit multiple cultural spaces, yet complete comfort in any one space remains rare. Ruma's conflict between duty and independence, Sudha's guilt and Rahul's breakdown, Kaushik's detachment, Aparna's loneliness, and Amit's nostalgic unease reveal different dimensions of transnational identity. The collection shows that displacement continues even after settlement. Assimilation produces unequal outcomes. Generational difference creates emotional distance. Memory and forgetting shape identity by selecting what is retained and what is lost. Taken together, these stories present transnational identity as a lived condition shaped by loss, adaptation, and emotional negotiation. In this way, *Unaccustomed Earth* makes a significant contribution to contemporary diasporic literature. Lahiri's careful attention to ordinary lives and restrained emotional conflicts allows readers to understand the human cost of migration beyond political or economic explanation. Her collection remains an important literary exploration of what it means to live, remember, and attempt belonging in *Unaccustomed Earth*.

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