Indian American Identity
Career, Family and Home
in
Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*

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A Thesis Presented to
The Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages
The University of Oslo
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts Degree
Spring Term 2011
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Tone Sundt Urstad for her inspiration, helpful advice, attention to detail and patience. I could not have asked for a better supervisor.

I’m also to Dana Ryan Lande for recommending I read *Unaccustomed Earth* in the first place, and Sara Beskow for your support.

My gratitude goes also to Daniel Kvalem and Ingvild Bruaset, who have kept me sane through this process, and with their loving support have made even these last few weeks endurable.

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Elizabeth Oltedal. In this work, as in my previous studies, she has been an invaluable help and support. Thank you for listening, discussing, inspiring, complimenting, criticizing and otherwise helping me with this thesis.
Jhumpa Lahiri’s second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, paints a powerful picture of life in the Indian American Diaspora. She describes the lives of the first and second generations of Indian immigrants who have settled in America, most of her protagonists being second generation characters. These characters face the opportunities and challenges of belonging to two different cultures, and must continuously negotiate an intermediate position within and between two cultures. They occupy a middle ground which could easily turn into a battle ground between the Indian and the American parts of their identities, but the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* strive to maintain ties to both cultures, identifying themselves as Indian Americans. Thus, no matter how predominantly Indian or American they feel, Lahiri’s characters still retain a sense of self as Indian Americans. The continuous renegotiation of their identities lies at the core of *Unaccustomed Earth*, offering an interesting perspective on the stories.

The Indian American community that Lahiri describes consists almost exclusively of Bengali characters. Bengalis are one of the numerous peoples of India, but they were singled out for Anglicanization and trusted with positions within the colonial bureaucracy by the English colonizers, who referred to them as “the respectable classes in Bengal” (Anderson 91). This emblem of respectability and privilege seems to have been transported to America, and the Bengali characters that we encounter in Lahiri’s short stories all come from highly educated and financially secure backgrounds. *Unaccustomed Earth* consists of eight stories that all feature central characters that are second generation Indian Americans. Though these stories show the obstacles that Indian Americans must overcome in order to pursue the lifestyles of their choice, they also show some of the advantages that come with the territory. For instance, many of the characters grow up to be high achievers who have been raised in a traditional manner and taught to enjoy family meals, to respect their elders and to honour the tradition of marriage. Thus growing up as Indian Americans is not without its benefits. As
Salman Rushdie noted, when discussing how “translation” is a fitting term for producing identities in the Indian Diaspora: “It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” (Rushdie 17).

Lahiri’s stories offer many alternative ways of living and negotiating identities as Indian Americans. In the story “Hell-Heaven,” Usha speaks of a happy outcome of such an identity process: “My mother and I had also made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well” (81-82). A harmonious mother-daughter relationship has been restored only when Usha’s mother accepts the fact that her daughter has dual identities, and realizes that these identities can be negotiated peacefully. The mother-daughter conflict is just one of the many conflicts over identity that are found in Unaccustomed Earth, and these conflicts and reconciliations take place in different spheres. Three central spheres in which the characters find themselves negotiating their Indian American identities are: Career, Family and Home, and these will be discussed in the three main chapters of my thesis. In each chapter, I begin by conducting close readings of one or several stories that are particularly interesting in terms of these central spheres. After this initial in-depth focus, I will go on to show how the theme is present in other stories, contrasting and comparing how this aspect of life in the Indian American Diaspora influences and shapes Indian American identity.

In my reading of Unaccustomed Earth, I will explore how identities that are formed in the Indian American Diaspora are shaped and function. In this I will rely heavily on postcolonial theory, and the various ideas about identity and Diaspora that have surfaced within this theoretical tradition. I will argue that there are certain values and goals that are at the core of Indian American identity, paying particular attention to how these values are perpetuated, but also including the ruptures in these values, showing how characters may fail or succeed in negotiating their Indian American identities. My assumptions of Indian American core values will largely be based on sociological studies and surveys of Indian American identity, along with more general surveys of immigrant identity.

Though Unaccustomed Earth is undoubtedly interesting from the vantage point of postcolonial theory and sociological studies, Lahiri’s fiction is invariably also interesting for the fluency and artistry of its prose. Thus, in my approach to Unaccustomed Earth I will rely on the method of close reading, giving examples, contrasting and comparing. Thereby, I hope to highlight and discuss the idiosyncrasies in Lahiri’s stories, and Unaccustomed Earth’s relevance as a key to Indian American identity.
The Life and Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri was born in London in 1967 (Karim 205). Her parents were first generation Bengali immigrants from Calcutta. They lived in England for the first two years of Jhumpa’s life before travelling to America and finally settling in Rhode Island. Her father got a position in the library at the University of Rhode Island, whilst her mother has worked as a schoolteacher. Jhumpa Lahiri has a younger sister who has gone on to acquire a PhD in History (Karim 205-206). Thus the family belongs to a class of largely successful Indian Americans and it is this segment of society which Lahiri chronicles in her fiction. Being an older sibling is a perspective that she shares with several of the protagonists she has constructed, and being the child of first generation immigrants on the East Coast is a description that fits most of her protagonists. This means that her biography is of interest when reading her fiction, as she draws on her own experiences. This is the case not only when it comes to her parental family, but also with her own marriage. She is married to Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, the deputy editor of the Latin American edition of Time. Together they have a son, Octavio, and a daughter, Noor, two names that indicate their different ethnic identities. Several of Lahiri’s protagonists in Unaccustomed Earth have married outside their ethnic community and have young children who in varying degrees are brought up with Indian names and within Indian traditions, and thus her characters, to a certain extent, mirror the author’s family life.

Lahiri excelled in school and was a keen writer already at the age of seven. She graduated from the prestigious Barnard College with a Bachelor’s degree in English Literature, and went on to achieve three Master’s degrees and a PhD at Boston University (Karim 206). During her graduate studies she developed her ambition of becoming a writer, rather than continue in the pursuit of a scholarly career. She began publishing some of the stories that would eventually end up in her first collection of short stories. These stories were printed in periodicals such as The New Yorker, which created some anticipation surrounding her first publication. Interpreter of Maladies was published in 1999 and became a favourite amongst readers and critics alike. She has won several literary awards, most notably the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for best American work of fiction.¹ The book also went on to

¹ other awards include a PEN/Hemingway Award, the Addison Metcalf Award, a Vallombrosa Von Rezzori Prize and the Asian American Literary Award for Fiction.
become a best seller. Her follow-up came four years later, and instead of a new collection of short stories, she published a novel: *The Namesake*. This was also largely successful, although more disputed by critics than her debut collection. Lahiri’s second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was released in 2008 and met with favourable reviews and quickly became a bestseller. In fact, it reached the number one spot on the New York Time bestseller list, an extraordinary feat for a non-novel (Harte 64). That same year it was awarded the Frank O’Connor International Short Story award, meaning that Lahiri has followed up the successes of her first two publications.

*Interpreter Of Maladies* consists of nine short stories. They feature different protagonists of varying age and gender and the point of view also differs between the stories, shifting from children to adults, Indians to Americans and to Indian Americans. Most of the protagonists are first or second generation immigrants living in America, and all these stories are set on the East Coast of the United States. The three exceptions to this are all set in India, featuring Indian protagonists. Although there is a great variety amongst the stories, they all deal with similar topics, such as communication and difficulties in communicating, and the extremes of carefulness and carelessness (Brada-Williams 456). These are recurring themes throughout the stories, and the story entitled “Mrs. Sen” is a good example. In it, a young American boy remembers the period of his childhood when he spent his afternoons after school in the Indian American home of the childless Mrs. Sen. Through his position as a child who observes the life of this newly arrived immigrant and her working husband, he is privy to the lack of communication between the two. Mrs. Sen is clearly unhappy in America, and yet the only way in which she seems to communicate this unhappiness to her husband, is that she demands the fresh fish that she was accustomed to in India, and that a failure to procure this will make her unhappy. This is clearly a breakdown in communication, as the fish, or lack of it, is only a symbol of the true sense of estrangement that she feels. The contrast between carefulness and carelessness becomes evident in the story when the young American boy watches Mrs. Sen carefully preparing the elaborate family meal every day, making sure that he is at a safe distance from her cutting equipment. This carefulness is suddenly replaced by a carelessness when Mrs. Sen decides to rush out to buy fresh fish, taking the boy with her into the car that she is not accustomed to driving, and instead of her customary carefulness, she drives recklessly, crashing the car. This is one of several stories where an initial carefulness is replaced by carelessness, often leading up to a climax and an uneasy ending to the stories.

*The Namesake* is Lahiri’s first and so far only novel, and it chronicles the lives of the Gangulis, who are a Bengali couple who emigrate from India and settle in Massachusetts.
There they start a family, and the novel spans a lifetime, from the father’s adolescence, through his wife’s experience of coming to America, to their son’s adulthood. The novel is told from the perspective of a third person narrator, and it is alternately focalized through mother, father and son. Central themes in the novel are identity and belonging, and the intermediate position that second generation immigrants occupy between the ethnic background of their parents, and the American society that they grow up in. Ashima Ganguli initially finds life in America hard and continuously feels out of place. This feeling is only remedied when she gives birth to Indian American children and begins to interact with the American society around her, and the fellow-Bengalis that she becomes familiar with. Her son, Gogol, on the other hand, struggles to find his path in life, and for a long time tries to suppress his Indian identity. His perspective is different from that of his parents, seeming out of touch with and touristy in his approach to India and his Indian heritage (Friedman 116-117). Towards the end of the novel he gets in touch with his roots and learns to value his name, and as Lahiri increasingly focuses on Gogol, this is a sign of her movement away from the perspective of first generation immigrants to that of second generation immigrants, which will be her main focus in *Unaccustomed Earth*.

**Critical Reception and Critical Work on Lahiri**

Along with a large readership and favourable reviews, critics have taken a keen interest in Lahiri’s work with the result that several critical texts have surfaced that deal with her fiction. *Interpreter of Maladies* seems to have garnered the most critical work, although *The Namesake* has also received some critical attention. There are also a few recent texts that explore *Unaccustomed Earth*. In my work, the most interesting of these critical texts are not only those that deal directly with *Unaccustomed Earth*, but also those that discuss traits of previous work that might also apply to this collection.

Laura Karttunen groups Lahiri with Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy in her essay: “A Sociostylistic Perspective on Negatives and the Disnarrated: Lahiri, Roy and Rushdie.” Karttunen defines the disnarrated in a text as those events that do not happen, but that are referred to in a negative or hypothetical mode. Negatives are related constructs that show how characters break with norms and expectations. Karttunen employs the title story from *Interpreter of Maladies* as an example, and shows how an Indian American mother breaks with expectations when she does not hold her daughter’s hand, and does not offer to share a snack with her family. The disnarrated and negative constructs are not limited to Lahiri’s
earlier short stories, but are present in abundance in *Unaccustomed Earth*. I will return to this when I discuss “Only Goodness” and “Unaccustomed Earth,” as both short stories feature such narrative constructs in the interaction between family members. Karttunen’s ideas will be useful in the chapters on career and homes.

A celebrated critical text is Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero’s “Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction.”² In it, she focuses primarily on Ashima Ganguli, the mother figure who is central in *The Namesake*. Alfonso-Forero describes immigrant motherhood as a lifelong pregnancy, continuously feeling out of sorts. She argues that the Indian American mother inhabits a significant role as upholder of an Indian household, whilst simultaneously raising children that will successfully maintain a sense of self as both Indians and Americans. Although this text focuses on Lahiri’s novel, the role of the Indian American mother here is similar to the mother figures that we encounter in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Thus, I will return to this critical text in my chapter on family.

Judith Caesar discusses two of Lahiri’s short stories in “American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri.” The first story, “The Third and Final Continent,” is taken from *Interpreter of Maladies*, whilst the second story, “Nobody’s Business,” appears in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Caesar’s essay is especially interesting in how it delineates the development of personal and imaginary spaces in Lahiri’s stories. She discusses the use of setting and the physical walls that surround Lahiri’s characters, and how homes can be both safeguards against the outside world, and also prisons for those inside. This approach is interesting to my study of homes in chapter four.

Leah Harte explores the link between borders and identity formation in Lahiri’s fiction.³ She defines these borders as either the physical borders between states and countries, or metaphorical borders between genders, generations and cultures, and argues that the process of negotiating these various borders is central to producing identity. She employs the short story “Unaccustomed Earth” as one of her examples, where the central characters Ruma and her father, find themselves negotiating the new borders to their lives and their relationship. Both of them have moved into new homes, and they need to renegotiate their relationship and their sense of self after the death of Ruma’s mother. Harte’s ideas are interesting in my chapters on family and home.

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² it won the 2006 *Literature Compass* Graduate Essay Prize.
³ “The Borderlands of Identity and a B-Side to the Self: Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’, ‘The Third and Final Continent’ and ‘Unaccustomed Earth.’”
Unaccustomed Earth

The title of Lahiri’s latest collection is borrowed from a passage in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, which is quoted on the opening page of Unaccustomed Earth. In The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne presents the narrator as an autobiographical voice, and the quoted passage as well as the rest of the book thus reads as his personal remembrances and opinions.

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth (13).

This quotation encompasses many of the central themes and projects in Lahiri’s collection. Hawthorne mentions generations and children, and this is a central concern in Unaccustomed Earth. He goes on to talk about the project of human life, using agricultural imagery, and contemplates the fortunes of his children. A possible interpretation of this is that like the Indian American parents in Lahiri’s stories, Hawthorne too has great ambitions on behalf of his children, wishing them successful careers, although he too realizes that his children’s destiny is not necessarily within his control. Lastly, Hawthorne’s description of how and where his children will “strike their roots” is an image of settling down. These three points in Hawthorne’s statement correspond with central aspects of Unaccustomed Earth and Lahiri’s choice of an opening quotation thus serves as a fruitful context for her collection of short stories. The design of my thesis with its structure of three chapters on Career, Family and Home, also corresponds with the passage from Hawthorne.

The quoted passage is not only interesting in how neatly it fits the themes of Lahiri’s stories. It is also interesting and significant from a more purely postcolonial point of view. The passage is featured in the first part of Hawthorne’s novel The Scarlet Letter, and is entitled “The Custom-House.” In this opening chapter, Hawthorne reveals his ambiguous relationship with his hometown, Salem. Of Salem he says that “though invariably happiest elsewhere, there is within me a feeling for old Salem, which, in lack of a better phrase, I must be content to call affection. The sentiment is probably assignable to the deep and aged roots which my family has struck into the soil” (Hawthorne 11). In this initial description of his hometown and the building where he worked, I would argue the possibility that Hawthorne is echoed in Salman Rushdie’s opening of Imaginary Homelands, where Rushdie looks back
upon his childhood home and tries to reconstruct the past. Hawthorne imagines that “my old
native town will loom upon me through the haze of memory,” but also realizes that “it ceases
to be a reality of my life. I am a citizen of somewhere else” (35). Rushdie puts it similarly
when he expresses that “the past is a country from which we have all emigrated,” (Rushdie
12) and that being an Indian author in Britain⁴ meant that he was removed from, and yet
always searching, his past. Several of the stories in Unaccustomed Earth feature characters
who look back upon their pasts, frequently upon their childhoods, and try to work through
their memories and make sense of themselves. This is essentially the project of both the fêted
American author Hawthorne and the acclaimed postcolonial author Rushdie, and taken
together they offer a way of framing Unaccustomed Earth as part of both the American
literary tradition and the postcolonial.

At first glance, Lahiri’s second collection of short stories seems to be structured very
much in the same way as her first, Interpreter of Maladies. On closer inspection however,
Unaccustomed Earth is different due to the collection being divided into two parts. Part one
consists of five stories whose characters seem wholly unrelated, although the settings and the
themes are to a certain extent similar. Part Two, on the other hand, is made up of three stories
that describe the lives of the same two characters, Hema and Kaushik. The first story, “Once
in a Lifetime,” is narrated by Hema, whilst the second, “Year’s End,” is narrated by Kaushik.
What makes these two stories special in terms of narrative technique is that the narrator in
each story addresses the narrator in the other story as “you.” Thus the stories taken together
seem like two monologues, two stories the narrators tell each other. The third and final story
sees Kaushik and Hema reunited as adults and they quickly become lovers. This story, “Going
Ashore,” is narrated from a third person point of view, shifting between Hema and Kaushik as
focalizers. The final trilogy of stories that makes up Part Two of the collection reads as an
unfolding love story, and its cyclical form, beginning and ending in death and birth, makes it
a departure from the style of the preceding stories. This second part of the collection will be
discussed in detail in the chapter on homes, as especially “Once in a Lifetime” and “Year’s
End” show the contrasting ways that homes can influence identity formation. In the other two
main chapters, I will go deeper into other stories that are particularly relevant to the central
themes. In the chapter on career, “Only Goodness” will be employed as the main example of
how fundamental academic and working life is to one’s sense of self as an Indian American.
This story is particularly apt, showing the contrast between those who succeed and those that

⁴ as he called himself at the time.
fail as Indian Americans, and how they identify themselves and each other. In the chapter on family, “A Choice of Accommodations” will serve as an illustration of the intricacies of negotiating an Indian American identity while relating to one’s Indian parents and an American wife, and raising Indian American children. Going into greater detail with these select stories will allow me to discuss not only their thematic content, but also their various complexities in style and form. Though the remaining stories will not be awarded the same detailed attention in my thesis, they too are interesting in terms of narrative technique, and one of the aspects that is most interesting in these terms is how Lahiri successfully inhabits different points of view.

The opening and title story is, aside from the final trilogy, the one which is perhaps most complex in terms of narrative style. This complexity stems from it being focalized through two different characters, who take turns as focalizing agents in the story. First, we are introduced to Ruma, a thirty-something wife and mother who has recently moved to Seattle and who is coming to terms with her existence as a stay-at-home-mother. We gain access to her inner thoughts, which include sadness over the recent death of her mother, and uneasiness about her new pregnancy and the demands of motherhood. Then the focus shifts from Ruma to her father, who has come to stay a week with his daughter and grandson, and who unbeknown to his daughter, thinks about the Bengali woman with whom he has initiated a relationship in his old age. The story continues through a series of shifts in focalizer, with frequent leaps back in time to Ruma’s childhood or the early days of her father’s marriage. Thus when the week of her father’s stay is over, and the story comes to an end, as readers we feel as though we have been privy to the whole life story of these two characters, rather than merely a week in their lives. Lahiri’s narrative technique of shifting focalizers and leaps back in time means that she is able to skilfully convey two life stories within the frame of a short story.

There is one short story in the collection that stands out in terms of its central characters and subject matter. “Nobody’s Business” is different from the other stories in that it is focalized through a non-Indian character. Paul is the focalizer of the story, though he is at times rather invisible. Paul is an American student, struggling to complete a PhD in literature. Despite being steeped in his studies, Paul swiftly falls in love with his beautiful and exotic new flatmate, the Indian American girl, Sang. However, the story is not a conventional love story, but rather a story of misguided and unrequited love. Sang is hopelessly in love with her non-committal Egyptian boyfriend Farouk, who in turn cheats on her with the American woman, Deidre. The characters relate to each other dysfunctionally, showing that they lack
real compassion or understanding for each other. In addition to being without a romantic 
partner and without a finished degree, Paul is also virtually without family ties, making him 
very different from the Bengali characters that are featured throughout *Unaccustomed Earth.* 
However, in his struggle to complete a PhD he is not dissimilar from the ambitious Indian 
Americans that Lahiri describes, and he thus serves as an interesting example of how personal 
success and a secure sense of self often rely too heavily on scholarly achievement.

Lahiri frequently employs first person narrators who look back upon their childhood, 
as she did in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “Mrs. Sen” in *Interpreter of Maladies.* In 
*Unaccustomed Earth,* “Hell-Heaven” is told from the perspective of the adult Usha who looks 
back upon and narrates her childhood, making it a coming-of-age, or initiation story of sorts. 
Her childhood memories are focused on the presence of a fellow Bengali, Pranab Kaku, in her 
family, and Usha mixes the innocent memories of her childhood with the realizations that she 
has reached as an adult. This double perspective is evident when she talks of how she would 
go on trips with Pranab Kaku and her mother, and how “any stranger would have naturally 
assumed that Pranab Kaku was my father, that my mother was his wife.” This thought is 
immediately followed by the realization that “It is clear to me now that my mother was in 
love with him” (66-67). The theme of this story seems to be the difficulties in communication 
between first and second generation Indian Americans, and also how one adapts to life in 
America.

While the narrative technique that Lahiri employs in *Unaccustomed Earth* is interesting both in itself and in how the main themes are presented, a discussion of the theme 
of Indian American identity requires a wider theoretical basis. In this respect, postcolonial 
theory and sociological studies will be useful to my current project.

**Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory is an area within literary theory that has developed over the space 
of the last half century. As the name implies, this theoretical direction is a product of the 
postcolonial period after the fall of the great colonial empires and in the era of 
transnationalism and globalism. Postcolonial theory was initially developed by certain 
influential critics, amongst them Franz Fanon and Edward Said. One of the initial aims of 
these critics was to challenge a literary canon that was made by and for the literary authorities 
in England, and to argue in favour of reading and teaching works by authors from the 
postcolonial world. In addition, postcolonial theory has occasionally urged postcolonial
authors to write with an eye on resisting rather than complying with the established literature of the former colonial power. Fanon and Said also introduced the idea of presenting colonizer and colonized in terms of Self and Other, or Orientalist and Oriental. Increasingly, postcolonial theory has become centred on questions of identity. Diasporic identities emerge as a product of emigration and resettlement, and though this could entail identity as “subaltern” to the former colonial powers, the Indian American characters in Unaccustomed Earth do not identify themselves as inferior or “subaltern” to ethnic Americans. As members of the Indian American Diaspora, these characters came from a position of privilege in India, and resettled in America in order to secure ever more privileged futures for their children. Thus, the “old” postcolonial terms such as “Oriental” and “Other” at first glance do not seem particularly useful in describing the Indian Americans that we encounter in Unaccustomed Earth, and yet I will argue that traces of these postcolonial ideas are visible in Lahiri’s stories. In addition, most current postcolonial theorists are indebted to Fanon and Said, often referring to them and employing their terms, as I too shall do.

Lahiri’s fiction is frequently labelled as postcolonial, and it is interesting to discuss her fiction in terms of identity and diasporic identity. Diaspora and diasporic identity are best described as the sense of communion felt by people who emigrate from for example India and who build their lives elsewhere, while still identifying themselves as Indian. The sense of communion with other members of the Diaspora and the transnational networks that exist between diasporic subjects also play a part in the formation of diasporic identity. What seems to lie at the core of diasporic identity is a sense of nostalgia for the homeland while simultaneously embracing life in the new homeland. In Unaccustomed Earth the main characters almost all belong to the Indian Diaspora in America, and as such qualify as postcolonial subjects. Their ancestors were colonial subjects who belonged to a part of the Indian people who were privileged under colonial rule. Benedict Anderson has discussed the problematic position of Bengalis in India after Independence in 1947 and described how a Bengali who was privileged in his education and subsequent career became “as much a stranger in his own native land as the European residents in the country” (Anderson 93, his emphasis). Seen in the light of this description, it is perhaps not surprising that many Bengalis had the means, education and motivation for emigrating. The Bengali characters and the subject matter of Unaccustomed Earth are interesting from a postcolonial vantage point, as the stories all deal with first and second generation Indian Americans who mediate their identities in their new homelands, as members of the Indian Diaspora. Thus postcolonial theory that deals with identity is highly relevant to a discussion of Lahiri’s fiction. I will offer
a brief survey of some of the central postcolonial theorists and how their ideas might be applicable to *Unaccustomed Earth*, particularly in terms of identity and the Diaspora. These ideas will be elaborated upon and contextualised in the subsequent chapters. The three theorists that I will present here are Bhabha, Spivak and Rushdie. These three are all members of the Indian Diaspora, and thus share some common ground with Lahiri and her fictional characters.

Any current survey of postcolonial theory will invariably include the writings of Homi K. Bhabha. He is one of the most widely quoted and influential theorists, and his 1994 publication *The Location of Culture* is significant in the present study of *Unaccustomed Earth*. Like many of the characters in Lahiri’s fiction, Bhabha grew up in India and he describes his move to Oxford as “the culmination of an Indian middle class trajectory where formal education and ‘high’ culture colluded in emulating the canons of elite ‘English’ taste (or what we knew of it) and conforming to its customs and comforts” (Bhabha x). In this trajectory he is clearly similar to the first-generation characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*, who travelled to Europe and the United States in order to study and work at prestigious educational institutions. Bhabha described the project of cosmopolitanism as a typically middle-class quest for “relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress” (Bhabha xiv), and avers that cosmopolitans “frequently inhabit ‘imagined communities.’” Here he is alluding to the title of Benedict Anderson’s influential book on nationalism. Thus his background in and knowledge of the Indian Diaspora make him particularly relevant in discussing diasporic identity, and his ideas are highly applicable to Lahiri’s fiction.

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha spans a variety of postcolonial themes, and often refers to the works of Said and Fanon as starting points for his ideas. In Bhabha’s perhaps most famous text, he builds on Said and Fanon’s ideas about Orientalism and racial discrimination. As a continuation of their arguments, Bhabha argues for the usefulness of the term “stereotype” within colonial discourse. By stereotyping he means fixing the Other as something that is at once rigid and unchanging, but which is also disorderly, deviant and which must be anxiously repeated (Bhabha 94). He discusses the fallacy of regarding the stereotype as something that is “offering, at any one time, a secure point of identification” (Bhabha 99, his emphasis). Here he implies that not only is stereotyping an erroneous way of finding truth, but that there is no such thing as a readily available, true point of identification.

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5 *Imagined Communities*, first published in 1983
6 “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” a chapter in *The Location of Culture*
Identities are forever being reproduced and negotiated. Bhabha goes on to argue that the stereotype is in fact “an ‘impossible’ object” (Bhabha 116), and that the force of the stereotype lies in “the ambivalence on which the stereotype turns” (Bhabha 109, his emphasis). By describing the stereotype as a force of ambivalence, Bhabha implies that the colonial subject will always transcend the stereotype, and that the fixity with which the colonizer views the colonized is erroneous and misleading. In the context of Unaccustomed Earth, these ideas are interesting when employed in ways slightly different from Bhabha’s original definitions. Stereotyping is visible not just from the vantage point of Americans stereotyping Indian immigrants, but rather through the perspective of Indian Americans stereotyping Americans, or even stereotyping newly arrived Indian immigrants. One story which is particularly relevant in this context is “Hell-Haven,” where the newly arrived immigrant Pranab Kaku and his American girlfriend, Deborah, are both heavily stereotyped, a point that I will return to in the chapter on family.

Furthermore, Bhabha claims that “the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning,” and that the image of the Oriental “is confronted with its difference, its Other” (Bhabha 66). Here Bhabha employs Said’s terms and elaborates on the challenges of producing and mediating identity. Bhabha continues to argue that “identity is never (...) a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality” (Bhabha 73), a claim which strengthens the idea of identity as an unfinished entity that is impossible to fix. He also argues that there is a clear distinction between imitation and identification, and I will argue that the latter is more available to the second generation of Indian Americans than it was to the first, who often had to make do with merely imitating the culture of their new homeland. At one point Bhabha describes identity as being “always a question of interpretation” (Bhabha 74). This statement is reminiscent of opinions found amongst other postcolonial theorists, most notably Spivak and Rushdie, who argue the centrality of interpretation and translation to the formation of identity, and it is to these two theorists that I now turn.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a highly influential postcolonial theorist, and like Bhabha and Rushdie, she too has ties to the Indian Diaspora. She has written about fiction by female Indian authors and argues that being labelled as such does not automatically attribute discernable merit to one’s literary production. She therefore argues against purely postcolonial labelling, complaining that sometimes “Indian women writing means American women writing (...), except for national origin” (Spivak 405, her emphasis). Lahiri would count amongst these women who have more of an American cultural citizenship than an
Indian, and who belong just as much, if not more to the American literary tradition. Nevertheless, Lahiri’s treatment of the postcolonial subjects in *Unaccustomed Earth* makes it interesting to view her work in the light of postcolonial theory, and in the light of Spivak’s ideas.

In one of Spivak’s central texts she discusses how language allows us to make sense of ourselves and that making sense of ourselves “is what produces identity” (Spivak 397). The theme of her text is translation, and she argues its importance as a clue to the self in the postcolonial world. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, there is a sense that the protagonists are continuously working to translate the Indian to their American peers, and to translate the American to their Indian families. As indicated by Lahiri’s first collection of short stories, this translation or interpretation is central to the lives of these Indian American characters, and thus to constituting and mediating Indian American identities. The need for translation between the first and the second generation of Indian Americans is just as central in *Unaccustomed Earth* as it was in Lahiri’s previous book, if not more so. Spivak poses the following question about the problems concerning communicating across generations of immigrants: “When the daughter talks reproductive rights and the mother talks protecting honour, is this the birth or death of translation?” (Spivak 409). This is a striking image of the distance that may develop between mother and daughter in the Indian Diaspora, and Spivak herself does not offer an answer to this question. However, in my chapter on family I will propose an answer to Spivak’s question. In “Hell-Heaven,” Usha and her mother find themselves inhabiting roles that correspond to those of Spivak’s immigrant mother and daughter. Initially it seems that the impossibility of translating Usha’s American adolescent lifestyle to her mother represents not only the death of translation but also the death of their mother-daughter relationship. However, at the close of the story mother and daughter are able to reconcile and understand each other, having successfully translated themselves and their life experiences to each other. I will return to this in greater detail in the chapter on family.

Last, but not least, the ideas of the author and theorist Salman Rushdie have been influential and instrumental in my approach to *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the preface to *Imaginary Homelands, Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* he considers his position as a British

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7 “The Politics of Translation”

8 after all, the collection is named *Interpreter of Maladies*.

9 “The Politics of Translation” in fact is based on a conversation between Spivak and Michèle Barrett and, as is common in conversations, some points are dropped without much explanation.

10 Usha frequently exclaims that she hates her mother.
Indian author, and how his sense of self is tied to this intermediate position. Rushdie describes his Indian childhood home and finds that studying a black and white photo of the building has reminded him of the past or, rather, helped him produce memories of his past. He discusses how growing up in the Indian Diaspora has formed him, and how his diasporic identity has been both a blessing and a curse. He and his peers sometimes “feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (Rushdie 15). He talks of the dangers of assimilating too little and too much, a consideration that is at the heart of Unaccustomed Earth. Eventually, Rushdie embraces the strength of his position as a member of the Indian Diaspora and expresses that he and his peers “are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because (…) we are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society” (Rushdie 19). In his optimism, Rushdie paints a positive picture of life in the Indian Diaspora, and though this is an optimism that might at times be shared by the characters in Unaccustomed Earth, more often than not they are conflicted about their background, and feel a sense of rootlessness rather than freedom.

In addition to these three central theorists, I will also refer to and employ certain ideas and terms from theorists such as Benedict Anderson, Vijay Mishra, Avtah Brah, Werner Sollors, Simon Gikandi, Sollors, Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft, Lisa Lowe, Ronald Takaki and Gayatri Gopinath. However, as I am exploring Indian American identity and arguing that certain traits are at the core of such identities, I will now look at how identity processes are perceived not only by theorists, but also by real postcolonial subjects. This means that in addition to postcolonial theory as an important source to my present project, a set of more sociological and survey-based texts will also inform my project of exploring Indian American identity.

**Indian American Identity**

While identity is a term that has garnered much attention within the field of postcolonial theory, it has also been at the centre of much sociological research and is important within social anthropology. Two sources have been particularly important to me; the first one that has been central in chartering Indian American identities is Pawan Dhingra’s survey of Indian American and Korean American professionals in Texas. The second sociological source is a collection of surveys of how different immigrant groups integrate and craft a sense of belonging in their new homelands. The collection was edited by Brigitte

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Bönisch-Brednich and Catherine Trundle\textsuperscript{12} and in it they raise many interesting ideas about immigrant life in different parts of the world. Whilst none of the surveys that are featured in the collection deals directly with Indian American identities and Bengali culture, some interviewees share experiences of migrant and immigrant life that remind us of characters in \textit{Unaccustomed Earth}, and thus offer insight into the realities of immigrant life and life in the Diaspora.

Dhingra identifies certain stereotypes of what being Indian American entails, and discusses how Indian American identities are negotiated amongst his interviewees. Amongst the central stereotypes associated with Indian Americans is the image of them as a “model minority” who have a firm grasp of the English language upon entering the US, work hard and honour their elders. These three qualities legitimize a label as model citizens and go a long way towards explaining why Indian Americans have been so successful at attaining “middle- and upper-middle-class status, (…) higher incomes and more secure careers” (Dhingra 246). This is most certainly the case with the characters in \textit{Unaccustomed Earth}, as the first generation seem to have embarked upon successful working careers as soon as they entered the USA, and they expect their children to follow in their footsteps. Falling in line with the expectations of parents thus becomes one of the main ways of mediating Indian American identities; displaying the Indian American ambition of making it in America.

Although Dhingra emphasizes the relatively fortunate position of first generation Indian Americans and their easy road to financial and social success in America, the second generation Indian American interviewees insisted that a different immigrant narrative had been instilled in them. Those interviewed related how their parents had arrived “with little means,” “how they knew what it was like to struggle financially while young and distanced themselves from a sense of economic privilege” (246). These statements convey how the virtue of hard work is central to Indian American identity, and that the immigrant narrative of going from rags to riches is circulated and perpetuated in the Indian American community. This immigrant narrative thus takes on the shape of a central myth that instils a sense of pride in one’s Indian American identity. In \textit{Unaccustomed Earth}, however, the Indian Americans characters invariably belong to a group of first and second generation immigrants who enjoyed economic privilege in their homeland, and who quickly achieved financial success in America. Nonetheless, some of the characters are instilled with this mythical immigrant narrative, most notably the children in “Hell-Heaven” and “Only Goodness,” who are told

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Local Lives: Migration and the Politics of Place}, 2010
that their parents were not born into privilege, and that they have had to work hard in order to succeed in their new homeland. In this context, the dissipated son who wastes his prospects in “Only Goodness,” clearly disappoints and shames his family. I will return to this point in the chapter on career.

According to Dhingra, one of the main arenas for maintaining and mediating an Indian American sense of self is the family and home sphere. One interviewee noted the importance of marrying a co-ethnic (1), and in fact almost all second generation interviewees had chosen to marry fellow Indian Americans. However, when reading Unaccustomed Earth, one does not get the impression that marrying outside one’s ethnicity is unusual. Lahiri herself has married outside her ethnic group, and so do most of her second generation protagonists. Amongst these characters, marrying a co-ethnic is almost an exotic practice, and in fact Hema is the only character who embarks on such relationships. I will return to this in my chapter on family, and discuss what Hema’s Indian relationships indicate about her Indian American identity.

Dhingra locates the majority of Indian Americans as living “on the coasts, mostly in select cities considered international centers” (247). The characters who make up the first generation in Unaccustomed Earth certainly correspond to this pattern, all living in some proximity to Boston. There the men have high-paying jobs within scientific educational institutions or major industrial companies, the wives lead secluded suburban lives, and the children attend local schools and go on to be accepted at prestigious colleges. However, Lahiri’s second generation characters often find themselves spread across the United States and outside it too. This corresponds with Dhingra’s findings of how Indian Americans move to developing regions such as Texas, which had not seen much Indian immigration so far. Interviewees in Dallas noticed “how much they stood out (…) relative to more cosmopolitan cities” (248). A similar sense of otherness is experienced by several of the second generation protagonists in Unaccustomed Earth, showing that geographical setting is important to how comfortable they are in being and presenting themselves as Indian Americans.

Ultimately, Dhingra identifies the core values of Indian American identity to be “putting the family first, obedience to authority, education, religion, and conservative gender and sexual norms, along with appropriate use of cultural symbols” (Dhingra 58). And acting in accordance with these values is thus the central way of negotiating Indian American identity. Dhingra’s survey also shows the reactions of the Indian American society when a member fails to live up to these values and how a “poor economic showing signals a poor upbringing” (157). This emerges as a central theme in several of Lahiri’s stories, most notably
in “Only Goodness.” Because Indian Americans are expected to be such high achievers, it is all the more disappointing to themselves and particularly to their families if they should fail. It is interesting that failure to live up to financial expectations is interpreted to be a failure not only in economic terms, but also in terms of morality. Economic failure thus becomes moral failure and, in short, the failure of one family member becomes the failure of the entire family. Failure to live up to expectations, whether in terms of career, family or home, can create strong dividing lines between characters, and will be devoted much attention in my subsequent chapters.

In Local Lives: Migration and the Politics of Place the authors state that they wish to explore “the micropolitics and everyday rituals of place-making and show how, in a fluid world of movement, place remains a deeply contested and symbolically rich site in which to constitute the self, even for those on the move” (Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle 1). This project of “place making” (1) is in fact a central aspect of the identity formation of immigrants, and it is thus a project that is undertaken by members of the Indian American Diaspora as a way of making sense of themselves and their new homeland. The authors go on to describe place as a central factor in “constraining and producing identity” (4). In the case of Indian Americans, life in America clearly fulfils both functions: being cast as a model minority produces an image of the self as clever, hard-working and successful, whilst the very expectations that one shall be clever, hard-working and successful, are constraining. Failure to attain these three goals can clearly be detrimental to the sense of self. In one of the texts in Local Lives, Michaela Benson13 proposes identifying immigration as a middle class endeavour. She argues that for certain immigrant groups, “settlement and integration can be understood as the continuation of middle class aspirations” (80). This idea is relevant to the first generation characters in Unaccustomed Earth, who build on varying middle and upper-class statuses from India, with the intention of maintaining or furthering their class status in America. Any character who does not share these middle-class aspirations stands out, and might no longer be identified or identify himself as properly Indian American. The younger brother Rahul in “Only Goodness” serves as an example here.

The different spaces or homes that Indian Americans inhabit are also of central importance to identity. Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle discuss how homes may be rooted in “diasporic imagining, international networks or collective transnational memory” (7), and this statement corresponds with how the Indian Americans in Unaccustomed Earth reproduce

13 “‘We are not Expats; We are not Migrants; We are Sauliacoise’: Laying Claim to Belonging in Rural France”
micro-versions of India in their new homeland. Rather than forming segregated
neighbourhoods and refusing to assimilate, the Indian Americans that we encounter in
Unaccustomed Earth live in ordinary American suburbs, but regularly meet up with other
Indian Americans. At such gatherings they reproduce India for each other by talking about it
and by reproducing the food, music and customs that they remember from India. The
economic mobility of these Indian Americans makes them able to travel back to India, and
also to travel to other parts of the world, and so to be part of the transnational movements of
the Indian Diaspora, while still staying rooted in their new homeland, America.

As indicated by Dhingra, Indian American identity may be produced and displayed in
different ways, by adhering to or breaking with central values in the Indian American
community. Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle argue that it is “through decisions about everyday
migrant practices, in private homes and public streets or parks, that an uneasy sense of
belonging (and exclusion) can be enacted” (9-10). This means that the clothes that Indian
Americans choose to wear, what kinds of food they eat, how and in what language they talk,
are all significant everyday practices that allow them to negotiate Indian, American or Indian
American identities, but at the same time mark them out as a group. In Unaccustomed Earth,
the second generation often comment on the attire of their parents, and how their parents’
choice of clothes marks them as ethnic Indians or assimilating Indian Americans. In the title
story, for instance, Ruma juxtaposes the attire of her parents, noting how her mother’s
colourful saris and striking jewellery would have made her stand out in suburban Seattle,
whilst her father’s typical American attire and baseball cap made him blend in as an
American (11). Some of the friendships between members of the first generation come about
precisely because they dress in traditional Bengali attire when moving about in public spaces
and are thus easily recognizable for fellow Bengalis. Examples of this can be found in “Hell-
Heaven” and “Once in a Lifetime.” The sites of public parks are significant in that while the
mothers display their status as Indian wives through their attire, they simultaneously bring
their children into contact with the American children that invariably play in the same park.
Thus this everyday practice of getting dressed and bringing their children to the park is an
element in negotiating the roles of Indian American mothers, who raise children that are to
become assimilated Indian Americans.

Robyn Andrews has conducted research into how retired Anglo-Indian expats created
a “Little Anglo-India” in their retirement home. Although these subjects lived in Australia

14 “Little Anglo-India: Making Australia ‘Local’ at St. Joseph’s Hostel”
and were not Indian Americans, the ways in which they enacted their Anglo-Indian identities is interesting in the context of *Unaccustomed Earth*. One of the central findings of the study was the importance of food as particularly evocative of India and the family structure in India. Maintaining family-like ties to fellow Anglo-Indians and cooking a particular cuisine, were identified as central to the production and negotiation of an Anglo-Indian identity (Andrews 17). In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the insistence upon family meals is striking, and this emerges as a marker of the closeness and traditions of a family. Enjoying Indian food together might even “enable a sense of familiarity” (Andrews 18), a development which is evident when members of the Indian Diaspora who are not otherwise related to each other, meet, eat and form strong and almost familial ties. When this connection is severed and diasporic subjects no longer prioritize family life or Indian food, this is detrimental to their sense of self as Indians, and also detrimental to their families. Part two of *Unaccustomed Earth* illustrates this development, showing how food and a sense of familiarity have connected Hema and Kaushik’s families to one another, and once this common ground disappears, so does the connection between the two families. I will return to this point in the chapters on family and homes. The various studies that have been conducted into immigrant and particularly Indian American identity, serve to highlight different aspects of *Unaccustomed Earth* in a way that postcolonial theory alone is unable to do. It is through a combination of postcolonial theory and sociological studies that the intricacies, similarities and contrasts within Indian American identities can best be explored.

**Design**

This introductory chapter is followed by three main chapters. All three chapters are structured in a similar way, starting with a detailed close reading of one or several short stories that are particularly striking in how the central themes of Career, Family and Homes are treated. After this initial in-depth focus, I will proceed to contrast and compare different stories and analyse how these themes appear in them. This will allow me to go into considerable depth with some stories, whilst also granting me the freedom to overlook others. However, in the space of these three chapters, all stories will have been touched upon, as they all possess literary and thematic qualities that make them interesting in my present study.

In Chapter Two I will discuss the centrality of career to Indian American identity. For this purpose, I have chosen “Only Goodness” to highlight the success and the failure of the Indian American Dream, and to look at how two siblings may become contrasting subjects
who identify themselves and each other in different ways. After this initial focus on “Only Goodness,” there follows a discussion on how the theme of career is central to several of the other stories. Aspects of class, education and working life will be explored.

Chapter Three shows how family is central to the formation of Indian American identity, and how the choices that characters make about marriage and family indicate the extent to which they identify themselves as Indian Americans. “A Choice of Accommodations” will serve as a starting point for this theme. The theme of family and love is at the core of this story and the problems of relating to first generation parents, marrying outside the ethnic community and raising children with hybrid backgrounds form the central conflict. Following this focus on “A Choice of Accommodations” comes an exploration of how the theme of family emerges as a central area of conflict in several of the stories. My focus will be first on marriage, and then on relations between first generation parents and second generation children.

In Chapter Four I will explore the function of homes in these stories, and how they offer the characters an opportunity of negotiating their Indian American Identities. In this chapter, two connected stories serve as useful examples, namely “Once in a Lifetime” and “Year’s End.” Maintaining a strict distinction between the themes of family and home is a challenge, but in focusing on the physical spaces that the characters inhabit in Chapter Four, I hope to avoid repeating what has been conveyed in the previous chapter.

After the main chapters, there will be a final conclusion in which some of the main findings will be summed up. This conclusion will also feature ideas as to how one might continue a study of Lahiri and Unaccustomed Earth, if time allowed.
CHAPTER TWO – CAREER

Indian Americans have been described as a model minority in terms of their successful careers, middle class aspirations and work ethic. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, most characters embark upon ambitious studies, often leading to multiple degrees and professional careers. Lahiri’s own scholarly career boasts a total of three master degrees and a PhD, accomplishments that do not stand out in comparison with those of her fictional characters. Although the drive to excel at school and in one’s career is visible throughout *Unaccustomed Earth*, there is one story that is particularly interesting in this respect. “Only Goodness” is well-suited for an exploration of career and its centrality to Indian American identity. It tells the story of the Mukherjee family, from the vantage point of the elder sister, Sudha. She relates her childhood and adolescent memories, and shows how her parents believed their family to be destined for success in America. They raise two clever children who excel at school and are admitted to Ivy League colleges. Thus, when Sudha’s younger brother, Rahul, drinks and drops out of college, and fails to live up to the high expectations of his parents and sister, a conflict develops between him and the rest of the family. Sudha lives up to her parents’ expectations and becomes an Indian American success story, exemplifying the norm that Rahul fails to live up to. The contrast between how the first and the second generation negotiate their Indian American identities is interesting in this story, but more so the different ways that Sudha and Rahul negotiate theirs, and how they variously fail and succeed at this.

“Only Goodness” supports Dhingra’s claim that when one member of a family fails, this failure is projected onto the rest of the family, and interpreted as the moral failure of the entire family (Dhingra 157). This fear of being exposed as morally deficient is at the core of the story, and telling the story almost becomes therapy for Sudha, who works through her feelings surrounding her childhood and her family. The story begins with the admission that it was “Sudha who’d introduced Rahul to alcohol, one weekend he came to visit her at Penn” (128). This reads as an initiation into American adolescence, where partying can be a way of breaking free from the restraints of their Indian American parents. One of Dhingra’s interviewees “referred to a common notion of Asian American men: ‘They’re geeks or nerds; they’re big computer nerd guys that want to play on a computer. They don’t go out and
party”’ (Dhingra 72). Maybe it is with this stereotype of Asian Americans in mind that Sudha introduces Rahul to alcohol and partying. She does not want her brother to be labeled an Indian American nerd, as she perhaps feels that she was. She certainly regrets that she herself did not fit in as an adolescent, that she did not drink or party in high school. In the act of letting Rahul drink alcohol, she is repeating the Americanizing influence over Rahul that she has asserted throughout his childhood.

Sudha has clearly taken on a special responsibility for her brother’s upbringing that borders on the parental. She has done her upmost to shield her brother from the sense of otherness that she felt whilst growing up. As a child, she would notice all the things that were different about her family, and she has made sure that many of the staples of an American upbringing should be natural to Rahul. Where she negotiated the American world for her parents and her brother, Rahul grew up in an Americanized environment. She remembers getting only “a flimsy apron and a weightless mask” (136) for her Halloween costumes, an indication of how foreign this celebration was to her parents. They opted out of this American tradition, but Sudha makes sure that her little brother grows up with these American traditions. When Rahul is old enough to celebrate Halloween, Sudha takes on the role of parent when she thinks up “elaborate costumes, turning him into an elephant or a refrigerator” (136). As they grow up, she continues to be cast, and to cast herself, in the role as a third parent to Rahul.15 At school she was aware of being different and remembers being picked on for the “funny things their mother occasionally put into their lunch boxes, potato curry sandwiches that tinted Wonderbread green” (143). It is as if all Sudha’s efforts at making Rahul’s childhood and adolescence as Americanized as possible are her way of dealing with the sense of otherness that she felt growing up as an Indian American, making sure that her brother will not feel the same way. In a sense she is healing something from her own childhood and working through the feeling of being used as a mediator between her parents and America.

Sudha waited until she was at college “to disobey her parents” (129). This disobedience included “going to parties and allowing boys into her bed.” Both behaviours would be unacceptable to her parents, who are described as “puritanical.” But while Sudha’s college behaviour goes on unbeknownst to her parents, Rahul acts differently. Though he is not yet old enough to buy alcohol, he begins to crave it, even in the family home. Sudha comes to realize that Rahul “consumed the alcohol in stealth, that he could not endure her

15 It is she who is ordered to speak with him when his grades drop, she who collects him at the police station when he has been arrested for drunken driving.
family’s company without it” (153). Although Sudha does not explicitly say that she is responsible for Rahul’s alcoholism and how he has turned out, the whole story is centred around her guilt. It is only in the final pages of the story that she reveals her secret. After Rahul has got drunk whilst minding their son, Sudha explains to her husband how Rahul hadn’t even liked beer, and then about all the cans they’d hidden over the years and how eventually it was no longer a game for him but a way of life, a way of life that had removed him from her family and ruined him (171).

Here Sudha finally lets on that she views herself as the prime corruptor of her younger brother, that it was she who made him drink something that he did not like the flavour of, leading by example and showing how alcohol and independence from their parents went hand in hand. Saying that alcohol has “ruined” her brother is a strong statement, as it does not offer much hope. Something that is ruined is difficult or impossible to mend and must be thrown away. At the close of the story Sudha metaphorically throws away the hopes and dreams that she had of her brother. After her brother has left, she looks at a balloon that he has bought for her son, which has now

sagged to the floor, a shrunken thing incapable of bursting. She clipped the ribbon with scissors and stuffed the whole thing into the garbage, surprised at how easily it fit (173).

The balloon may be read as a symbol of Rahul. It is an inflatable thing and Rahul, who was clever beyond his years and the hope of his parents, was in a sense puffed up beyond his real size. But just as Rahul is ageing, failing and disappointing his family, so is the balloon sagging toward the floor, only waiting to burst and be thrown away. When Sudha clips the balloon off its ribbon and stuffs it into the garbage, this echoes how she must now make a clean break concerning her brother. He is obsolete, no longer a part of her family after her husband has forbid that Rahul should ever come close to their son again. Sudha is surprised at how easily she is able to make that break, finally, after a lifetime of guilt. By confessing her role in Rahul’s alcoholism to her husband, it is almost as if she has absolved herself of her sins. To her, Rahul’s alcoholism is not just a failure in itself, but also a moral failure of the entire family, and most of all, her own. The fact that she has chosen to keep this from her parents and her husband shows her moral corruption, her failure to be a good daughter, wife, mother and Indian American. Thus the story is centred around Sudha’s attempts at dealing with her guilty conscience, and with Rahul’s final drunken mistake, she cuts her ties to him and the story ends. The culmination of the story becomes a rite of passage for Sudha, where
she finds closure with her childhood and with her parents. She has failed at Americanizing Rahul, who has become the worst kind of American and not the Indian American success story that his family had predicted.

The Indian American Dream

The American Dream is a central theme in much American literature, not least so in immigrant literature. The American Dream has many connotations and definitions, and a preliminary definition might include equal opportunity for all teemed with the idea that hard work will be rewarded with financial success. For those about to enter the United States, the prospect of attaining the American Dream is central in their motivation for relocating from their homelands, and as the United States is a nation of immigrants, it seems to promise abundant opportunities even for the newly arrived. However, many new Americans do not become financially successful and do not fit in, and such economic and social failure is often represented in immigrant literature. Although the characters in Unaccustomed Earth do not correspond to the image of the immigrant who enters America in rags, they are all motivated by their wish for a richer, better life for themselves and their children. Sudha and Rahul’s parents in “Only Goodness” are perhaps the set of parents who come closest to the “from rags to riches”-cliché, at least they project this image onto their children. Sudha’s father has never let his children forget how hard he has worked to get where he is:

He never let his children forget that there had been no one to help him as he helped them, so that no matter how well Sudha did, she felt that her good fortune had been handed to her, not earned (140).

When he relates their family history to his children, he stresses their humble background and describes how “their grandmothers had given up the gold on their arms to put roofs over their families’ heads and food on their plates” (140). This certainly paints an image of poverty, although there is no direct reference to “rags.” There is however a mention of “gold,” which brings to mind another cliché of the American Dream about how American sidewalks are paved with gold. These clichés are not mentioned explicitly in “Only Goodness,” but it is somewhat ironical that the only noticeable reference to American sidewalks is when Sudha recalls getting so drunk in her first year at college that she throws up, “splattering the sidewalks and stumbling back to her dorm” (129). If one reads this as a play on the image of gold paving the sidewalks, this shows that the myth of success in America is not all that it
seems to be. In addition, it indicates that college life, regardless of how prestigious the institution is, does not necessarily pave the way for the success that parents envision, but might just as easily be the road to dissolution.

Ivy League universities are generally regarded as the best educational institutions in the world. An Ivy League education thus becomes a symbol of a successful life in America, and as it offers the best education in the world, it seems to promise limitless possibilities for any graduate. To the first generation characters that we encounter in *Unaccustomed Earth*, getting into an Ivy League school mirrors the infinite possibilities available to those who enter the United States. Sudha’s parents certainly believe naively in America as a safe environment that will be conducive to the development and success of their children. They believe their children to be destined for success and happiness simply by growing up in America, believing this to make them “immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India” (144). Likewise, they also believe that getting their children accepted to Ivy League universities means that they have succeeded as parents. But, when Sudha has been accepted to Pennsylvania and Rahul to Cornell, their statement, “Our job is done” (129), rings uncannily naïve, since the opening lines of the story have already indicated this will not be a tale of happy-ever-after.

When the family drops off Rahul at Cornell, they find the campus almost otherworldly. Sudha describes it as being a “remote, majestic place” (130). It seems that they are all in awe of Cornell and its surroundings, and yet the mentioning of it being remote makes one think that it is somehow impenetrable. Its physical beauty is daunting and foreign to Sudha, who mentions that it is nothing like her university. In both these descriptions, it seems that Cornell, in addition to being Ivy League and thus symbolizing the American Dream, also acts as a symbol for Rahul. Just as Cornell is remote and majestic, so is Rahul increasingly removed from the sphere of his family, and similarly to the beauty of his University campus, so are his good looks considered something alien and indecipherable. Sudha says of her brother’s face that it “defied the family mould (…) his genes pulled not from the surface but from some deeper, forgotten source” (137). As such, he breaks with the looks and conventions of his family, and might more easily be viewed and treated as an American. This is important, as he is not only expected to be an Indian American success, but also a success in purely American terms.

Sudha’s parents emigrated from India and settled in England as a young married couple. Her father’s career path is described as “transferring from Badger to Raytheon” (135), which were both major industrial corporations and, though the nature of his work there is not
stated specifically, one imagines that he is an engineer. Certainly, he is adamant that his children study sciences, probably to follow in his footsteps and find secure employment. Dhingra identified a tendency amongst first generation parents to “emphasize choosing college majors that lead to well-paying careers” (50), and found an “overrepresentation of Asian Americans in science and technology fields, which pay higher wages than other fields which require similar education” (26). Whilst Sudha pleases her parents by double-majoring in economics and maths (129), Rahul tries to opt out of sciences in favour of film studies. This is unacceptable to his father, who “did not approve of paying an astronomical tuition just so Rahul could watch French movies in a classroom” (140). In this, their father is acting as a typical Indian American parent, trying to ensure a safe and wealthy future for his children. He and his wife’s financial situation had improved significantly through moving to America and settling in Wayland. Their relative affluence is hinted at when they invite 200 guests to celebrate Rahul’s admittance to Cornell (129) and also by their ability to finance Ivy League educations for both their children. Another telling hint is the fact that in London, Sudha’s mother was “working toward a certificate in Montessori education” (138), but that these plans were dropped when they arrived in America. This shows that her husband’s American income allowed them to live comfortably, but it also indicates what a shock American suburban life was to many Indian American women, who mostly became and remained stay-at-home-mothers.

Sudha and Rahul’s parents try to project success upon their children, while also projecting the success of their children outward to the Bengali community. Sudha remembers her father showing her newspaper cut-outs of children who were extremely academically talented (129), seemingly with the intention of encouraging her and proving that such feats were possible. He even obtained an application form for Harvard Medical School that he gave her at the age of fourteen (130). This shows that he possessed a naïve belief in America as a country where anything was possible, and significantly, that his children had limitless potential. Sudha also recalls being “compared to other Bengali children, told about gold medals brought back from science fairs, colleges that offered full scholarships” (129-130). These expectations seem an awful lot of pressure to place on two children, even two children as clever as Sudha and Rahul. For Sudha, this pressure creates an ambition in her to do well and to live up to her father’s expectations, however ill-founded they are. She “struggled to keep her place on the honor roll, to become salutatorian of her high school class” (130), a sentiment that is echoed in a statement by an Asian American interviewee: “The stereotype will follow you. The stereotype of being smart, work hard, always valedictorian of class”
(Dhingra 151). Sudha is thus a product of her Indian American upbringing and channels the values that her parents have instilled in her.

When it comes to Rahul, he is not only pressured by his father, but also by his sister. As a college student, Sudha lets her high school brother answer one of her philosophy papers (149), an action which echoes the Harvard application that her father showed her. As it turns out, some portion of their ambitions is well-founded, as Rahul was clever beyond his years as a child and the college-level philosophy paper that he wrote, was approved of (149). Though both siblings initially live up to their parents’ expectations, graduating from high school with good results and being accepted to Ivy League universities, Sudha veers away from her parents and Rahul cracks up. Thus in pressuring their children into certain career paths, the parents are inadvertently pushing them away from themselves, and though they might achieve the success of the American Dream through their daughter, they are losing the close-knit family-aspect that is so central to Indian identity. Sudha eventually puts an ocean between herself and her family, choosing to settle in England.

Viewing Rahul as a symbol of the American Dream for his parents, or even as a key to attaining the American Dream, offers useful insight into “Only Goodness.” He is the only member of the family to be born on American soil, and as such seems to be the one who feels the greatest sense of belonging in America. Sudha makes sure that he does not lack any of the commodities of an American childhood. She borrows children’s books from the local library that her parents refuse to buy for him and creates elaborate Halloween costumes for him. Rahul is subjected to stronger Americanizing forces than Sudha was; in fact, it is often Sudha who is responsible for Americanizing him. He seems to be more of an American than an Indian American as he acts as a typical adolescent by drawing away from his family, retiring to his room. When he is stopped for driving under the influence of alcohol, drops out of Cornell and moves back in with his parents, he is not only a failure in Indian terms, but also an American failure.

**The Good Daughter and the Prodigal Son**

The title, “Only Goodness,” tells us that the various involvements of Sudha and her parents in Rahul’s life, were all made with good intentions. But as the proverb goes: “the path to hell is paved with good intentions,” and the developing conflict between Rahul and his family does take on hellish proportions. However, “Only Goodness” also echoes Psalm 23:6 about the Good Shepherd. The passage reads: “Only goodness and kindness follow me all the
days of my life; And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come“ (New American Bible 23:6). The hope of the Promised Land, for Jews and Christians alike, was synonymous with the American Dream for many immigrants. Sudha and Rahul’s parents clearly had such hopes of their new homeland. This hopeful and positive statement might also give the reader of this story expectations that the difficulties in the family and Rahul’s addiction may be overcome. But as the story progresses, the effect of this title becomes ironic and ominous.

On a slightly different, but still biblical note, Rahul is reminiscent of the Prodigal Son. This well-known parable tells the story of the younger of two sons leaving the family home, taking much of the family’s riches with him, and wasting it on excess. It relates a fall from grace that has much in common with Rahul’s fate in “Only Goodness.” Just as the parents of the Prodigal Son invest much of their family’s wealth on him, so do Sudha’s parents pin their hopes on Rahul, investing in a costly education and a car for him. Before Rahul runs away from his parents’ home, he steals the family jewels, betraying the family code. Unlike the biblical example, “Only Goodness” does not end with a happy reunion and forgiveness. Instead, it ends with Rahul betraying his family once again, this time by getting drunk and jeopardizing the life of his young nephew. By the end of the story, forgiveness seems unlikely or even impossible. There will be no more goodness or kindness toward Rahul, who has banished himself from the family.

“Only Goodness” is also reminiscent of the Bible in how it contrasts the behaviour of two siblings. The Bible is rife with stories where the elder sibling seems faultless whilst the younger disappoints and betrays, and Sudha and Rahul appear to fill these roles of opposites. The story is narrated from a third person point of view and focalized through Sudha. Thus she becomes the protagonist of the story and, as readers, we sympathize with her. She is six years senior to Rahul, and does not have fond memories of his birth. She remembers being pushed aside by her mother (134), having to spend the night of her brother’s birth with friends of the family who were unaccustomed with children. These memories function as forebodings of how problematic Rahul’s presence in her life will be. Looking back, Sudha insists that “she had not minded” (135) when Rahul was given preference over her, and yet her denials make the reader suspect that she is suppressing her true feelings, and that she in fact feels conflicted and hurt by these memories. She goes on to contrast her childhood with the first years that Rahul was alive, and conveys how differently her parents treated the birth of a daughter to the birth of a son. One of the things that she reacts to is the mass-documentation of Rahul’s childhood as opposed to the few pictures that exist of her. This seems rather unusual to a western reader as the first-born is usually the best documented baby, whilst those that come
later are not granted the same photographic attention. The attention that is paid to Rahul could imply several things. One the one hand, it shows that his parents advanced financially in the space of their first years in America and could afford all the photographs, toys and celebrations that Rahul’s birth prompted. On the other hand, this indicates that the birth of a boy was seen as more important than that of a girl.

At the onset of the story, it transpires how different things are to be expected from Indian American females versus Indian American males. Sudha and Rahul’s parents frowned “upon the members of their Bengali circle - the men, that was to say - who liked to sip whiskey at gatherings” (129). This clearly shows that whilst drinking alcohol was not appropriate behaviour by men, it was tolerated. For a woman to drink alcohol, on the other hand, was simply unthinkable. Sudha realizes this contrast between the genders, and in order to act as her parents’ good little Indian girl she keeps “her persona scholarly, her social life limited to other demure girls in her class” (129). However, she resents that the same expectations do not apply to Rahul and that he “was allowed to wear shorts in summer, to play sports in school, things her mother considered inappropriate for a girl” (137). Here the social conservatism of her parents becomes visible. Although they raise their children in America, hoping for American success, they are still influenced by the Indian traditions that they grew up with. No matter how much they believe in Sudha as their good daughter and ambitious student, she is still under the control of her parents, and she in turn still leads them to believe that she is playing by their rules. Rahul is angered by her double standards, exclaiming “Jesus, Didi. You’re almost twenty-four. Do you really still care what they think?” (132). She is hurt by his words, but also frustrated by leading a double life. On the one hand, she is a free student who is social, dates and drinks, and on the other hand she is her parents’ Indian American daughter and trusted mediator. It is only once she has turned 24 and completed her degrees at Pennsylvania that she is finally allowed to go abroad to study and break free from her family’s grip.

Laura Karttunen has discussed how negative constructs and the disnarrated are important narrative tools within postcolonial fiction. She argues that “the negative mode is useful for illustrating a focalizing agent’s norms and what s/he expects of others” (Karttunen 425, her emphasis). In “Only Goodness,” Sudha often compares herself with Rahul, expecting that he will follow in her footsteps and that he will act in accordance with the expectations of the family and the Indian American community. These comparisons and expectations are frequently presented as negative constructs, and sometimes also as instances of the disnarrated. From the beginning of the story, Rahul is often described by how he does not act.
For instance, in school “Rahul never lifted a finger, never cracked a book unless it appealed to him” (130). This description stands in stark contrast to how Sudha studied diligently throughout her school years, and how she and her family expected that Rahul would do the same. Sudha conveys how she would often “come down with the flu over Christmas break, collapsing once she was free of the pressure of exams, and thought that Rahul might do so too” (131). Here she compares herself with her brother, imagines that because she works herself to exhaustion, so will Rahul. This is an instance of the disnarrated. Rahul does not fall ill, and yet Sudha suggests that he should have fallen ill, that he too should have worked hard and succumbed to the pressure of exams.

There is an abundance of negative constructs in the descriptions of Rahul. He is presented as the opposite of Sudha, who is consistently cast as the helpful and selfless older sister. When she is home for the holiday she gives herself “fully to her parents, watching Wimbledon with her father on television, helping her mother cook and order new blinds for the bedrooms” (139). Rahul does not pay his parents the same tribute, and Sudha notices that at Christmas he

did not eat the enormous amounts Sudha still did when she sat at her mother’s table. He seemed bored, watching but not helping when Sudha and her mother decorated the tree (131).

In these two instances, Sudha presents the things that Rahul does not do. She does not say that he is in the wrong, but she implies it. The things that Rahul does not do are emphasized, whilst Sudha’s willingness to please her parents is spelled out. This use of negative constructs makes the contrast between Sudha as the good daughter and Rahul as the dissipated son more pronounced.

One of the most significant areas in which Sudha and Rahul differ, is in their choice of partners and in their parents’ reactions to these partners. Sudha falls in love with the Englishman Roger. He is fourteen years her senior (152), has a PhD in art history, is an editor of an art magazine and has the means to provide a comfortable life for Sudha. Roger fulfils many of the demands that Sudha’s parents might have had of a husband for their daughter, but there are nevertheless many complicating factors which demand compromises on the part of Sudha’s parents and of Sudha herself. Roger is not Indian though he was in fact born in India, to wealthy parents who lived there during colonial rule. While this hypothetically provides a link between Roger and Sudha’s family, it is an ambiguous one. Roger’s ancestors colonized Sudha’s, and Roger has no understanding for Indian culture and traditions. Although Roger is
an art school dropout, this is presented not as a fault in his character, but rather as a strength: “he was a person who understood what his limits were” (147). Instead of becoming an artist, Roger went on to become an art critic. This of course makes him more acceptable to Sudha’s parents. The fact that Roger has previously been married poses a problem to his acceptance, but this fact is not granted much attention: Sudha presents it as a minor detail, an irrelevance. Though Sudha is not marrying an Indian American of her parents’ choosing, and though she is relocating to the other side of the world, she has nonetheless found a partner who shares her middle class, scholarly ambitions, and who is able to provide for her as would be expected in a Bengali marriage.

Rahul’s choice of partner stands in stark contrast to Sudha’s spouse. Rahul brings home the single mother Elena, who is described as “an aspiring actress, and (...) a waitress” (153). In this ambition and occupation she appears as the opposite of Roger, who dropped out of art school once he realized his limitations. Elena’s ambition to become an actress indicates that she has not reached the same realization yet, that she is not as mature as Roger. But like Roger, she is older than her partner. Elena is eight years older than Rahul, and while the age difference between Sudha and Roger is acceptable to Sudha’s parents, this age difference is not. When Rahul announces his engagement to Elena, his father exclaims:

You are only a boy. You have no career, no goal, no path in life. You are in no position to get married. And this woman (...) is practically old enough to be your mother (155).

This statement shows that Sudha and Rahul’s parents are old-fashioned about age difference and about a husband’s ability to provide for his wife and family. While Sudha realizes what is acceptable to her parents, Rahul does not show the same understanding. Elena too seems oblivious to the unwritten rules of the Indian American home, and refuses to “eat the rice Sudha’s mother served with lunch, saying it caused her bloating” (154). Although it is not spelled out in the text, one gets the impression that Elena does not come from the highly educated middle-class background of the Mukherjees. Her name, which indicates that she is of Eastern European descent, and the name of her daughter, Crystal, indicates that she does not come from a privileged background. The fact that she is a single parent indicates loose morals, and shows that she has not been ambitious in her education or career. Roger, on the other hand, clearly belongs to the middle or upper-middle classes, and is thus much more in

16 he has no children, and thus no living reminder of his previous relationships.
keeping with the class and career ambitions of the Mukherjee family and the Indian American community.

The differing academic, class and career aspirations of Sudha and Rahul set them on divergent paths. While Sudha works hard throughout her years at school, Rahul gets by with as little work as possible. When Sudha announces her plans to enroll at the London School of Economics, Rahul sounds “distressed, and also disapproving” when he asks: “Why do you need another master’s degree?” (132). To him it is unfathomable that Sudha would go to the trouble of moving to England and taking another degree. He does not understand her ambitions, perhaps because he has so different ambitions for himself. At the end of the story he is working part time as a line cook in a restaurant, and in the afternoons he takes care of Elena’s daughter Crystal. Thus his lack of ambitions has led to a life that is very different from Sudha’s busy existence. Where Rahul has a reasonably undemanding job, the highly educated Sudha works full time and leaves her son in the care of a nanny for large parts of the day. Thus they inhabit roles that are opposite of the norm in Indian American society, where the man is expected to be the main breadwinner whilst the woman is responsible for running the household. Another important way in which they are opposite to each other, is in how they approach alcohol. Ronald Takaki has identified a common trait amongst upwardly mobile, ambitious immigrants, as a carefulness or even avoidance of alcohol (Takaki 5). Sudha is an example of an ambitious Asian American who strives for a middle-class existence, and she and Roger are “moderate with alcohol, always ordering a bottle for the table but seldom consuming more than a glass or two” (147). Here too Rahul breaks with his family and with the Indian American society at large. Rather than drinking in moderation and pursuing a middle class career and lifestyle, he becomes an alcoholic who settles for a non-skilled job and a working-class life with Elena and her daughter. However, Rahul has had dreams of an artistic career, and his thwarted aspirations of working in film and becoming a playwright might actually be considered purer and more ambitious than the careers of Sudha and her husband.

Career is an important symbol of success in the Indian American community, and whilst Sudha has made her parents proud in this respect, here too Rahul appears as her opposite. Sudha realizes that she has become one of the many Bengali success stories, “her collection of higher degrees framed and filling up her parents’ upstairs hall” (151). Rahul, on the other hand, turns out as the exact opposite, dropping demanding subjects, bringing home mediocre grades and finally being thrown out of Cornell. This passage says it all:
Other Bengalis gossiped about him and prayed their own children would not ruin their lives in the same way. And so he became what all parents feared, a blot, a failure, someone who was not contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children were making across the country, as surgeons or attorneys or scientists, or writing articles for the front page of The New York Times (151).

**From India to America**

Immigrants come to the USA from all corners of the earth, and today the least welcomed and most feared of these are probably refugees and illegal immigrants. These immigrants generally have little choice other than to leave their home countries, and have thus been forced into migrancy. When they arrive in the US some of them form ghettos and take a long time to become integrated into American society. This makes them unpopular immigrants and they may face discrimination in their new homeland. Once upon a time Asian immigrants were perhaps as unpopular as illegal Mexican immigrants are today. During the so-called nativism of the 1920s, several acts were passed that severely restricted the immigration of Asian Americans, and it was only in 1965 that the Immigration and Nationality Act was abolished, allowing Asians to settle in America (Lowe 7). The Bengali Indian immigrants that Lahiri describes benefited from this political reform and most of them emigrated in its wake.

The postcolonial theorist Avtah Brah raises the questions of when, how and under what circumstances people decide to migrate, and asks what "socio-economic, political and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys?" (Brah 443). Unlike refugees of today, the Bengalis presented in these stories had not been forced into exile from India, but rather chose to leave in order to forward their education, personal economy and working career. Such voluntary and ambitious immigrants are labelled “economic migrants” (Braziel 29), a term which seems fitting to all the first generation immigrants in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Bill Ashcroft has suggested that "the Indian people have always been migratory and exploratory” (Ashcroft 73), and this mindset might explain the size of the Indian Diaspora. It has been estimated to count twelve million people, 2.8 of these millions living in America (Mishra 256). What is particularly striking about this segment of American society is that Indian Americans have higher incomes and more education than almost any other ethnic group, including white Americans (Dhingra 25-26). This reality is mirrored in Lahiri’s fiction, and the Indian American characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* are reasonably wealthy and highly educated. This poses the question of what makes the Indian Americans so successful?
Lahiri’s Indian American characters are all Bengalis, and in the colonial history of India, Bengalis had a privileged position. In Benedict Anderson’s survey on nationalism he describes how the English colonial authorities early on singled out Bengal and Bengalis amongst the regions and peoples of India. Anderson mentions that a Committee of Public Instruction was set up in Bengal with the intention of creating “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect” (Anderson 91). The first targets of this process were “the respectable classes in Bengal.” Clearly, the characters that we encounter in *Unaccustomed Earth* belong to this segment of Indian society, as they are all highly educated and have the means and the motivation to emigrate from India. Some characters have family ties within the colonial bureaucracy, and their ancestors were educated and employed in the British Empire. Anderson discusses the down sides of this connection to the colonial empire, and finds that a person who was privileged under colonial rule became “completely estranged (…) from the society of his own people” (Anderson 92). Thus it is not surprising that many Bengalis and other Indians of privilege emigrated from India after Independence in 1947. These Bengalis had education and a mastery of the English language that enabled them to become successful immigrants in the West. The Indian American characters that we encounter in *Unaccustomed Earth* are testimony to Anderson’s argument of how “Anglicanization produced thousands of Pals all over the world” (Anderson 93). Here he is signifying upon “Pal” which is on the one hand a common Bengali surname, and on the other hand a name for friends. Lahiri also mentions a Mr.Pal in “Only Goodness,” who is a fellow Bengali who helps the Mukherjees out when they are in great need of a friend. Thus both Anderson and Lahiri indicate the importance of forming friendships with fellow Bengalis.

The two central male characters in “Hell Heaven,” Usha’s father and Pranab Kaku, both emigrate from India as foreign students, finish their studies abroad and settle in the USA. But despite this similar career path, their lives and their careers are completely different. At the onset of the story, Pranab Kaku is a recently arrived immigrant who is baffled by life and studies in America. Usha and her family follow him through his studies and see a tremendous change in him. When he arrives in America, he is fresh from a prestigious educational institution in India, Jadavpur (63). This indicates the standing of his family, whose wealth seems greater than that of Usha’s parents. In Boston, he studies engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), a world-renowned east-coast university. Though he is enrolled at a prestigious educational institution, he is cavalier about attending his classes and seems disillusioned with the quality of American education. His parents had expected him to stay in
America only to study, before returning home to marry and work there (71). But Pranab Kaku learns to enjoy his life in America, and when he falls in love with the American student, Deborah, he decides to stay on in America and build his life and career there. When he tells her parents about Deborah he promotes her as a philosophy student whose parents are professors with PhDs (68). He is obviously trying to show that although Deborah is an American, she belongs to the same class as he does, and that she epitomizes the values that he and his fellow Bengalis revere. But his parents do not accept his choice, and so his temporary exile from India in order to study becomes a life-long exile from his home country and his family.

Usha’s father is presented as Pranab Kaku’s stark opposite, not only personally but also professionally. He has lived in Berlin and finished an education in microbiology, before going on to becoming a researcher at Massachusetts General Hospital (61). Like Pranab Kaku, he left India in order to study and acquire a profession. But in contrast to his Bengali compatriot, he studied diligently and returned to India to marry a girl in order to “placate his parents” (65). Although he has become a husband and a father, it is his role as a hard-working scientist which seems to define him. He is absent throughout much of the story, staying at work all day and returning home only in the evening. His dedication to his research is clear when he is described as being

wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate. Conversation was a chore for him; it required an effort he preferred to expend at the lab (65)

He thus represents the work ethic that is associated with Indian American identity, and yet he is so absorbed in his work that he neglects his wife and daughter. Thus he is both a typical career-driven Indian American, and at the same time he is an exception to the Bengali father figure of a close-knit family; his work seems more important to him than his family, and he does not connect with his wife or his daughter.

In “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma’s father has followed a similar path, and he confesses to feeling that he “turned his back on his parents, by settling in America. In the name of ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered anymore, he had forsaken them” (51). He looks back upon his young manhood, and considers the values of ambition and accomplishment to be irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. Now that he is retired, this aspect of his life feels meaningless to him. While he has a PhD in biochemistry (28) and a strong work ethic, he has not been as passionate about his career as, for instance, Usha’s
father. Working hard was something that he did in order to provide for his family, buy a house in the suburbs and become financially secure. Now that he is a retired widower, he is glad that those years of his life are over, that he no longer works in order to keep his family in the lifestyle that they have grown accustomed to: “He didn’t want to live again in an enormous house that would only fill up with things over the years, as the children grew, all the things he’d recently gotten rid of” (53). Now he spends his time and his money as he pleases, and feels like “an old man who was himself behaving like a child” (55). He has moved into a small apartment, does some volunteer work (30) and travels. No one demands anything of him anymore and this is freeing to him.

All the first generation Bengali immigrants that are described in Unaccustomed Earth are to some extent economically privileged. They are able to travel to the other side of the world, study at some of the most prestigious educational institutions and then set up home there. Ashcroft describes a type of immigrant coming from a privileged background as: “the person who is able to travel freely, to experience and participate in other cultures for long periods, who has time to engage with the Other in a ‘cosmopolitan’ way, must inevitably be a person with considerable material resources.” (Ashcroft 76). Simon Gikandi described such immigrants as “postcolonial elites,” who “by virtue of their class, position or education” distinguished themselves from their countrymen, a distinction that persevered and in many cases even strengthened through the process of decolonization (Gikandi, 29). This immigrant type is most pronounced in the first generation parents that we encounter in “A Choice of Accommodations” and “Once in a Lifetime.” Amit and Kaushik’s fathers travel between continents not as students, but as successful professionals. In the process, they uproot their families on the quest towards greater professional success. Brah argues that “diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots ‘elsewhere’” (Brah 443). In travelling so freely, these fathers challenge the concept of the Diaspora, as they do not seem to have strong ties to either their home or host countries. Thus, they raise the question of well-to-do-Bengalis being more migratory expats than diasporic subjects, while also showing that career is an all-important aspect of Indian American identity. I will return to these characters in greater detail in chapters three and four.

Desperate Housewives

The Bengali men who come to the USA in order to study and work are all of marriageable age, and with the exception of Pranab Kaku, they marry Bengali wives and
bring them over. These wives form a significant group of immigrants, who in contrast with their husbands do not have any working career outside of the home, either as students or as working professionals. They are expected to cook, clean and otherwise care for their husbands and children, and their only success lies in the careers of their husbands and the extent to which their children excel. Many of these female first generation immigrants seem to turn into desperate housewives and detest suburban American life. Being suburban stay-at-home-mother seems to equal an unhappy and isolated existence.

The desperateness of this state is most pronounced in “Hell-Heaven,” where feeling trapped in a loveless marriage leads the wife to attempt suicide. Her daughter comes to pity her mother and the desolate life that she leads with no other source of employment than housework (76). At one point when the wife complains about the loneliness of living in the suburbs, her husband merely suggests that she go back to Calcutta (76). This suggestion is more like an empty threat: if she is so unhappy, she can do as she pleases. He knows that going back to Calcutta by herself is not an option and his response might cause her to feel ashamed and angered by her dependency on him. In this sense they have the opposite discussion from the couple in The Namesake, where it is the wife who threatens her husband with going back to India. In “Hell-Heaven” the roles are reversed and the husband threatens his wife with his lack of care. However, by the end of the story, her life seems to have taken a more positive turn, a development which is highlighted by her pursuing a degree in library science at the age of fifty (82). This turn of events indicates that a major source of the unhappiness and loneliness that these women feel is due to their lack of an independent career. When their children begin school and later move out, they are left to their own devices for most of the day, and do not have much to do except prepare the family’s evening meal and watch soap operas, daily rituals that do not fulfil them.

Ruma’s mother was equally miserable with life in the suburbs (29), and her husband seems to feel guilty for not having provided her with a happier life. She raised two children in America and spoke to them exclusively in Bengali, made elaborate Indian meals and owned more than two hundred saris (17). These aspects of her life in America show how she was able to cling to the Indian ways of life. Mrs. Bagchi’s example seems to indicate that if a Bengali first generation woman joins the work force she will naturally integrate into society and abandon many of the traditional Indian customs, such as dressing in saris. Mrs. Bagchi is an independent woman who has made a life for herself without the aid of a man, and here too she emerges as the exact opposite of Ruma’s mother, who if she were widowed, would have moved in with her daughter instead of living by herself. Ruma’s father recognises that Ruma
is echoing her mother in making herself overly dependant on her husband, and that she is leading a life as an isolated stay-at-home-mother. This makes Ruma’s father concerned that his daughter will become as unhappy as his wife was, and he wishes for a different life for her.

In “Year’s End” we encounter Dr. Chaudhuri’s second wife, Chitra, who has a hard time adjusting to suburban life in America. She is scared of being alone in the house, and does not know or care for American traditions. When Kaushik suggests that she learn to drive, she answers:

‘Oh, no,’ she said, not as if she were incapable, but as if driving were beneath her. ‘I would not like to learn’ (270).

This reluctance to interact with American society in one of the only ways possible for a wife living in a remote, suburban area, indicates how alienated Chitra feels in America. Here she is on the same page as several of the other first generation wives that we encounter in Lahiri’s fiction. Sudha’s mother is paralyzed by her arrival in American suburbia where she “did not work, did not drive” (138), and in Interpreter of Maladies, Mrs. Sens’ reluctance to learn how is a signifier of how unhappy and alienated she feels in America, and ultimately becomes her downfall. These examples show that just as entering the American work place, driving a car is also an alien practice, reserved for their husbands. However, Chitra’s background is different from these other first generation wives in that she had a career in India. Chitra used to be a primary school teacher “in her former life” (262), a statement which signals that marrying, having children and moving to America makes a female working career an impossibility, something that is inconceivable now that she is reborn as a Bengali homemaker in America. Kaushik notices that her demeanour is still that of a primary school teacher, an observation that makes one regret that she is not able to pursue the career that she is clearly well-suited for. As with the other Bengali wives, it seems that staying home with children instead of pursuing a career in America makes integration in society more difficult. Although we do not learn how Chitra feels about her new life in America, being married to a man who spends all day at work and living in a remote area make it likely that she too will become familiar with the loneliness and desperateness that is experienced by the other first generation wives in Unaccustomed Earth. At the end of the story, Chitra is described as “chafing” under her solitary existence, and the family moves to a more urban area (293).

Ruma has been a hard-working, successful lawyer, earning six-figure sums (36). After the birth of Akash she came back to work in a part-time position, but after the sudden death of
her mother she resigned and has since been a stay-at-home-mother. She now uses the bookcase that used to hold her law books to store Akash’s things (44), a choice which clearly shows how she has swapped a working career for being a full-time mother. Although she has made a conscious decision about not working anymore, a decision which means that her husband has to work all the more in order to finance the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed, she does not seem to be particularly proud of it. She has not told her father about her decision, and when asked about her plans for finding work in Seattle she admits to herself that “she had not bothered to contact any firms in Seattle, not called up the trusts and estates attorney one of the partners at her old firm had given her the name of” (36). This shows that she at some level feels guilty or shameful about staying away from work, maybe because she feels her talent is going to waste, but also because she is repeating the life that her mother led, a life that did not make her happy. Her father realizes this, and tries to persuade Ruma to go back to work, He is surprised to see his daughter staying away from professional life, as she has worked for as long as he can remember (40), and he warns her that she should go back to work so that all her hard work will not go to waste (56). In this advice he is not primarily worried for her for financial reasons, but rather is concerned about her happiness. He seems to be proud of how hard she has previously worked, and she shares this pride. She mentions several times how hard she worked as a lawyer and how much money she made, details that show the pride that she used to take in her career, and how important it was to her sense of self.

Mrs. Bagchi stands for the opposite choice in life from Ruma and all the other female characters in Unaccustomed Earth. She emigrated to the USA by herself, completed a doctorate in statistics and has been a lecturer at an American university for close to 30 years (8). By not going down the road of marriage and motherhood in America, she does not have to take anyone else into consideration. She has not even maintained ties to her Indian family, and she is regarded as “an anomaly, an Indian woman alone” (8). Gayatri Gopinath has studied how the heterosexual Indian married woman is the norm within the Indian Diaspora, and how anyone who does not conform to this ideal is suspicious. Amongst these outsiders she counts single women, who “negotiate (....) their function both as threat to home/family/nation and as perennially outside the confines of these entities” (Gopinath 264). Mrs. Bagchi illustrates how the only way for Bengali women to be truly free to pursue careers, is if they do not have families, and thus challenges the confines of the Indian American society.
An Education

The first generation parents in *Unaccustomed Earth* all take pride in their ability to raise children who become high achievers. Seeing their son or daughter be accepted to an Ivy League university seems to be the ultimate goal, and a key indication of their children’s cleverness is the school that they are accepted by. This is evident in “Unaccustomed Earth,” when Ruma feels that despite her successful career as a lawyer, her father always respected her younger brother more “for having graduated from Princeton and getting a Fulbright to go abroad” (37). Princeton an Ivy League university, and Ruma identifies her failure to be accepted by any of the Ivy League institutions as a setback in her relationship with her father: “She knew that she had disappointed him, getting rejected by all the Ivy Leagues she’d applied to” (37). This disappointment is one of many that she feels responsible for, and Ruma “felt the prick of his criticism as she had all her life” (13).

Sang’s college career is the story of an Indian American failure. She is accepted into Harvard, an impressive feat and obviously a topic of conversation amongst her family’s circle of Bengali friends. This makes the disappointment all the greater for her parents when she drops out after her first semester. This must be disastrous and shameful to her parents, and as a result “her mother locked herself up in her bedroom for a week and her father refused to speak to her” (181). After dropping out, she works part time at a bookstore (174). This change of career plans clearly is not divulged to the Bengali community, as she keeps receiving phone calls from misguided Bengali suitors. Their interest in her shows how the myth of the young successful Bengali is perpetuated:

They were interested in a mythical creature created by an intricate chain of gossip, a web of wishful Indian thinking in which she was an ageing, overlooked poster child for years of bharat natyam classes, perfect SATs (176).

Bharat Natyam is a traditional Bengali dance form which is mainly practiced by girls and young women. Thus it is ironic that the 30 year old Sang, who is in love with an Egyptian, is presented as a poster child for such traditional Indian virtues. As she has attended an Ivy League university, this is what potential husbands are told about her, regardless of the fact that she has dropped out, and is in a relationship with someone else. She seems to try to live through her boyfriend, or work her way into his life. She acts the part of a stay-at-home wife by doing his laundry and helping him redecorate his apartment (188, 186), although she is not living with him and they are not married. Her lack of ambition on her own part seems to drive
her into investing all her emotions and energies on a man who is “always blocking off chunks of his day and working from home with the phone unplugged” (181). Ironically, whilst he uses his scholarly career as an excuse for his reclusiveness, he is in fact conducting an affair with another woman.

The first generation Bengali men seem to be part of a quest for a PhD. Dr. Choudhuri is the first of these men to obtain a PhD and the reverence with which the other Bengalis treat this accomplishment show that it was once a foreign, impressive thing. However, as the different stories unravel it transpires that PhDs become commonplace among the Bengalis, a title that is mentioned in an offhanded manner. In “Unaccustomed Earth” it is mentioned in passing that Ruma’s father has a PhD in biochemistry (28), and that Mrs. Bagchi has a doctorate in statistics. This cements the impression of Indian Americans as being ambitious and career driven, and academic excellence being central to one’s sense of self. However, the importance of academic careers is not limited to the Indian characters in Unaccustomed Earth. To Paul, the white protagonist in “Nobody’s Business,” his failure at attaining a PhD leads to an existential crisis. His scholarly persona has been his defining trait, and when he fails at that, he becomes reclusive, doubting himself and too ashamed to meet his peers (182). When he finally passes his oral exam and finishes his doctorate, he is released from this pressure and the story ends. But “Nobody’s Business” ultimately shows that academic expectations may be crippling, and that it is dangerous to identify oneself exclusively with an academic career.

**The Indian American Work Ethic**

Much has been written about the Protestant work ethic, but in Lahiri’s stories there is a corresponding Indian American work ethic. In “Unaccustomed Earth,” the virtue of working hard is kept up by Ruma’s father. Even in his retirement he requires work. For instance, he volunteers for the Democratic Party, and while visiting Ruma he takes on work with her garden. He is immediately attracted to Ruma’s garden, and she remembers back to her childhood that for ”as long as she could remember it had been his passion, working outdoors in the summers as soon as he came home from the office” (16). It seems that it was in fact this hobby that nurtured him in that period of hard work and child rearing. Gardening offered him a solitude that he could not find elsewhere, and it seems to have been therapeutic to him (49). In addition, it allowed him to show his love for his wife in a way that he was otherwise unable to. He grew the fruits and vegetables that his wife craved, and while Ruma feels that he was
oblivious to her mother’s needs in other ways, "he had toiled in unfriendly soil, coaxing such things from the ground" (16). The use of “coaxing” implies a loving, caressing involvement, which strengthens the impression of gardening as his true love. When he goes to work on Ruma’s garden he realizes that his daughter most likely will not be able or willing to maintain the work that he has begun, but he does not seem to mind. Rather, he enjoys tending the garden and connecting to his grandson in the process. As to the future of the garden, he wonders whether his daughter might hire a gardener (48), an idea which shows that he does not expect the same work ethic from her, nor the same love and understanding of gardening.

Although all the first generation men that we encounter in Unaccustomed Earth are scientists, for several of them, their true passion lies elsewhere. In Part Two of the collection, Dr. Choudhuri is to a large extent characterised by his work ethic. He is a civil engineer and in the memories of his son, he has always been away at work all day, the days when he does not go in to work rare occasions that are treated with special attention. And yet, it seems that his true passion might have been something else. It transpires that he is a talented poet, and that he used to enjoy composing poetry. Kaushik reveals this, describing it as ”one of our family secrets, the fact that my civil engineer father was also a poet” (262). This indicates that for a Bengali man, any kind of creative work should be kept as a secret hobby, that this was nothing to indulge in. Like the joy that Ruma’s father takes in gardening, Dr. Choudhuri’s love of poetry seems to fulfil and interest him in ways that his paid work does not. Their scientific careers show that the Bengali work ethic emphasizes certain careers over others, and that any responsible man would choose a life in science over anything else he might like to do. The second generation of Bengali immigrants seem freer in their choice of careers, although they too feel pressurised to opt for sciences at university. Ruma’s father tries to convince her to take biology instead of history (37) and Sudha placates her father by double-majoring in economics and maths (129), but in the end, the second generation characters are largely able to make their own choices and to pursue the careers that they are passionate about.

In ”Going Ashore,” Hema and Kaushik both display great passion for their work. Their careers have top priority in their lives, and they both use it as an excuse for not conforming to expectations as Indian Americans. In Hema’s case, her academic career is an excuse for her status as an unmarried 37-year old (297), whilst for Kaushik it conveniently takes him far away from Massachusetts and his father’s new family. They both seem to live and breathe their work, which for Hema means that even on holiday in Rome she does not cease to work and plan future courses. She gets up before eight in order to read and write,
rather than sleeping in and behaving as is usual on a holiday. Though she senses that she should ideally be experiencing more of what Rome has to offer, she revels in "her isolation, immersed without effort in the silent routine of her days" (299). It is only once she meets Kaushik that this solitude ends and she is able to draw herself away from her work. Kaushik, on the other hand, is never completely off-duty from his work as a photographer as he is always ready to document the world around him through his camera. Though Kaushik is equally wrapped up in his job as Hema, he too feels some regret at how his career shapes his life. He feels that he has become single-minded, to the point where he acts as a photographer before being a fellow human being (317).

They are both focused on leaving a lasting impression in their fields. To Hema, her dissertation is a source of pride which she describes as “a bound, published, privately praised thing” (299). For Kaushik, finding his photographs in international journals, having them reach his father’s doorstep even, is a source of pride (306). They both hope to publish books, and in this sense make their mark on the world and in their fields. Hema envisions a book on the Etruscan culture, whilst Kaushik pictures a book containing a portfolio of his photos (316). In the end, the pride which they take in their careers seems to be one of the main obstacles to their continued relationship. Kaushik proposes that Hema come with him to Hong Kong, to build his new life there. While Hema appreciates the fact that he wants to share his life there with her, she is simultaneously provoked by the idea that she should give up her life and her career in order to go with him (321). It is this reluctance to compromise that essentially stands in the way of them continuing their relationship, although it is impossible to predict whether they would have been happy together had they taken the leap and committed to each other. In fact, Hema reflects that “it would not have made a difference (...) And she refused to (...) hope for a thing that was unchangeable” (316). This pessimism regarding Kaushik is tied not only to her assumption of him being a womanizer, but may be more connected to how set in his ways a 40-year old photographer must be, who is used to travelling freely wherever world affairs take him.

Apart from their strong work ethic, a further link between Hema and Kaushik is that they have both chosen postcolonially correct careers. Though Hema’s work within the field of classics studies is widely different from Kaushik’s career as a photographer, the common denominator is that they both document peoples and events that the world might otherwise remain oblivious to. Julie Mullaney has defined postcolonial writing as being particularly occupied with “vernacular archives (sculpture, rock painting, music and theatre, architecture, orature) in exploring indigenous histories and cultural experiences” (Mullaney 39). The
project of postcolonial studies thus becomes to excavate, document and represent that which has been suppressed by empire. This project is at the core of Hema’s academic interest:

Since eighth grade, reading Latin had been an addiction, every line a puzzle to coax into meaning. The knowledge she’d slowly accumulated (…) felt sacred, enabling her to bring a dead world to life (299).

Her present project is to study the Etruscans, the civilization that preceded Rome, and that was subsequently suppressed by the Roman Empire. For Hema, this means that she studies one of the early colonial periods of the Old World. The fascination that she develops for the history of the Etruscans seems to echo the project of certain postcolonial theorists, of discovering what has existed prior to empire and excavating the culture that has been suppressed by a more powerful and imperialist one. She aims to gather enough information to set up a seminar about the Etruscan culture when she returns to Wellesley, and in this sense teach a postcolonial subject about pre-colonial times.

Like Hema, Kaushik has also chosen a profession that allows him to negotiate the postcolonial world.17 After college he travelled in South America, beginning his career as a photographer in El Salvador, which he understands as a place “so obviously at war with itself” (303), a condition which has been typical of much of the postcolonial, decolonized world. His work brings him into violent conflicts in parts of the world that used to be under colonial rule. To his surprise, his ambiguous status as Indian American fares him well in these troubled parts of the world: "the Salvadorans were never sure what to make of Kaushik” (303). His ethnic background is a resource to him as a photographer, similarly to the way in which Rushdie’s background in the Indian Diaspora was a strength to him as a writer (Rushdie 19). To Kaushik, documenting the atrocities and tragedies of the world makes him feel useful (305). However, when it comes to his own life, he is reluctant to document any of the people or situations that move him. This is evident when he makes a conscious decision to leave his camera at college when coming home for his first Christmas with his father’s new family, and once again when he refrains from photographing Hema on their brief Italian holiday. It seems that having documentation of such situations is too painful to bring himself to take pictures. Looking at pictures of his mother certainly is, and pictures of Hema might be all the more painful to view. Both Hema and Kaushik are passionate about their work and

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17 Photography may be studied as a postcolonial concept as the idea of positives and negatives. In developing photographic negatives, black becomes white and vice versa. This could symbolize a play on ethnicity, but also the ways in which characters in Unaccustomed Earth appear as opposites, a son being the negative of his father for instance. This and other aspects of photography would offer an interesting approach to Unaccustomed Earth, but due to constraints of time and space, are only briefly mentioned here.
revel in their ability to highlight peoples and histories in a meaningful way. But just as Hema’s work brings her into contact with something that can not interact with her, so too does Kaushik’s work. Their careers, as postcolonially correct that they may be, invariably allow them to escape from the realities of their own lives. They can deal with other people’s problems and other people’s histories, while negotiating their own identities may be too painful.

In closing, it seems that careers play a huge part in the formation of Indian American identities. Careers offer the characters ways of finding their place within American society and Indian American society, their families and themselves. To those that do not have careers outside the home, family life becomes even more central to a sense of self, and it is to this aspect of Indian American identity that I now turn.
CHAPTER THREE - FAMILY

Family emerges as a central theme in *Unaccustomed Earth*, and is of central importance to the characters that one encounters in the different stories. I will pay particular attention to the ways in which family as an element of identity is played out in the first and second generations of Indian Americans in Lahiri’s stories. I propose that the ways in which the characters go about forming relationships and the partners that they variously choose are significant markers of the extent to which they adhere to an Indian American identity. A second important theme within the larger theme of the family is the relation between generations. Belonging to a family is perhaps more central to a sense of self and identity than finding a partner, and most of the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* are very family-focused. When discussing what it means to belong to different generations of Indian Americans I will include the relationship between first generation immigrant parents and their children, or between the next generations – parents who were raised in America and who now are about to raise their own children, who are part Indian, but predominantly American. In addition to focusing on family relations, Lahiri’s stories also describe the family-like ties that exist between Bengalis in the USA. Those who travel from India to America leave behind extensive family networks, and often experience isolation and a sense of alienation in their new homeland. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, some of the stories clearly show how this loneliness and lack of surrounding family may be remedied by befriending fellow Bengalis and welcoming them into the family. From a postcolonial perspective, these constructs are especially interesting, as they show the ways in which Indian American identity may be negotiated.

While all the various stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* to some degree encompass the theme of family, there is one story that emerges as particularly interesting in this respect, namely “A Choice of Accommodations.” In it, the protagonist Amit Sarkar is faced with the challenge of inhabiting the often conflicting roles of son, husband and father, and I will discuss these three roles in my close reading of the story. Being the son of first generation Indian American parents, he needs to deal with the issues of rejection and estrangement that have haunted his relationship with them ever since they moved back to India, leaving him in Langford Academy, an American boarding school. Less than ten years into his marriage,
Amit and his wife, Megan, are going through a rough patch with little time to themselves, and he is frustrated with the state of their marriage. Lastly, he is the Indian American father of two daughters who, despite being part Indian, seem wholly American. Whilst embracing the joys and responsibilities of fatherhood, he is sometimes crippled by worries that he will fail as a parent. Regarding the theme of Indian American identity, this protagonist seems loath to identify himself as an Indian American and tries to suppress his background, only to have it return to him without warning. Nevertheless, though he does not admit that Indian traditions mean anything to him, he seems uncomfortable with certain aspects of his family life that do not correspond with the values he has been raised with, most notably the fact that his wife is the main breadwinner, whilst he takes on the responsibilities often associated with a domestic feminine role.

The story takes place in the time span of less than twenty-four hours and is set around the wedding of Amit’s schoolboy crush, Pam. The wedding takes place at his old boarding school, and Megan and Amit are supposed to stay for the whole weekend, making it a romantic getaway for the couple and their first holiday alone together since becoming parents to their two young girls. But rather than being a weekend of the romance and intimacy that they used to revel in earlier in their relationship, the wedding sets the stage for a crisis in their marriage, and one which is only tentatively overcome at the end of the story the following day. However, it is not just Amit’s relationship to his wife, or the strains of raising two children that are at the core of his personal turmoil, but rather his past and the lack of any real connection with his own parents. Returning to the place that evokes bitter adolescent memories, he finds himself doubting the happiness, and even the reality of his present family life. Thus, two family conflicts are at the core of the story. On the one hand there is Amit’s lack of closure and reconciliation with his parents and the way in which they have treated him. On the other is the tangible crisis in his marriage, that peaks in Amit drunkenly walking away from his wife and the wedding party.

On the opening page of *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri quotes Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. The passage that she has quoted from goes on to describe the eeriness that Hawthorne’s narrator feels as he returns to the Custom House in Salem, a building and a town that have played a major part in his life, though he admits to having been “invariably happiest elsewhere” (11). These sentiments regarding Salem and the Custom House seem to be echoed in the feeling that Amit gets upon going back to Langford. Amit associates the school with the rejection he felt at the hands of his parents, and returning offers an uncanny sense of homecoming. He anticipates beforehand that going back will be a haunting experience when
he expresses his reluctance to “socialize with ghosts from his adolescence” (89). Like Hawthorne, Amit too has built a life elsewhere, he has moved on since graduating from the school. And yet upon returning to Langford he is once more reminded of his unhappiness there. At first he dulls the pain that these memories cause him, and the pain of his deteriorating marriage, with alcohol. As the story comes to an end, however, he finally faces his past and present, defies and transcends his schoolboy experiences and may at last have found some measure of closure with his past.

It is significant and ironic that the story is set around a wedding. The fact that Amit and Megan are present as another couple celebrate their love and enter into marriage, makes the lack of romantic love and the problems in their marriage stand out in contrast. Altogether, it is strange that Amit has accepted the invitation to a wedding at his old school. He has spent his adult life trying to forget his time at school and has not kept in touch with his classmates. His reason for accepting the wedding invitation seems to be that he has always secretly coveted Pam, and at this difficult point in his marriage he is keen to see the woman of his dreams one last time. As such, his insistence that they go to the wedding is an indication of how he wants to escape the reality of his marriage and rather revel in the daydream of Pam. Seeing her walking down the aisle, he thinks to himself that “she was the most beautiful woman he had ever known” (103). But then, as he meets and talks with Pam, he notices that she is not the picture of perfection that he has imagined. He notices signs of ageing in her face, and finds that his ideal woman is not marrying into the ideal situation. To his surprise she is becoming stepmother to her husband’s children, something Amit would not “have predicted for Pam, such complications, Pam who could have had any man” (105). This realization is a kind of reality check for Amit. In the mundane family life that he leads, he has perhaps fantasized about Pam, but now he sees that not even his ideal woman is exempt from the realities of ageing and the compromises of family life.

Although Amit is the protagonist of the story and one might expect to feel sympathetic toward him, there are various reasons why we often feel more sympathetic to Megan - despite not having access to her inner thoughts and feelings. It is Amit’s thoughts that we are privy to, and his private thought that Pam is “the most beautiful woman he had ever known” (103), whilst standing next to his own wife, can make readers critical of him.18 Amit is full of conflicting feelings and seems powerless in what he sees as deterioration in his marriage. This is evident when he instead of telling his wife that he is unhappy, tells a complete stranger at

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18 although many readers might also be able to relate to this
the wedding that his marriage has “disappeared.” Here we as readers sympathize with Megan, sitting on the other side of the table and probably not hearing, and with the receiver of this confidence; a young woman who is engaged to be married, and who is disturbed by Amit’s fatalistic view of his marriage. Some of Amit’s thoughts and feelings are omitted from the text. For instance, during conversations with Megan, Amit often does not answer her and we sense that he becomes exasperated with her and withholds a negative comment or thought. At other times Amit comes across as childish. After having disgraced himself at the wedding, he still reacts with anger when Megan announces that she wants to sleep on the drive home: “’You’re always tired’ he wanted to tell her. ‘The only time you haven’t been tired in years was last night’” (121). But he keeps his peevishness to himself, aware that he is in no position to throw accusations. Instead, he pleads with her that they go to the wedding brunch, much as a spoilt child might plead in order to get his way. Amit emerges as an unsympathetic antihero, unable and unwilling to maintain important relationships, and neither in touch with his own past, present or future.

The Absence of Parents

Amit is the only child of the esteemed Dr. Sarkar and his wife. The Sarkars belong to the upper classes of Bengali society, are highly educated and financially successful. They have lived in various parts of the world where Dr. Sarkar has been employed. Amit was born and raised in Massachusetts, where his father grew “restless on the faculty of Harvard Medical School” (95). The reference to “restless” makes it seem that Dr. Sarkar returns to India on a whim, that he grew bored at one of the best medical institutions in the world and was willing to uproot his family because of his restlessness. The importance of his career and his willingness to let it take him where it will becomes clear when he sends his only child to a boarding school in America and moves back to India. This memory is painful to Amit, and it is ironic that he marries Megan, who is an ambitious, hard-working doctor. He notices that she too sometimes acts as doctor before acting as a wife: “Megan regarded him with a look of professional concern, as if he were a patient on her rounds” (88). This echoes the relationship between Amit and his father, and shows an almost Freudian repetition of relationship patterns. Though Amit’s parents are not present at Pam’s wedding and do not appear in the story, they are very much present in Amit’s thoughts and recollections. In fact, it seems that their absence in his life is at the core of why Amit feels so unhappy and out of place. Although he now has
a family of his own, he has never stood up to his parents,\textsuperscript{19} and lacks closure with the
disappointments of his childhood and his feeling of not being important enough to his parents.

Amit’s parents have traits in common with other Indian Americans, and yet they
break with many of the traditions within Indian American society. As members of the Indian
Diaspora in America, they have ties to other Indian Americans who Amit describes as “his
parents’ uniformly successful crowd of Bengali friends” (95). Dr. Sarkar’s successful career is
typical of the Indian American community, and he projects the strong work ethic that
permeates Indian American identity. However, Amit’s mother is described as having short
hair and wearing trousers, “putting on saris only for special occasions,” whilst his father
enjoys drinking gin and tonics (96). In this they break with Indian tradition, and in raising
their Indian American child in this home environment, they are not laying the foundation for
the adult Amit identifying himself as particularly Indian. However, the main departure from
the values of Indian American identity is the lack of a close-knit family life. When Amit’s
father is offered a position in India, he chooses to leave his only child behind halfway across
the world, only to see him in the summer holidays. This means that not only is Amit first
brought up in a home where the traditional staples of Indian home life are absent; he also
grows up lacking the close-knit connection with his parents so typical of Indian American
homes. Thus it is no small wonder that Amit grows up to avoid his parents, and also that he
feels out of touch with the Indian American community, lacking a clear sense of self as Indian
American.

Amit appears to be the opposite of his father in terms of work ethic and ambition, and
is thus at odds with the norm within Indian American society. Amit’s lack of career ambitions
seems to be a type of rebellious contrariness against his father. But Amit is also his father’s
opposite in the role as father. Amit cannot fathom sending his daughters to boarding school
and is so attached to them that he has not spent a night away from them in three years. He
identifies first and foremost as a father, whilst Dr. Sarkar seems to have identified first and
foremost as a doctor. While Amit initially followed in the footsteps of his father by going to
medical school, perhaps it is his reluctance to be anything like his father that made him
unwilling or unable to complete his studies. Complying with the expectations of his parents
gradually ceases to be a priority to him, and he might even secretly cherish being able to defy
and disappoint them. He admits that he is aware of “what an insult it was to them” that he
married Megan, a woman they had never met (112). Amit is among the second generation

\textsuperscript{19} with the exception of his elopement with Megan
characters in Unaccustomed Earth who, through their choice of non-Indian partners, not only decline the possibility of finding someone who will strengthen their Indian identities, but also defy the wishes of their parents and thus in a sense desecrate Indian family tradition. In this he is similar to Rahul in “Only Goodness” who announces that he is engaged to the scantily dressed, single mother Elena. Amit similarly springs his relationship with an American working class woman on his parents when he elopes with and marries Megan. But unlike Rahul, Amit finds that his identity as husband imbues his life with meaning, and allows him to avoid making the same mistakes as he feels his own father made. In forming his own Indian American family he is at once distancing himself further from his Indian heritage, and yet in the role of the father and husband in a close-knit family, he is perpetuating the family values so central to Indian American identity.

For the weekend of the wedding, Amit has arranged accommodation at the Chadwick Inn. In a typical understatement he adds that his parents’ “had not stayed here for parents’ weekends” (86). He also remembers that instead of coming to his graduation from Langford, as they had planned, his parents stayed in India because Dr. Sarkar was called upon to perform cataract surgery on a member of Parliament. Although this shows how successful Dr. Sarkar was, it also indicates that cataract surgery, which after all is hardly a question of life and death, is more important to him than being at his son’s graduation. Amit does not comment further on this, refraining from saying how hurtful this must have been to him, but as readers we can imagine the sense of rejection he must have felt. In another understatement, he hints at how devastating the experience of being sent to boarding school was, mentioning that “it was possible, after a traumatic experience, for a person’s hair to turn gray in youth,” and promptly reasons that in his adolescence there had been no death or accident or “life change, apart from his parents sending him to Langford” (93). Here he indirectly blames his parents for turning his hair gray, and thus in a sense putting an abrupt end to his childhood and adolescence. He concedes that doing to his daughters what his parents did to him is unimaginable, “letting go of them as his parents’ had let go of him” (86). To “let go” is a passive expression, where the active equivalent would have been that they “put him” in boarding school. Thus it seems that Amit’s parents were disinterested and almost absent minded when they parted with their son, that it did not mean anything to them. Letting go also evokes the idea of a lifeline or an umbilical cord which is let go, severing the connection between parents and son. As Amit grows up, he similarly lets go of his chances of a medical career and of a successful career in journalism, and at the wedding party he seems to be in the
process of letting go of his marriage. Thus history is repeating itself, but when it comes to his own family, Amit fights against this loss.

A close-knit family life has been identified as a central trait of Indian American identity. In this, the Sarkar family have failed miserably. Moving back to India and placing their son in an American boarding school meant severing the close ties between the young Amit and themselves. Though Amit is loath to openly blame them for this rejection, he indirectly does, several times. His memories of his first period at Langford are still fresh in his mind and he remembers being “crippled with homesickness, missing his parents to the point where tears often filled his eyes,” and yet soon enough he came to “shed his dependence on them even though he was still a boy.” “Crippled” is a strong active verb, showing that Amit is unable to function properly without his parents. Not only was missing his parents painful, but being reduced to tears would also be punishing in an all-boys boarding school. The revealing use of “shed” indicates that he was not only able to cast off his dependence on his parents, but one might imagine that he also casts off part of his love for them too. Finally, he admits that even as an adult “he refused to forgive them” (all 97).

The Marriage That Disappeared

Amit feels that his parents have never fully accepted his choice of wife. She is an American who does not share the same privileged background as Amit, and who does not seem knowledgeable about Indian culture and traditions. Amit notes that Megan is not wearing jewellery, and adds that she could have chosen to wear “the jewels that his mother had given her eventually, that were too ornate for her taste” (107). This statement shows that Amit’s parents did not rush to embrace Megan, and that it was only after a length of time that they honoured her in the Indian tradition of giving their son’s wife jewels. Amit does not comment on this, not showing if he approves or disapproves of Megan’s taste, but reveals that he prefers her without makeup (92), an indication of how he likes it when she is casually made up. Knowing that he is emotionally distanced from his parents, one may imagine that he is silently happy that his wife does not wear his mother’s jewels, although he is divided in these feelings. Considering the vast wealth and high status of the Sarkar family, these jewels are likely very valuable, and Megan’s reluctance to wear them shows that either she is oblivious to their true value and meaning, or she is defying her in-laws by refraining from

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20 and ornate jewellery does not seem to mix well with an otherwise casual style
wearing them, just as Amit defied them by eloping and marrying her. In marrying a woman who will not wear them he is distancing himself from his parents, his past and thus also his Indian identity.

It seems that one of the things that Amit is attracted to in Megan is how little she reminds him of his Indian heritage, that she looks nothing like his mother and the women that his parents might have wished him to marry. When Megan puts on “a reddish lipstick,” applying a colour that is typical of the vermillion of Bengali women, Amit notices that he preferred the intelligent, old-fashioned beauty of her face. It was the face of someone he could imagine living in a previous era, a simpler time, in an America that was oblivious to India altogether (92-93).

This mentioning of India seems to come out of nowhere, with the exception of the previously mentioned jewellery. Amit does not mention any Indian friends, traditions or anything else that reminds us that he is in fact an Indian American. And yet this description of Megan indicates that while Amit may not appear to identify himself as particularly Indian, he is nonetheless continuously aware of his Indian American identity, and of how oblivious his wife is to this aspect of him.

Instead of actively seeking the acceptance of his parents, Amit and Megan eloped and got married, thus avoiding the decision of where and how to hold an Indian American wedding. Though it was initially romantic love that tied them to each other, now it is their two young daughters. At the commencement of the story, it quickly transpires that Amit and Megan’s relationship is at a low point. Although Amit does not express this clearly at the beginning of the story, and perhaps does not even fully realize it, as readers we are privy to marital communication which indicates the deterioration of their marriage. Amit’s first inclination upon entering the hotel room is not to celebrate their new-found privacy by embracing his wife on their first outing without their daughters in three years, but rather feeling that he “was in the mood for a drink” (85). The lack of physical intimacy and their lack of enthusiasm about their hotel room serves as a stark contrast to the passion with which they embarked upon hotel holidays in their early days as a couple. Where they previously would have fought for a better room, now Megan only states “it’s not worth it, for just two nights” (91). Marriage and parenthood have clearly changed them and their relationship, and Megan is resigned to settling with what they have. Amit, however, is frequently annoyed with

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21 perhaps as an act of solidarity with her husband
Megan. She does not seem to know or care where Langford is, describing it as “in the middle of nowhere” (86). She is clearly oblivious to how significant Amit’s time at Langford was, how the boyhood trauma of being left there has shaped him. Though Amit’s irritation is not spelled out, one imagines that he is silently mad at Megan for not taking a keen interest in this part of his past.

As they prepare to go to the wedding, Megan notices a spot on her skirt, and on closer inspection Amit sees it stems from a cigarette burn. The spot is described as “unsightly, like the bright flesh exposed when a scab is forcibly lifted away” (91). This reads as an image of their marriage: outwardly quite ordinary, but upon closer inspection displaying an unsightly wound. Later, the weather emerges as an image of the problems in their relationship, with Megan deciding that they should go home one day ahead of time, claiming that to stay the whole weekend would be “a bit silly (…) given the weather” (120). Here it is clearly not the weather that is the real reason why Megan wants to go home early, but rather the storm that is coming in over their relationship. Just as there is nothing to be done about bad weather, there is no way to mend the hole in the skirt. The only way to hide it is to stay together, keeping close by each other’s side the whole evening, so no one will notice it. At first they manage to do so, but as the party wears on, Amit leaves Megan in order to get more drinks. They subsequently drift apart, with Amit spiralling downward into drunken, unsympathetic thoughts and statements. After the dinner he searches for a phone to call and say good night to his daughters, but finding no phone, he wanders back to the hotel and falls asleep.

In this disappearing act he is repeating how he quit medical school. Instead of making a decision and turning in a letter of resignation, he simply walked out and kept walking in the opposite direction of his exam. Likewise, he does not tell Megan what he drunkenly tells a perfect stranger, namely that “our marriage sort of (…) disappeared” (113-114), but rather walks away without much intention and no explanation. This link between medical school, their relationship and the wedding party is visible when Amit tells a schoolmate: “She stuck it out. I didn’t” (103) Megan is the working-class daughter of a policeman, whilst Amit comes from a privileged background and is the son of a successful doctor and it is thus somewhat surprising that she is the one who completes medical school. Likewise it is Amit who has insisted they go to Pam’s wedding, he who wants to see the woman of his boyhood dreams

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22 the skirt being gray
23 although it is not unusual that children that come from rich and privileged backgrounds lack ambition and become dissipated
walk down the aisle, and yet it is Megan who stays at the wedding party, socialising and dancing while Amit lies in a stupor in the hotel.

At the end of the story, Megan and Amit are reconciled when they end up alone together in one of the old school dormitories, in a room that is rife with unhappy memories for Amit. Instead of quarrelling over what happened the previous night, or about their relationship in general, Amit makes a physical advance on his wife, taking the initiative and being assertive in a way that seemed impossible to him at the beginning of the story, when all he felt was an impotent “twitch of desire, too mired by exhaustion to act upon” (93). In these final moments of the story, Megan allows Amit to behave as the assertive male, having “relaxed her body, adjusting herself to accommodate his hand” (125, my emphasis). This is the only partial reference to the title of the story, and although the title also alludes to the choice that the couple make of staying at a hotel rather than choosing the much cheaper dormitories, it here refers to the ways in which Megan forgives and accepts Amit, and allows him to find in her his sense of self as husband and father.

In this final act of making love to his wife, Amit is in a sense doubly defying his parents. He makes love to his American wife, a woman they would not have wished for him. It is also significant that he makes love to her in the dorms of the school that his parents chose for him, and by making love in a boys-only school dorm, Amit is simultaneously desecrating the rules of the school and the wishes of his parents. Thus this final scene offers Amit some measure of closure, having finally defied his parents and made his peace with the school. He mentions that he remained a virgin until he left the school, so in finally having sex in one of the dorms, he is going through a rite of passage. It is as if he is an adolescent all over again, reliving the period of his life that he feels robbed of by his parents and the school. Whether Megan is conscious of the importance of this action or not, she indulges Amit, and simultaneously rekindles the passion of their relationship.

The Transformation of Parenthood

Amit and Megan are the parents of two young girls, Maya and Monika. Amit concedes that “apart from their vaguely Indian names they appeared fully American” (94). The girls look nothing like him and have inherited their mother’s complexion. Despite the distance that he feels from his parents, and the distance that he seems to feel to all things Indian, he admits that he is bothered by the fact that “his mother and father had passed down

24 sharing a Capital letter with Megan
nothing, physically, to his children” (94). And yet perhaps Amit’s daughters silently please him by denying his parents any discernable descendants. However, he also mentions that he is frequently asked if his daughters are in fact his, a disclosure that leads us to believe that this bothers him more than the fact that they do not look Indian.

For Amit, fatherhood has become his prime identity. He continually fears that he will lose his daughters for instance in freak accidents in which the girls die, whilst he survives. He worries that a “brief glance in the wrong direction, he knew, could toss his existence over a cliff” (91). Lahiri’s use of “toss” is important: as in the tossing of coins, Amit fears that in a momentary act of negligence, he will have gambled away his daughters’ lives and therefore his own existence. It is also a term that implies to throw actively, and is a huge contrast to the passivity with which his parents are described as having let him go. But nevertheless, Amit fears that he will lose his daughters, in correlation with how he lost his parents when he was left at Langford Academy, and that the cataclysmic effect being left had on him will be repeated.

Fatherhood has given Amit’s life a sense of purpose, “fulfilling him in a way his job did not” (113). He remembers feeling powerful when he was able to impregnate Megan (112), his ability to produce a new life surprising and delighting him. Fathering two children makes him feel proud and manly, two feelings that he otherwise does not seem particularly familiar with. In fact, in his marriage and in his parenting, he fulfils the role that is typically attributed to females. He is the one who sacrifices his career in favour of being the referee for his daughters, who worries about them when they stay with their grandparents. He complains that as a parent, Megan

was less fussy, less cautious than he was. One her days off she indulged them, baking in the kitchen, not minding if they skipped dinner because they were too full of cookies and cake (90).

Thus Megan fulfils the expectations that one has of a typical man25 in that she is the main breadwinner, works to the point where she hardly sees her husband and daughters, and is better than Amit in compartmentalizing and relaxing away from her children. Although she is older than Amit, more driven and ambitious, being cast in the role of parents has properly defined their contrasting roles, and it is perhaps exactly this emasculating of parenthood that causes Amit to behave as he does, to doubt his relationship and, inadvertently, to sabotage it.

25 except for the fact that she bakes
However, Amit’s anxiety connected to his family life is most clearly the product of the trauma of separation he suffered as an adolescent. He wishes to be the opposite of what his father was, but struggles with the universal fear that he will “repeat the sins of the fathers.”

**Love and Marriage**

Finding someone to love and being loved in return are important to all the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*, but the ways that different people go about finding love varies. On the one hand are the love and marriage patterns of the first generation of Indian Americans, and on the other hand the corresponding patterns of the second generation. These groups have widely different approaches to romantic relationships and marriage, and I will argue that the different choices that Lahiri’s characters make when it comes to love and marriage are significant markers of their sense of self as Indian Americans. To the parent generation in *Unaccustomed Earth*, being a “Good Indian” seems to equal marrying within your caste, and significantly marrying someone suggested and approved by your family. In “A Choice of Accommodations,” Amit’s parents clearly belong to the same privileged segment of society. He describes how they “had both summered in hill stations and attended boarding schools in India” (96). Though the details of their marriage are not mentioned, one can only assume that they entered into an arranged marriage. Certainly, they wish that their only son should “marry a Bengali girl, raised and educated as he had been” (112). This clearly shows the contrast between the first and the second generation of Indian Americans. The first generation entered into arranged marriages and want the same for their children, believing this to be the only way for the children to achieve lasting relationships that also maintain their Indian American identities. The second generation, on the other hand, often marry someone of their own choosing, regardless of ethnicity. Apart from Amit and his parents, *Unaccustomed Earth* is rife with examples of the contrasts between first and second generation Indian Americans in how one approaches love and marriage.

A majority of the marriages among first generation characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* are arranged marriages. Some of these marriages are presented as happy unions, and two such marriages even feature the same husband, namely Kaushik’s father, Dr Chaudhuri. Dr Chaudhuri was first married to Kaushik’s mother, Parul, and despite their marriage being arranged, it is described as having “a touch of romance about it” (255). For Kaushik’s father,

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26 a central character in Part 2 of the collection, first and foremost in “Year’s End,” which I will return to in the next chapter
it was love at first sight, and the public displays of physical and emotional intimacy in their marriage make it stand out in contrast with the other first generation marriages in *Unaccustomed Earth*. The Chaudhuris come from the same background, both born into privilege, educated and with a keen interest in the arts. Thus this arranged marriage was a success and the two were well-suited for one another. When Parul dies of cancer, her husband finds it painful to be reminded of her, and solves this by hiding away all photographs of her, trying to suppress the memory of her. However, the final solution to his grief only emerges three years after her death, when he is introduced to the young widow, Chitra, and marries her in a ceremony arranged by relatives.

Where his first wife was similar to him in age, background and taste, his new wife is younger and seems to come from a less privileged background. Despite their differences they gradually get acquainted and fall in love with each other. In this, they follow a more typical trajectory of arranged marriage than was the case with his first marriage. The romantic notion of falling in love at first sight is not typical for the arranged marriages in Lahiri’s fictional writings. The ideal pattern within Indian culture is rather marrying, subsequently getting acquainted and finally falling in love. While Dr. Choudhuri and Chitra correspond to this pattern, Chitra also fulfils the role of a traditional Indian American wife in her cooking and adherence to Indian traditions. Here too she poses a contrast to Parul, who was marked by her privileged upbringing and was not the typical upholder of Indian tradition that is often expected of Indian American mothers. It is interesting that Dr. Chaudhuri has a more Indian choice in his second marriage, perhaps acknowledging the importance of his cultural roots. Besides showing the contrasting ways that arranged marriages can play out, the example of Dr. Chaudhuri also indicates that his identity as a husband is central to his sense of self. His need for having a wife to come home to illustrates the acceptable Indian American social pattern, but also the universal need for someone to love and care for. However, not all the marriages in *Unaccustomed Earth* are as happy as Dr. Choudhuri’s two marriages.

The opening and title story, “Unaccustomed Earth,” contrasts two arranged marriages, one of them happy, and the other one less so. Both marriages end in the death of one spouse, and the two remaining spouses, Ruma’s father on the one hand and the university teacher Mrs. Bagchi on the other, become available to each other. The happiest marriage is also ironically the one that lasts only two years, indicating that whilst short-lived happiness is easy to come by, life-long happiness is more difficult to achieve. Mrs. Bagchi’s brief marriage is presented as different from the other first generation Indian marriages in that she “married a boy she’d loved since childhood” (8). This indicates that her husband must have belonged to
the same social stratum as her, otherwise it is unlikely that her parents would have allowed them to get acquainted. And yet the fact that they loved each other throughout their adolescence and were allowed to marry makes them different from the other Bengali couples in *Unaccustomed Earth*, who seem to have been introduced to each other not long before marrying, and with marriage as the sole motivation behind their meeting. When Mrs. Bagchi’s husband died two years into their marriage, she refused to remarry, emigrated to America and remained a widow.

The contrasting marriage in this story is that between Ruma’s parents, who never seem to have loved each other in the same way that Mrs. Bagchi loved her husband. Ruma’s father admits this when he reflects that Mrs. Bagchi “had loved her husband of two years more than he had loved his wife of nearly forty” (30). And yet although theirs was a less romantic arranged marriage than Mrs. Bagchi’s, what also made it different was the fact that while the Bagchi’s led their married life of two years in India, close to family and in a culture that they were both familiar with, Ruma’s parents embarked on married life in a new and alien place, in America. Being away from family and away from all things familiar was a huge strain on their relationship. Ruma’s mother was unhappy, finding life as a suburban housewife a lonely existence. Though Ruma’s father was shocked by his wife’s death, it seems that he is in some ways relieved with now living alone, responsible only for his own happiness. Ruma realizes that whilst those who lose a long-term spouse frequently fall ill in the next few years, “her parents had never loved each other in that way” (33). This realisation is bittersweet, as is her father’s act of planting his wife’s favourite plant in Ruma’s garden. Unable to make his wife happy while she was alive, and unwilling to give up on his life in sympathy with her, he honours her in this way instead. In a sense, this is a final act of closure with his first marriage, whilst for Ruma, her mother lives on in her mind and now also in her garden.

When Ruma’s father meets Mrs. Bagchi in his old age, he finds he has more in common with her than he ever had with his wife. They share an interest in travelling, an interest that brought them together in the first place, being the only Bengalis on a tour of Europe. Like him, she too is fiercely independent, revelling in her privacy, and yet willing to share a portion of her life with him. Significantly, she is an Indian American who has made a life and a career for herself in the United States, and their lives have thus followed the same trajectory. Cultivating a romantic relationship with a fellow Bengali allows him to negotiate his Indian American identity in a new way. On the one hand, the couple are able to communicate with each other in Bengali and share childhood experiences of life in India, and on the other hand to share their experiences of life in America, a life that neither of them is
interested in giving up in favour of moving back to India. They do not feel bound by Indian tradition, as neither of them has moved back to India in order to take care of parents, and for Ruma’s father it is equally unthinkable to move in with and be cared for by his daughter. He and Mrs. Bagchi realize that their true homeland is now America, and their romantic connection allows them to share and strengthen an Indian American sense of self.

Though all the arranged marriages in the first generation that we witness have produced at least one child and thus seem to have encompassed some measure of happiness, the marriage between Usha’s parents in “Hell-Heaven” stands out in its unhappiness. Although they have one child, Usha, they also suffer five miscarriages (70), a tragedy that is a fitting symbol of the tragedy of their relationship. It does not bode well for their marriage that the husband agreed to get married only in order to “placate his parents” (65), that in fact he did not wish to be wedded to anything other than his work. As a married man, he does not become divorced from his work, rather the contrary, and his wife becomes isolated, depressed and increasingly desperate with her situation. Furthermore, they are different from each other in age, disposition, and background. While he has grown up in the countryside, his wife misses the urban lifestyle in the Calcutta of her youth. However, she admits that things could be worse; she could be living in the home of his parents in rural India – a fate far worse than the suburban isolation of life in America (64). The central problem with their marriage is a lack of connection, warmth and love. Being of different generations and being raised in different communities also means that they do not share memories or interests from their life if India, and thus when the younger Bengali student Pranab Kaku enters their lives, a man who is more similar to her in age and who she has much in common with, she falls in love.

Usha’s mother and Pranab Kaku rekindle their connection with Calcutta and with Indian culture and traditions through each other, and this bond strengthens her love for him and her sense of herself as Indian. Thus when Pranab Kaku chooses a non-Indian wife, Usha’s mother is doubly devastated. Not only has he chosen another woman, he has also chosen to forsake part of his Indian identity, and she loses him as a secure point of identification. It would seem that Usha’s mother has in fact regarded Pranab Kaku as a projection of the India that she grew up in, a stereotype. She sees him as a good Indian boy, an innocent and newly arrived immigrant who is in need of her care. When he marries Deborah, Usha’s mother realizes the fallacy of her projections. In Bhabha’s work on stereotypes, he describes the fallacy of regarding a stereotype as something that offers “a secure point of identification” (Bhabha 99, emphasis his). Although Bhabha’s idea of stereotyping concerns colonizers stereotyping the colonized, or Orientalists stereotyping Orientals, the process of stereotyping
also seems applicable to Lahiri’s stories, particularly to those that deal with the relationship between seasoned and newly arrived immigrants.

In marrying the American woman Deborah, Pranab Kaku is the only first generation character who breaks with the norm of marrying the Indian woman chosen by his parents. Pranab Kaku’s marriage is not parentally sanctioned, and his determination to marry Deborah makes his parents in India cut all ties to their son. Through finding a non-Indian spouse, he distances himself from the Indian American community and instead embraces an American identity. This American identity is outwardly visible, for example in the degree of intimacy that he and Deborah show in public, behaviour that is inappropriate in Bengali society. At his wedding, Usha’s family is the only Indian family present, and the food and drink that is served and the way the marriage is celebrated is all-American, retaining no Indian customs and hardly any Indian guests.

When it comes to marriage, Usha’s father and Pranab Kaku appear as opposites. Whereas Usha’s father has acted in compliance with his parents’ wishes and married an Indian girl of their choosing, Pranab Kaku has done the opposite by marrying Deborah. When Pranab Kaku invites Usha’s family for Thanksgiving years later, Usha’s father is still part of the Indian American community, and still declines beef and alcohol. Pranab Kaku, on the other hand, has lost contact with the Indian American community, and has become visibly lax in his consumption. Ironically, though Usha’s mother had always warned that marrying an American woman was a mistake, and that Deborah would inevitably leave him, in the end it is Pranab Kaku who strays and leaves his wife for another woman. He has become morally lax in American society, infected by “the Western disease.” In an act of ultimate irony, he cheats on Deborah with a married Bengali woman, showing that he too craves a partner who shares his Indian American identity. If one continues to view Pranab Kaku as a stereotype, then this final development strengthens Bhabha’s argument that the force of the stereotype lies in “the ambivalence on which the stereotype turns” (Bhabha 109). In cheating on his American wife with a married Bengali woman, Pranab Kaku has transcended the stereotype, and shown how impossible it is to fix someone as a particular projection.

The female Indian author Bharati Mukherjee describes how she, by choosing a husband outside her ethnic community, “was opting for fluidity, self-invention, blue jeans and T-shirts, and renouncing 3,000 years (at least) of caste-observant, ‘pure culture’ marriage in the Mukherjee family.” She describes her marriage as “cultural and psychological ‘mongrelization’” (Mishra 187), adding that she takes pride in this term. In breaking with the traditional pattern of the Indian American community, Mukherjee is reminiscent of many of
the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*. The outrage and distancing that Pranab Kaku’s marriage caused, especially the harsh reaction from his parents, shows how controversial mixed marriages initially were. The second generation may also meet with initial scepticism, but most non-Indian spouses in *Unaccustomed Earth* are eventually accepted by the Indian families, at least on a superficial level. Whilst arranged marriage was established in the first generation of Indian Americans, these rules lessen in importance for the second generation. In assimilating to American society there is a corresponding lessening of the importance of Indian tradition, and in the second generation Indian Americans that we encounter in *Unaccustomed Earth*, many seem to identify more with Americans than with fellow Indian Americans.

Whilst arranged marriage may have been the norm within Bengali society in India, the more typical pattern that precedes marriage in America is the romantic notion of falling in love, preferably without the involvement of family. This basis for marriage is different from Indian notions of marriage, and as such the way that first generation parents feel about their marriages and the way their children perceive them, are also very different. The idea that “falling in love” is more of an American concept than an Indian one, is evident in “Unaccustomed Earth” when Ruma wonders whether her father might consider her idea of falling in love with a house “frivolous” (23). This statement indicates that to a first generation Indian, falling in love might not be sufficient reason to decide in favour of anything. Such decisions as who to marry or what house to buy should rest on more stable reasons than simply having fallen in love. Ruma has a different view of the importance of romantic love from the view of her parents, and in this she is similar to her second generation peers. Like them, she was raised in America and values romantic love. She seems to pity the lack of love in her parents’ marriage, and has felt responsible for providing her mother with the comfort that her father should have provided for his wife. This sentiment is illustrated by her feeling that she has played the role of second spouse to her mother and tried to fill in for her father (37). Indeed, like many of the second generation characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma observes her parents’ marriage as an Indian insider, and simultaneously with the eyes of an American youth, probing for public displays of affection that never occur.

Dhingra’s survey found that few, if any, of the Indian American second generation interviewees wished to marry outside their ethnic community (Dhingra 69). Many interviewees reported having dated people who were not Indian Americans, but when it came to marriage, they preferred to marry within the Indian American community. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the second generation characters mostly fall in love with people outside
the Bengali community, and although they date many Americans that they do not end up marrying, some characters do marry outside their ethnic community. The second generation characters find themselves vying for the acceptance of their parents, and in most cases first generation parents gradually accept and welcome the partners of their children, regardless of their ethnicity.

In “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma has decided to marry Adam, and this decision is made without the initial blessing of her parents. In fact, Ruma’s mother accuses her daughter of being “ashamed (…) of being Indian” (26), and worries that marrying an American will lead to the loss of Ruma’s Indian identity. In this attitude, she echoes Bharati Mukherjee’s sister, who sees in Bharati “‘the erasure of Indianness,’ the absence of an unvarying daily core” (Mishra, 187). Though Ruma’s choice of a non-Indian spouse is not immediately approved of, in time, her parents warm to their daughter’s husband and the father of their grandson. Ruma’s mother comes to embrace her American son-in-law, and makes sure that he is introduced to Indian traditions. She does this particularly through cooking Indian food for him, and Ruma reflects upon how her husband’s favourite dish is her mother’s Indian cream-filled cakes (26). In this sense, an appreciation of Indian food is a redeeming feature in Adam, and supplies a bond between Indian mother-in-law and American-son-in-law. However, when Ruma’s mother unexpectedly dies, this bond between Adam and Indian tradition is severed, as Ruma is unable to concoct the dishes that her mother made with ease. Although Adam appreciates Indian food, he has not learnt to appreciate other aspects of Indian tradition, and Ruma does not manage to translate the values that she was raised with, to her husband.

While Ruma seeks and gains the recognition of her parents for choosing a partner who do not belong to the Indian American Diaspora, some of the other characters in Unaccustomed Earth do not seek parental blessing of their relationships. The two best examples of this are the female protagonists of “Nobody’s Business” and “Going Ashore,” and their relationships share some common ground. Both protagonists fall in love with men who are unwilling or unable to commit to them, and both keep these relationships a secret from their parents. In these endeavours they end up broken-hearted, and seek refuge in their families.

Sang’s relationship with the Egyptian academic Farouk forms the central conflict in “Nobody’s Business.” They have been seeing each other for several years and she hopes that

27 In this, they mirror Lahiri, who is married to an Italian.
28 for instance, he does not seem to understand why Ruma should feel duty bound to invite her father to come live with them.
marriage is not too far into the future. But despite her intentions, she has not told her parents about him. This is clear from the amount of phone calls that she receives from potential suitors. These suitors are eligible Indian bachelors who her parents try to put in contact with their daughter, oblivious to the fact that she is uninterested in anyone but Farouk. Farouk is also silent about their relationship, claiming that Sang is only his cousin (194). The two have widely different notions of what a relationship should be. Whilst Sang is hoping for a proposal and in the meantime helps Farouk with house matters such as laundry and redecorating, he, on the other hand, does not want her to stay overnight, let alone move in. In addition, he is conducting an affair with the older American woman, Deidre. Sang’s desire to marry Farouk is revealing of how she deep down is a traditional Indian American girl, who wants to be able to identify herself as a married woman.\(^{29}\) It is ironic that despite the number of eligible Indian bachelors who make themselves available to Sang, she wastes her time and emotions on Farouk.

At the beginning of “Going Ashore,” Hema reminisces about her one long-term relationship so far. She fell in love, and spent the better part of her grown-up life conducting an affair with the married scholar, Julian. This relationship necessarily remains a secret, both to his family and to hers. Her parents innocently believe that “she was single because she was shy, too devoted to her studies to bother with men” (297), and even wonder if maybe “she preferred women.” Meanwhile, Hema does not have to tell her parents that she has fallen in love with an American, although it seems that she would have liked to, as she for a long time hoped that he would leave his wife for her. She has been burned by this long-lasting affair and describes it as “a heap of rubble” (296) and a “demolishing” force in her life (298). Acting the part of the other woman for so many years has made her all but give up on love. It is against this background that she agrees to meet an Indian bachelor that her parents introduce her to. She meets Navin, the Indian\(^{30}\) bachelor that her parents have found for her, and in the space of three weekends decides to marry him. Where Julian slept with her behind his wife’s back, Navin wants to save the physical side of their relationship until marriage. He is thus the complete opposite of Julian, and as she approaches her late thirties, she appreciates his willingness to commit, and finds that after “years of uncertainty with Julian, Hema found this very certainty, an attitude to love she had scorned in the past, liberating” (298).

\(^{29}\) perhaps she is particularly keen to inhabit the role of wife because she has given up on becoming a career woman?

\(^{30}\) albeit not Bengali.
Whilst marrying outside the Indian American community was almost unthinkable to the first generation characters, actually marrying an Indian American seems almost unthinkable to those of the second generation. Hema is the one character who embarks on relationships with fellow Indian Americans, and to her, these relationships seem more exotic than dating outside her ethnic community. Outwardly too, these relationships are treated as unusual and exotic, and Hema finds herself explaining why she has agreed to marry Navin, a man she hardly knows. Her friends “either thought she was doing something outrageously stupid or thrillingly bold” (313). In fact, the relative ease with which Hema enters into these Indian American relationships shows that she, perhaps more so than the other second generation characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*, is at ease with her ethnic background, and that acting in accordance with Indian tradition does not feel alien to her. When she sees the traces of her first night with Kaushik on her face: “she was pleased by that unbecoming proof, pleased that already he had marked her” (314). This act of marking his romantic partner seems innocent and juvenile behaviour, but it is also possible to interpret this as a way of marking her as his woman. The love bite could serve as a reinterpretation of the ancient Bengali ritual of a taken woman wearing vermilion in her hair. The pleasure that Hema takes in this marking shows that Hema wishes to belong to a man. Not only does being marked by Kaushik strengthen her image of herself as an attractive woman, but it can also represent her Indian identity.

Hema is very much attached to a piece of Indian jewellery, a gold bangle, that she has inherited and worn throughout her life. When she loses it at the airport in Rome, she feels as though she has lost a part of her self (324). This bangle that she has worn all her life up until now, ties her to her family and her ancestors. When Kaushik latches on to it with his little finger, he unwittingly honours their Indian connection and it is this connection that makes their relationship so profound and exotic to them both, as falling in love with an Indian is new to them. The bangle signifies the unchanging family values that may be passed on to the next generation, and the fact that Hema always wears it, shows that much like Indian heritage, such pieces of jewellery need not be little used and irrelevant things kept in their boxes, but may also be living, growing parts of the identities of these children. Hema’s bangle, after all, has grown along with her and been adapted in order to fit her as her wrists have expanded. She loses it on her way to India, where she is set to marry and continue the traditions of her Indian family. While leaving Rome and the bangle behind means letting go of her identity as

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31 as Kaushik leaves the jewels that he inherited from his mother.
Kaushik’s love, she also simultaneously loses her identity as the unmarried Hema and grudgingly embraces her new identity as an Indian wife, a status that she reminds herself will reward her with numerous new pieces of jewellery.32

**Translating Between Generations**

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the problems of communicating across generations is a recurring conflict. The scholar Lisa Lowe has observed that in much Asian American fiction “the question of the loss or transmission of the ‘original’ culture is frequently represented in a family narrative, figured as generational conflict” (Lowe 62). *Unaccustomed Earth* corresponds to Lowe’s stipulations of Asian American literature, and the opening story is perhaps most illustrative of such family narratives. In “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma’s father ponders what if “the conclusion he sometimes feared was true: that the entire enterprise of having a family, of putting children on this earth, as gratifying as it sometimes felt, was flawed from the start” (54-55). Here he startlingly doubts the salience of the goal of having a family. This is an unsettling statement, as we expect this father and grandfather to embrace the family life that his daughter offers him. Readers may wonder “what if,” and thus call his fixed identity as a father in this story into question. He remains nameless throughout the story, only being referred to as father or grandfather. In this he is similar to almost all the other first generation characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*, and yet being a focalizer in this story makes his namelessness stand out. His nameless status might function to make him more universal, as a father, grandfather and widower. However, his thoughts about Mrs. Bagchi and about other aspects of his life, show that he does not just identify himself in terms of his family role. But Ruma is oblivious to these other aspects of her father’s identity. It almost seems that anything about her father that is not directly related to his role as father and grandfather, is unfathomable to her. The fact that he is fixed in the eyes of his daughter only as a father figure, makes his doubts and negative view of family life all the more troubling. When considering moving in with his Ruma more permanently he reasons that: ”He did not want to be part of another family, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it” (53).

Ruma’s mother was an important link between Ruma and her Indian American identity, and without her, Ruma seems to lose her sense of self as part Indian, and is unable to pass Indian values on to her son, Akash. It was her mother who insisted that Ruma speak

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32 Interestingly, the Bengali meaning of Hema is “gold,” and the gold bangle thus becomes a symbol of Hema, making the loss of the bangle a loss of identity.
Bengali in the home, a tradition that Ruma continued when she taught Akash some Bengali words while he was still a baby. As he grew out of his babyhood she switched to English, feeling that “Bengali had never been a language in which she had felt like an adult” (12). Her sense of self as being incompletely Indian is connected to her incomplete mastery of the Bengali language.

Ruma’s father surprises her by filling in the role left vacant by her mother (47). He helps around the house, plays with Akash and even teaches him Bengali words and customs. The only Indian custom that Ruma seems to consciously honour is making tea. She describes it as “a ritual she liked, a formal recognition of the day turning into evening” (45). And yet Ruma is contemplating honouring Indian tradition in a more life-altering way, namely by inviting her father to come and live with her in his old age. When she finally does ask, her father declines. They both sense that she needs his company more than he needs hers. For Ruma, taking care of her father would mean having company, remedying the loneliness and sadness that has affected her since the death of her mother. It would also mean negotiating her Indian American identity, doing the right Indian thing by taking care of her parent. As her father leaves, she is hurt by this rejection, but more so by the postcard that she finds, addressed to Mrs. Bagchi. Not only is her father conducting a secret affair with a Bengali woman, but he also composes letters to her in Bengali, a language he knows his daughter does not master, thus strengthening Ruma’s feeling of being out of touch with her self, her family and her heritage.

The term “translation” may be used not just to infer the act of translating one language into another, but also to describe the act of interpretation and understanding that is central in communication. Within postcolonial theory, translation has mainly been employed as interpretation, or reinterpretation. A leading theorist in this tradition is Spivak, who launches the question of whether the following situation equates the birth or death of translation: “When the daughter talks reproductive rights and the mother talks protecting honour” (Spivak 409). Such dilemmas are abundant in Unaccustomed Earth. The second generation are continuously struggling to translate themselves to their parents, to bridge the gulf between the outlook of first and second generation Indian Americans. The quotation from Spivak is particularly interesting to the conflict between mother and daughter in “Hell-Heaven.”

Usha grows up as the only child in an unhappy marriage. When she reaches adolescence, she feels her mother’s grip on her tighten (75), as she is not allowed to attend dances and date, and her mother flies into a rage when Usha wants to start wearing a bra. Her mother’s strictness stems from her determination that her daughter will not “get away with
marrying an American, the way Pranab Kaku did” (75). Whilst the thirteen year-old Usha has begun to develop crushes on boys in her class, her mother fears that her daughter will disgrace herself and the family by eloping with an American man. Both are oblivious to each other’s thoughts and feelings, and with no real communication, they are not able to translate their realities to one another. When Usha gets her first period, her mother tries to instil terror in her daughter, telling her that she must not let men touch her (76). However, what seems most terrifying to Usha’s mother, is the idea that her daughter might already know all the details of procreation. Usha realizes this, and calms her mother: “though I knew that aspect of procreation as well, I lied, and told her it hadn’t been explained to us” (76). As Usha grows older, she continues to lie to her mother, pretending to be with friends, whilst to the reader she admits: “I went to parties, drinking beer and allowing boys to kiss me and fondle my breasts and press their erections against my hip as we lay groping on the sofa or the backseat of a car” (76).

Thus far it seems that Usha’s adolescent disagreements with her mother correspond to what Spivak calls the death of translation, the death of the mother-daughter relationship. And yet the relationship between Usha and her mother is rekindled as Usha grows up. She and her mother gradually open up to each other, translating their lives and their lost loves to each other. Usha’s mother admits to having been hopelessly in love with Pranab Kaku, even to the point where she attempted suicide (83). Her over-protectiveness toward Usha sprung from her wish to spare her daughter from the pain of heartbreak. The mother and daughter make peace with each other and turn the death of adolescent conflict into the rebirth of a more mature and understanding mother-daughter relationship. This birth of translation is best described in the following passage (83):

My mother and I had also made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well. Slowly, she accepted that I dated one American man, and then yet another, that I slept with them, and even that I lived with one even though we were not married. She welcomed my boyfriends into our home and when things didn’t work out she told me that I would find someone better.

Although Lisa Lowe commented on the centrality of family narratives to Asian American fiction, she warns that “interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender and national diversities among Asians” (Lowe 63). Although the conflicts and reconciliations between first generation parents and their second generation children permeate Unaccustomed Earth, that is
not to say that these are the only interesting relationships in these stories. I propose that one important aspect of Indian American family relations is neglected when only looking at marriage and intergenerational conflicts, namely the family-like networks among Bengalis in the Indian American Diaspora.

**Imagined Families**

As this chapter has dealt with the theme of family in *Unaccustomed Earth*, it has been centred on the biological family, and often the small and preferably close-knit unit of parents and their children. The boundaries of the Bengali family in America are wildly different from the Bengali family in India. In India family signifies not just families of say two parents and a child, but rather all aunts, uncles, great aunts, grandparents, cousins, second cousins and so on. Vijay Mishra complains that in the Diaspora, “there is no extended family who may supply emotional support” (Mishra 193). However, the friendships that are forged between Indians in America remedy this lack of extended families and “come to act as a surrogate family and a microcosm of the India that was left behind” (Alfonso-Forero, 856). In *Unaccustomed Earth* both the loss of the Indian extended family and the development of new family-like networks are visible.

In “Going Ashore,” Hema travels to India in order to marry Navin, and there we are introduced to some of her extended family. Simply opting for a wedding in India shows that although she has lived all her life in America, the family ties that bind her to India make it a natural choice to marry there, particularly as her parents have returned to Calcutta (294), but also as she is marrying a fellow Indian (but interestingly Jhumpa Lahiri herself had an Indian wedding ceremony in Calcutta when she married her non-Indian husband, indicating how important it is to wed in front of the whole extended family). In “Going Ashore,” Hema mentions that she is shopping for bridal wear with her mother and two aunts (331), an endeavour that in America would rather include the maid of honour and possibly a few more girlfriends.

The Indian American characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* all belong to the same ethnic group, they are all Bengalis. The term “ethnicity” is a source of much debate and contestation, as its connotations are not predominantly positive. Werner Sollors has defined the essence of ethnicity as any boundary-constructing processes that function as markers between groups (Sollors 192). In the case of Bengalis in America, such cultural markers might be found in attire, food and drink, and these three markers are especially pronounced in *Unaccustomed*
Earth. Interestingly, when the prevalence of these markers is diluted, it seems that the ties between the Bengalis and their faux-family relationships deteriorate. “Hell-Heaven” is particularly interesting in this respect.

When Pranab Kaku spots Usha and her mother he immediately becomes aware of their ethnicity due to their traditional attire. The fact that they speak Bengali is mentioned as a secondary piece of information, whilst the recognition that Usha’s mother is a married Bengali woman comes from the fact that she is dressed in the “bangles unique to Bengali married women” and “had a thick stem of vermillion powder in the center parting of her hair” (61). Her attire reminds him of the female members of his family in India, and so he approaches her and quickly forms a bond with her and her family that resembles that of a real family. Pranab Kaku is invited home for dinner, and he subsequently eats most of his dinners with Usha’s family. This development is in line with Robyn Andrews’ claim sharing meals together can “enable a sense of familiarity” (131) as “food is particularly evocative of India and the family structure in India” (120). Pranab Kaku treats Usha’s father with the reverence he would treat an older brother, feeling a sense of fraternity with this fellow Bengali. When Benedict Anderson discusses “Imagined Communities,” he frequently describes the ties amongst those who claim to belong to the same nation as a “fraternity” (Anderson, 125). This is fitting for “Hell-Heaven,” which opens with the statement that “Pranab Kaku wasn’t technically my father’s younger brother” (60). This statement indicates that for all other purposes, Pranab Kaku is a fully naturalized member of their family, acting as Usha’s uncle, and yet, technically, he is not.

Clothes and make up are part of the easily discernable markers of Bengalis and Bengali culture, but just as important, if not more so, are the foods and drinks that are served and consumed by Bengalis in America. In most of the stories, food and drink are mentioned several times, and the traditional Bengali food is described as rather elaborate, and the meal times are significant in how they gather all members of the family around the table. In this respect, these meals are very different from the stereotypical everyday American family meal, which tends to be speedily put together, not a matter of cooking throughout the day and serving an array of different dishes. In “Once in a Lifetime,” Hema and Kaushik’s families were originally brought together over an appreciation of Indian cuisine and tradition, cooking elaborate meals together and thus reinforcing their Indian identities. Thus it is ironic that the original Indian markers that brought them together, namely Indian attire, food and drink, develop to become dividing lines between them and participate in the break up of their relationship. Non-Indian food and alcohol become markers of a waning sense of self as
Indian, and of waning friendships with other members of the Indian American Diaspora. Hema’s parents have remained in Massachusetts since emigrating from India, whilst the Chaudhuris, Kaushik’s parents, return to America after seven years in India. When the Chaudhuris return, Mrs. Chaudhuri no longer dresses in traditional Indian attire, and instead wears elegant, western fashion. She is no longer a passionate cook, and her son does not seem to care for Indian food. Significantly, the only dish that she prepares is English trifle. Another notable dividing line that emerges between the two families is that the Chaudhuris now have taken to drinking alcohol, and the bottle of Johnnie Walker becomes a symbol of how different the families have become, and how the Chaudhuris have distanced themselves from Indian culture and tradition. Alongside this distancing from all things Indian, there is a visible distancing from the Indian American society. The two families lose touch and become only old acquaintances, a development that is visible when Kaushik dies and Hema’s parents ask their daughter: “Remember the Caudhuris, the family that once stayed with us?” (333). I will return to this story in greater detail in the next chapter, where I will discuss the importance of homes to Indian American identity.
In this final chapter, I will be looking at the importance of home to the formation and development of Indian American identity. Although this is an important theme throughout *Unaccustomed Earth*, it is particularly central in “Once in a Lifetime” and “Year’s End.” This chapter will thus begin with a closer look at the role that two homes play in these stories and especially at the contrast between the homes. I will consider how homes are interpreted as signifiers of the identity of those who inhabit them and how the homes may be inscribed by those who inhabit them, how homes may function both as safeguards and as prisons, and how they may appear as postcolonial stages. After an analysis of these last stories, I will go on to look at the theme of homes in general in *Unaccustomed Earth*. My exploration of the remaining stories will focus first on the importance of settling, striking roots and inhabiting a particular space. Then I will consider how the various homes function as arenas for negotiating Indian American identity.

In “Once in a Lifetime” and “Year’s End” we are introduced to two homes that are widely different in exteriors, interiors, and uses. The houses are interesting signifiers of those who live within, namely the families of the two Indian American children, Hema and Kaushik. The first story, “Once in a Lifetime,” is set in the home of Hema’s family. The exterior of this home is not described in any detail, except for the information that it is identical to the surrounding suburban houses. On the inside it is decorated with various fabrics and colours, and is spacious enough to accommodate the many family friends that come to visit. At the end of “Once in a Lifetime,” Kaushik’s family, the Chaudhuris, buys a modernist house in a sparsely populated area. This home stands in stark contrast to the home that Hema grows up in. It is a white, square building with glass walls, no ornamental or comforting fabrics inside, and no discernable Indian traits. Whereas Hema’s home is intended to accommodate visitors, Kaushik describes his home as being “not an easy, typically inviting place” (259). It lies in an isolated location and serves as a stark contrast to the other Indian American homes in *Unaccustomed Earth*.

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33 two of the three stories that make up Part Two of the collection.
The cars that the two families own appear to be symbols of their homes. Hema’s parents live in a non-descript suburban house, and drive a corresponding non-descript station wagon (293). It is large enough to comfortably accommodate five people, showing that Hema’s parents value a practical, spacious vehicle, and that they are unconcerned with having a flashy car to symbolize wealth. Hema does not describe the station wagon in any detail and seems indifferent to it. Meanwhile, when the Chaudhuris buy a car, Hema takes notice and describes it as a “beautiful” (244) “Audi with a stick shift” (238). The Chaudhuris’ silver Audi functions as a status symbol both because of its logo and its modernity. However, it transpires that despite its modernity, it is impractical. Like their home, the Audi is a work of beauty that indicates their wealth, and just as their home is not “a typically inviting place,” the Audi also does not welcome anyone except the Chaudhuris into it, as it is too small to accommodate more than three passengers. Thus their vehicles and their homes act as signifiers of the contrasts between Hema and Kaushik’s families.

In “Once in a Lifetime” the two Indian American families find themselves living under the same roof. Hema’s family lives in a suburban home outside Boston, whilst the Chaudhuris, return to America after spending seven years in India, and need a place to stay while they look for a new home. “Once in a Lifetime” is interesting in how it portrays the interaction between two Indian American families and what they identify as home. The story is narrated from the point of view of Hema, who looks back on the winter of 1981, when she was twelve. Her family’s household corresponds to the Indian image of a close-knit family, with a daughter who diligently helps around the house, does her homework and conforms to the expectations of her parents. When the wealthier and more cosmopolitan Chaudhuris arrive, Hema and her parents must share their home with three people who, despite a previously close friendship, are now virtually strangers. The Chaudhuri family consists of Dr. Chaudhuri, his wife Parul and their 16 year old son, Kaushik. They belonged to the same set of Bengalis in America as Hema’s parents, and when the Chaudhuris decided to move back to India, it was Hema’s parents who threw a farewell party in their honour. Hema and her parents were perhaps the closest thing that the Chaudhuris had to family in America, but in the space of these seven years apart, there is little contact between the two families and the reason why the Chaudhuris choose to return to the relatively humble home of their distant friends, remains a mystery throughout much of the story.

34 in America cars are indeed often considered to be alternative homes.
35 the number seven suggests that the story has mythical, even biblical associations.
The Chaudhuris’ choice of a temporary home when they return to America functions as a signifier of their standing as a family, and the reasons for moving in with Hema’s family are at the core of this story. To Hema’s parents, this choice is interpreted as a sign of weakness, that the Chaudhuris must have fallen down in the world and no longer have the affluent lifestyle for which they were formerly known. However, it soon transpires that the Chaudhuris are by no means badly off financially and they readily display their wealth by flying first class and spending money freely at the mall. When they eventually begin looking for a home of their own, they consider residences that are far beyond the means of Hema’s parents. A feasible reason why such a wealthy and cosmopolitan family would voluntarily move into the home of a less wealthy family might be exactly that it is a home. It offers the stable surroundings that they envision will help them get their bearings and feel rooted once more. Also, because they remember this family’s home as the last place they visited before they left for India, it offers a sense of homecoming. However, Kaushik reveals that it is exactly because they are not related and because they do not know each other well that they choose to stay with Hema’s family (250). Unlike in India, word has not spread to the Bengalis in the US that Parul has been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and thus the Chaudhuris are granted the privacy of not being pitied. When the role of narrator is passed on to Kaushik in the second story, “Year’s End,” Parul has passed away, and the families have next to no contact with each other. Thus the Chaudhuris’ choice of a temporary home does not signify what Hema’s parents at first believed, or what readers might imagine, but the truth is rather revealed in the final pages of “Once in a Lifetime.” This development shows how easy it is to make false assumptions about homes as readily available markers of identity, and how the conclusions that one may arrive at do not necessarily take in the true complexities of identity.

Although these stories are narrated by Hema and Kaushik, the character that is most striking and in many ways most central, is Kaushik’s mother, Parul. Significantly, she is the only parent in the whole of Unaccustomed Earth who is referred to by her given name, rather than being described merely as “Kaushik’s mother.” This indicates her importance, making her stand out as a real character who is important in herself, not just in her role as mother or wife. In addition to being named, she is different from all the other first generation mothers due to her behaviour and style. Although she is only alive in the first of the three stories in Part Two of the collection, she is still influential through her absence in the two last stories. In “Year’s End,” Kaushik clearly misses his mother and has trouble adjusting to her absence, and when he is introduced to his father’s new wife, Chitra, he contrasts and compares her to his mother, at first secretly, but eventually quite explicitly. In “Going Ashore,” Parul is still
very much a part of the story, despite having been dead for over 20 years. Though Kaushik does not refer to her much, he still thinks of her and has not found a woman who intrigues him as his mother did, and he is consequently a single 40-year old when he suddenly meets Hema on the streets of Rome. His first impression of her is that of “a woman standing on the sidewalk, long hair concealing her face (...) her dark hair and fitted leather coat” (310). In this description she is similar to Parul, who also dressed in western attire, and was not easily discernable as an Indian woman. Hema mentions how she feels the looks of men when she walks the streets of Rome, and this echoes Kaushik’s memory of how his mother would get looks from men when the Chaudhuris visited Rome (307). Thus, Parul is just as important in her absence as in her presence, and the tragedy of her death is later repeated in the tragedy of Kaushik’s death in “Going Ashore,” strengthening the impression of Part Two as a beautiful and tragic story.

**Homes as Markers of Identity**

Just as the American houses that the families choose are different, so are the homes that they have lived in in India. Parul grew up in a “beautiful home in Jodhpur Park, with hibiscus and rosebushes blooming on the rooftop” whilst Hema’s mother’s childhood home was “a modest flat in Maniktala, above a grimy Punjabi restaurant, where seven people existed in three small rooms” (225). The former home is a place of beauty, the mention of the flowers evoking pleasant smells whilst appealing to the aesthetic senses, and teamed with the mention of the rooftop, one almost imagines it to be heavenly, out of this world and out of reach of most mortals. The latter home stands as the exact opposite. Adjectives like “modest,” “grimy” and “small” do not evoke images of heavenly scenes and the fact that seven people exist in such a small space makes the reader imagine different smells than the scent of flowers. This contrast between the mundane and modest on the one hand and the lofty and out-of-this-world on the other is also mirrored in their American homes.

The home that Hema grows up in is a typical suburban middle class home, and significantly, it is centered on welcoming guests from the Indian community. Hema’s parents routinely entertain guests for parties and for weekend stays, filling the house with Indian food and music. Thus it is in keeping with this that they welcome the Chaudhuris and allow them to stay with them for a lengthy period of time, upholding the Indian virtues of being polite and hospitable. While the Chaudhuris are staying, a total of six people are “existing” in three

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36 most notably the smells of a grimy restaurant
bedrooms, so although it is far more spacious than the home that Hema’s mother grew up in, it is somewhat reminiscent of the crowdedness that she recalls from life in India. The house that the Chaudhuris buy and move into, on the other hand, never seems crowded, and indeed feels like a space that is not inhabited or marked by the people who live there in any significant way. The familiar Indian scents do not fill it, and neither do the different Indian artifacts that the family brought with them. These remain stacked away in the cellar, suppressed as it were, like aspects of their identities.

The contrast between these different homes creates an image in the minds of each family of the other family’s home as an otherness, something exotic. The lifestyle that the Chaudhuris were accustomed to in India was clearly glamorous, with their own chef and several servants, and they lived in a beautiful home. The house that they end up buying in Massachusetts is beautiful, but like the Audi that they bought upon returning to America, the preference of form over function is obvious in the Chaudhuri home. When Kaushik returns three years after his mother’s death and notices a leak in the ceiling, his father only offers that “There’s a reason roofs should be sloped in this part of the world” (260). Dr. Chaudhuri is clearly aware that the building is impractical and, being a civil engineer, he must have always known this and yet he agreed to buy it in order to indulge his wife. Perhaps he felt that his beautiful wife needed a building that matched her beauty, and now that she is gone, there is no reason for the house to stay beautiful. This beauty seems lost on his new wife, Chitra, who wonders why there are no curtains and no railings on the stairs. Kaushik’s only reply is that these choices were made in the name of beauty.

One gets an uneasy feeling about the Chaudhuri home, and it certainly defies the conventions of the typical middle class home. It is seemingly as far removed from anything Indian as possible. In addition to the absence of Indian scents, the other elements that one associates with an Indian home, such as warmth, vibrant patterns and colours, are also lacking. It seems that in moving to America and choosing a home so different from what is traditionally regarded as Indian, Parul and her family are trying to suppress what they associate with their life in India, most notably the discovery of her illness and the potential influx of family members trying to help. But while their modern architectural home may be interpreted as a suppression of their past and her illness, the whiteness, sterility and institutional aspects of the home evoke images of a hospital. To Kaushik, this is one of the main connotations of the building, as he notes that “the great wall of glass looking out onto the trees, more befitting of an institution than a private home” (259). Whilst Hema’s home was chosen for its functionality as a family home, the Chaudhuri home is chosen for its
suitability as a place to die. Hema understands it as a beautiful building intended to grant Parul two final years “of pleasure” (251). Kaushik describes the house as a maintainer of “an impersonal quality, full of built-in cupboards concealing the traces of our everyday lives” (258) and he attaches it to the memories of his mother’s death, and how it fitted all the guests at the funeral.

Rather than being a family home, the Chaudhuri home is better described as a mausoleum. As children, talking about India, Hema and Kaushik briefly discuss the Taj Mahal and its geographical position (241). This early mention of the Indian world’s most famous mausoleum brings this image to mind when one reads the description of the Chaudhuri home. In addition, Parul’s sentiments concerning the beauty of religious buildings in Rome, and her wish to be able to inhabit them, suggest that coming to rest in a building of great beauty would be a preferred end to her life. After having been in the Sistine Chapel she expresses that it made her “want to be a Catholic, only to be able to pray in them” (233). But far from belonging to the Catholic faith, she is an Indian who despite her westernized ways, remains bound by Hindu traditions. The similarities between their home and the Taj Mahal are notable, such as the fact that the Taj Mahal was built in order to commemorate the favourite wife of a Shah, a motive which is mirrored in Dr Chaudhuri’s wish to accommodate his wife’s wishes for a beautiful home. When the Taj Mahal was built, it was amongst the most modern and forward-thinking architecture in the world, and likewise the house on the North Shore is an example of modern architecture, designed by a famous architect. The whiteness and its sheer size also bring to mind the colossal proportions of the Indian landmark. If one reads this modern home as a mirror image of the ancient symbol of Indian culture, the Chaudhuris’ choice of house is not such an un-Indian choice after all, but rather a way of commemorating their Indian heritage, and the memory of Parul.

**Inscribing Spaces**

In Rushdie’s introduction to *Imaginary Homelands* he discusses how diasporic subjects are influenced by their new homelands, but also how the spaces that they inhabit are in turn also influenced and changed. In Part Two, there are several instances of characters inscribing the spaces that they inhabit, and these inscriptions are variously interpreted by other characters and also by the reader. In “Once in a Lifetime,” Hema is at first apprehensive about Kaushik living in her room and decides to leave few of her belongings behind, as she does not want him to have access to any of the objects that identify her. The first thing that
she mentions in this respect is her jewelry, which is a significant marker of her Indian identity. Although she removes the jewelry from the room, and does not think that Kaushik pays much attention to her, when she meets him as a grown-up he recognizes the bracelet that she has worn since childhood (312).

To Kaushik, his family’s home is forever inscribed by his mother, and it pains him to see his father’s new wife, Chitra, touch and use the various artifacts that he remembers his mother touching (279). When he enters the kitchen, he seems to feel his mother’s mark on the room, in spite of how little she eventually used it, due to the decline of her health. Looking around him, he notices the plants that she tended there, that are still thriving, and the clock on the wall which she chose, still ticking (263). These observations indirectly juxtapose the life of these plants and objects with the dead state of his mother. The contrast between his dead mother and these inanimate things indicates his grief and how unfathomable it is that his mother, the maker of this space, no longer inhabits it, and that the objects that she cultivated outlive her. As readers we may juxtapose further and propose that, as Kaushik himself lives on, he finds his life increasingly meaningless and on some level wishes that he could join his mother in death. At the end of “Year’s End” Kaushik seems to be flirting with death. He finds himself drawn to the sea at its darkest and most dangerous, and imagines that travelling on his own amongst strangers is “like being dead, my escape allowing me to taste that tremendous power my mother possessed forever” (290).

Ultimately, Kaushik sees himself as “proof that my mother had once existed” (282), and that more so than any of the artifacts around the house, he is an inscription of her memory. This might be the reason why his father has so little contact with him, why he seems to let go of his son and rather embraces his new role as father to two young stepdaughters. Sharing a home with his father’s new family is too painful to Kaushik, and upon escaping the Chaudhuri house at Christmas he goes on a trip in part in commemoration of his mother. He brings with him the only undisputable evidence of his mother from the house; the box of photos that his father sealed up and hid after her death. The action of storing all photos of her in a box mirrors what Parul imagined death as, when she likened it to the atmosphere in a darkroom, a “perfectly dark, silent, sealed-up space” (278). When Kaushik buries the pictures of her in “the easternmost state park in the country, it is a way of commemorating her Indian and thus eastern identity, and being in a breathtaking location, overlooking the open sea, it is commemorating her personal taste and love of seaside views (291-292). Burying her photos also signifies a new and personal funeral, where he is able to bury her in a place and manner that he is comfortable with, rather than simply scattering the pictures like her ashes were once
scattered. This was a Hindu ritual that he was against, an attitude that he conveyed to Hema as a child, but that was honoured when Parul died nevertheless (249). Ironically, although the Chaudhuris seem so far removed from Indian culture and traditions, they went through with a traditional Hindu funeral regardlessly, and it is partly this honouring of a culture that he feels little connection to, which pains Kaushik. After burying the memory of his mother in American soil, a further final closure with the memory of Parul comes about when his father decides to sell the house. Kaushik realizes that his father and he “were both thankful to Chitra for chafing under whatever lingered of my mother’s spirit in the place she had last called home and for forcing us to shut its doors” (293).

The only way that Hema’s family relates to the Chaudhuris throughout the years that the latter family lives in India, is through commemorating the kitchen equipment that belonged to Parul, and for Hema, wearing hand-me-downs from Kaushik. These inanimate remnants and signifiers of the Chaudhuris are acknowledged and variously appreciated, but the one thing that these objects have in common, is that they are grown out of. In time, the kitchen equipment that was bestowed on them by the Chaudhuris is replaced, and the garments that Hema has inherited ultimately become too small for her. When contact all but ceases, the ties between the two families linger on through the belongings that have been passed between them, but as the friendship gradually disappears, these things too must pass.

Hema’s feelings about these inherited objects may be interpreted as a symbol of how she feels about being and seeming Indian. She resents being forced into wearing Kaushik’s hand-me-downs to the point where she begins to hate him for it, for making her look “so different from all the other girls” in her class (226). However, the sense of otherness that she blames on the clothes she is forced to wear, is really just a symbol for how she feels different from her peers in other ways. Being born to Indian parents, she is naturally different from her classmates. This otherness seems to be a condition that the second generation in Unaccustomed Earth never quite gets used to, just as Hema never gets used to “hooking the zipper on the right side.”37 She feels out of place and senses that the façade that she puts on does not reflect her true identity. For Hema, wearing Kaushik’s clothes is a reminder of her otherness, and by experiencing him only through his old clothes, she fixes him as an extension of his clothes: an annoyance, something inanimate and “other.” Hema here inhabits the role of the Indian American naturalized immigrant, who views the, to her, foreign and Indian Kaushik as a fixed entity that is easily placed as being outside or beneath Hema’s

37 a staple of boys’ jackets.
realm. Hema thus fixes Kaushik as a stereotype, as someone who is foreign and exotic to her, and that she can feel removed from and superior to. The fallacy of this position is only revealed once Hema encounters her stereotype and thus must renegotiate her preconception about her Other. This renegotiating occurs when the Chaudhuris arrive and she sees the 16 year old, attractive and aloof Kaushik who is nothing like the annoying boy that she has conjectured up from his old clothes. Instead of hating him, she finds herself developing a crush and subsequently falling in love with him. Far from being the Indian child that she has imagined, he is at once a gauche Indian adolescent who is excited to see the first snow, and at the same time a typical American youth who gives the impression of being impressed by nothing and continuously bored. Thus, Kaushik both conforms to and contradicts Hema’s expectations, and proves far too ambiguous to fit her stereotypical image of him. Thus Kaushik corresponds to Bhabha’s description of the stereotype as “complex, ambivalent, contradictory” (Bhabha 100). As previously mentioned, the force of the stereotype lies in its ambiguity, and its ability to transcend expectations and preconceptions, as Kaushik transcends the expectations that Hema has of him as a newly arrived Indian immigrant.

The inscribed objects that Hema’s family have inherited from the Chaudhuris form ambiguous opposites. The things that are inscribed by Parul are living, fully functioning objects, whilst she herself is dead. In contrast it is outgrown, inanimate clothes that symbolize the living and growing Kaushik. These objects show the dangers of attaching human meaning to different objects. In addition, one might read this comparison of the inanimate objects that are passed on from Parul and Kaushik to Hema’s family, and the fact that they are all outgrown and become outdated, as a sign that like Parul, Kaushik too will pass away. Although he lives to be 40, his death is still a major development and one which is hinted at throughout Part Two of Unaccustomed Earth.

**Home as Safeguard or as Prison**

In the postcolonial world, homes are considered to be important as safeguards against the outside world, but also as prisons to those that live in them. Judith Caesar argues that “to be shut in does not mean to be safe but to be trapped” (Casesar 51). But homes also offer an arena where ethnic identities can be negotiated perhaps more freely than outside the home (Dhingra 157). In “Once in a Lifetime,” both positions are viable, the former most articulated in Hema. As an only child, she is the centre of most attention and affection in her home. She

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38 the jacket and the various kitchen equipment.
has slept in the same room as her parents up until very recently. This mirrors the Indian childhood of her mother, where children shared their sleeping quarters with their parents almost until adulthood. Hema’s mother has thus transported the Indian values of having a close-knit family. She is not fazed by the American norm and considers a child sleeping in its own room “a cruel American practice” (229). Hema, on the other hand, does not dismiss the American norm as cruel and is aware that her classmates all seem comfortable with sleeping in their own rooms. She feels the tug of wanting the safety of her parents’ bedroom juxtaposed with a desire to be a normal American child. Her solution is to keep her sleeping arrangements a secret from her friends at school, before finally forcing herself to sleep in her own room. Thus the walls of the home, specifically the walls of her parents’ bedroom, function as a boundary against the outside American world of adolescence and the cult of severing the ties to one’s parents. At the same time these walls preserve the Indian customs and traditions inside, and offer a hiding place or a space in which to negotiate an Indian identity. However, when the Chaudhuris arrive and Hema has to vacate her room and move back into her parents’ bedroom, this is not something that she takes lightly. She is clearly on the verge of becoming the typical American adolescent who values her privacy, keeps a diary and becomes infatuated with boys. But for as long as the Chaudhuris live with them and she shares a bedroom with her parents, this development from childhood to adolescence is checked and she remains for all purposes her parents’ good little Indian girl, chastely preserved within the walls of her home.

Hema’s perspective as a first person narrator grants the story a particular honesty and innocence. In her childhood memories, she notices all the things that adults either do not notice or pretend not to. For instance, the first thing that she notices upon entering the dining room and meeting the Chaudhuris, is that there is a bottle of Johnnie Walker on the table, an object that has previously been an alien thing in their house. There is a sense of this being a coming of age story, and the differences that are indicated between Hema and Kaushik are largely to do with age and experience. He is the worldly, independent boy who has escaped the grasp of his parents, whilst Hema still very much depends upon hers and acts in correspondence with their wishes. She listens to innocent commercial pop music, whilst he purchases a record by the Rolling Stones, rock musicians who were known to be more rebellious and suggestive than the average pop group. Hema and Kaushik’s approaches to fruit may be read as a further symbol of the degree to which they are innocent or experienced. Kaushik eats “enormous amounts of fruit” (240), and though the allusion here is not clear, one might imagine that the way he devours fresh fruit may indicate a passionate and even sexual
side. Certainly, fruit is a common symbol of sexuality. Hema on the other hand finds that “the textures and intensity of flavors” make her nauseous. She has not yet grown to like fresh fruit, but one senses that she will develop a taste for this and many other things as she becomes more experienced. The nature of her feelings for Kaushik thus amount to an innocent crush, all though even that seems unthinkable to her mother, who fails to understand the nature of her daughter’s feelings (241). Hema remembers spending hours daydreaming about being kissed by him and reasons that “I was too young, too inexperienced, to contemplate anything beyond that” (247). Though she at the time was too young, it was only a question of maturity until she would imagine other things than simply kissing.

Hema’s name suggests the importance of her chastity to this story. “Hema” brings to mind associations with “hymen,” and though she remains a virgin throughout the story, her path toward womanhood is central. Hema being on the verge of “ripening” and going from girlhood to womanhood is stressed when she and Parul try on bras together in a changing room. Parul considers Hema’s body and the fit of the bras, and tells Hema: “I hope you know that you’re going to be very beautiful one day” (239). By imagining how Hema will grow to look, she is coaxing Hema into growing up to be the beautiful woman that Parul already sees and that Kaushik some day will discover. It also reads as a pre-emptive acceptance of Hema by her future mother-in-law. Though it seems unimaginable to Hema’s mother that her daughter should become involved with boys at her young age, the practice of girls marrying at a young age in India is not necessarily an obsolete and outdated tradition. The fact that a relationship or marriage between Hema and Kaushik is unimaginable to her mother, shows the extent to which they are shaped by the place that they live; child marriage is unthinkable in America, and consequently, it is unthinkable to Hema and her mother also. Whether Parul was as oblivious to the idea of a future romantic connection between Hema and Kaushik is difficult to know, but the compliment that Parul pays Hema is striking when one continues to read the trilogy of short stories.39 As an adult, the memory of Parul’s words is still fresh in Hema’s mind, and when she and Kaushik make love, she tells him that his mother was the first person to compliment her on her beauty (313). Thus the third and final story sees the culmination of the dreams and wants that Hema harbours as a child, but these events only take place in a location that is far removed from the home environment, outside the prison or safe haven of Hema’s home.

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39 indeed one could even read the Chaudhuris’ choice of a temporary home as a choice of future marriage partner for their son, and one gets the feeling that this is exclusively Parul’s choice, whether conscious or subconscious. If so, this would indicate that she hopes her son will identify himself as Indian rather than American.
When the sixteen-year-old Kaushik enters their home, he does not share Hema’s sentiments about it as a comforting and safe haven from the outside world. When Hema shows him around she senses that he is bored and unimpressed with the different aspects of the house. He shows his contempt toward Hema’s suburban home and its surroundings when he criticizes her neighbours for taking an interest in the hostages in Iran when “most Americans had never even heard of Iran before” (235), a critique that Hema takes personally. This is an ironic development, as Kaushik is placing Hema and her family in an American context, which he clearly disapproves of. But as the story unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that the Chaudhuri family are themselves moving away from the Indian identity and embracing the American. However, sharing the home of Hema’s family is not an arrangement that Kaushik is happy with, and as he later remembers and comments: “I had hated every day I spent under your parents’ roof” (291).

Kaushik clearly feels alienated from his immediate surroundings and upon entering Hema’s bedroom, his first instinct and reaction is to defy the limits of the room by climbing out through the window, which is very unconventional behavior. He finds himself in the personal space of a young girl that he feels nothing in common with, in a country that he feels estranged from, and he traverses the limits of this imposed new prison by climbing through the window and out on to the roof. He had not wanted to leave India in the first place, and his parents find it impossible to please him. Meanwhile, Hema comes across as the exact opposite of Kaushik. She is four years younger, politer and more agreeable. She identifies herself as Kaushik’s opposite, and whereas she only dares to defy her parents when she is removed from the home, such as when she leaves her winter jacket on the school bus on purpose, Kaushik more openly defies the limits and rules of the home by, for instance, going into the woods behind the house, that are off limits to Hema, and also when he plays records on her father’s precious stereo.

Parul may be the one who chose for her family to stay with Hema’s, but she seems torn in her sentiments about the situation. On the one hand, she is able to watch soap operas and reminisce about old times with Hema’s mother, and she is fed traditional food without having to do much herself, but she also senses that she is a guest and perhaps increasingly that she is not wanted. Although this is not spelled out, her eagerness to dine at restaurants and go shopping indicates that the home environment at times becomes stifling to her. It is also when she is outside the home that she can behave most as a free agent. Her husband gives her his credit card and she is free to spend money as she pleases, to take her mind off her disease. This is clearly the case when she, a terminal breast cancer patient, buys several new bras. It is
also while out shopping that she makes her one significant interference with Hema’s upbringing, by insisting that they get some bras for Hema too, despite her mother arguing that she is too young for that. Hema’s home is at once a safe cocoon in which Parul can live in denial of her disease because Hema’s family is unaware of it, and simultaneously a prison where she is not free to behave as she likes, eat what she fancies or dress as she likes without irking Hema’s mother.

Different versions of reality can be seen through the prisms of the various rooms of Hema’s home, although as the narrator, everything is mediated through Hema’s consciousness and thus needs to fit into her reality. For instance, Hema’s parents discover that one of the Chaudhuris smokes in the bathroom, and their opinions as to whom the smoker is, differ. Hema’s mother supposes that it must be Dr. Chaudhuri who has taken up smoking (236), whilst the reader might guess that Kaushik is the smoker, as he shortly before asked about the whereabouts of the bathroom (235). When Hema finally discovers that it is in fact Parul who smokes in the bathroom, this comes as a shock. This experience is further complicated when Parul presses her to keep this a secret (244). The fact that the smoking only takes place in the bathroom, the most private room in the house, is also significant. Parul has clearly chosen this room because it is so private, and maybe because she does not think the family will think it suspicious that she spends much time in the bathroom. She complies with the image that they have of her when she, upon being discovered, retouches her makeup and thus makes sure that any signs of her disease are invisible. When she also opens the window, this is both a natural thing to do in order to get rid of the smoke, but it may also read as a symbolic action, letting go of a secret.\footnote{In a sense, this revelation prefigures and possibly mirrors the moment when Hema finds out that Parul is ill. Kaushik later reasons that living with a family that was oblivious to her disease allowed him to believe that his mother was not sick after all (291). In this sense, keeping a secret almost makes the lie of being healthy real, and it is the privacy that they are granted that allows them to keep this secret. Thus the bathroom, that has been a private haven in the house, but also a sterile cell that might remind Parul of what is to come, and in which she can observe her bodily deterioration, fulfills a duality that is prevalent in this story.}

Bedrooms are also highly privatized spaces, and yet they offer some possibility for overhearing through adjoining walls, as the private behaviour of family members is not necessarily so private when it goes on within the walls of a home. Hema shares a room with
her parents and is privy to their conversations about how different the Chaudhuris have become. She worries that Kaushik will hear the increasingly negative things that her parents are saying about his, as his bedroom is adjacent to theirs. When the Chaudhuris have left and she is back in her own bedroom, she imagines what her parents are saying through the wall, and although she is not actually able to hear them, the proximity and her knowledge of their attitudes make her certain that her mother is complaining about feeling snubbed. Hema fears that Kaushik was also able to hear their various complaints, but in an ambiguous final sentence we learn that Hema is now “back in my own room by then, on the other side of the wall, in the bed where you had slept, no longer hearing them” (251). I would argue that Hema is referring to herself as the person who can no longer hear her parents, but it is also plausible that she might be referring to Kaushik, who has moved on by then.

In “Year’s End,” Kaushik also reflects on how the private behaviour of his parents is not contained within the walls of the bedroom, but is rather audible outside it too. He hears them being intimate and as upsetting as this is, he does not seem to offer it much thought until his father remarries and he is faced with hearing his father with another woman. When he is placed in the guest room, cut off from the rest of the house and insulated from his new step family, he revels in this isolation and as he has not stayed in it before, it does not harbor so many memories of his mother’s death. However, as it is part of the house, albeit a separate wing, he can still hear the sounds that the little girls make in the mornings, but he is thankful for not being able to hear his father with his new wife, sounds that would be traumatic to him and really bring home the fact that his mother has been utterly replaced.

It is also interesting to consider the implications of Hema’s parents sharing a room with their daughter, whilst to Kaushik’s parents, this would be out of the question. Kaushik remembers feeling in the way of his parents, sensing that his father wished to be alone and in private with his mother as often as possible (255). He feels pushed away from his parents’ intimacy, whilst Hema is pushed into that of her parents, and is possibly used as an excuse for their lack of sexual intimacy. Her mother’s determination that Hema share a bedroom with them might be a way of avoiding the intimacy that the Chaudhuris revel in. Thus the bedroom here functions as a stage either for playing out one’s physical love for one another, or one’s lack thereof. In this sense, Hema’s mother is playing or signifying upon an Indian tradition, and presents it as the natural arrangement for an Indian American household, whilst in reality this practice might be more a matter of avoiding the intimacy of being alone in the bedroom with her husband.
If one reads the homes in these stories as prisons or safeguards against the outside world, then one of the things that is kept and guarded within these homes is secrets. The secret of Hema being in love with Kaushik is one of the many secrets that are contained within Hema’s home. This particular secret is locked away in her diary, where she hides a cut-out picture of him and keeps it “locked up for years” (247). This indicates that, while she intends to keep it a secret, she is holding on to evidence of her feelings that may be revealed at some point. In fact, after having “locked up” the memories of her first love for years, she rediscovers them when she meets him as an adult. Far away from the trappings of her family home, she is able to realize the daydreams of her youth in a new and, at the same time, old location of Rome, where both Hema and Kaushik have been before, but that they now rediscover together, through each other.

The other primary secret that is kept in Hema’s home and which is successfully kept from her parents is the knowledge of Parul’s disease. Parul wants to keep it a secret and is successful in doing so, although it often causes her to retreat to her room, or remain in bed for large parts of the day and she does not offer much in the way of help in the kitchen. This behaviour is interpreted by Hema’s mother as laziness and aloofness. She resents feeling as if she has taken over as servant to the affluent Chaudhuris, and yet she does not air her frustrations with them, as this would conflict with the politeness and hospitality by which she identifies herself. It is an important marker of her Indian cultural identity to hold back, show restraint and yet be hospitable. This sense of self is thus in great conflict with the freedom and flamboyancy that identify Parul. The tension that develops between the cultural conventionalism of Hema’s home and the modern and more American freedom of the Chaudhuri family is felt by the young Hema, and she finds herself mediating the middle ground between these two positions.

Home as a Postcolonial Stage

Ideally, a home may be the only place where one does not have to pretend and where one is safe to act as one pleases. Dhingra identifies the postcolonial home as “an especially significant site of identity management. It supposedly offers a space where individuals can reveal their ‘true’ selves, in privacy and away from the gaze of others” (Dhingra 157). However, in “Once in a Lifetime” this freedom is complicated and hampered by the fact that the characters are not alone in their home, but share it with another family. Thus, the members
of Hema’s family cannot simply be themselves, but rather must act appropriately in front of their guests, the Chaudhuris.

Hema’s home is in many ways a mix of Indian and American influences, and the different aspects are highlighted and downplayed as particularly her mother sees fit. For instance, her mother proclaims the importance of children sharing the bedroom of their parents, although in her Indian childhood this was not so much a matter of tradition as it was a matter of necessity, given the modest size of her home (225). Other aspects of their home are very much Americanized, such as the piano, TV and stereo, although the latter is used primarily for playing Indian music. In preparing the house for the arrival of the Chaudhuris, it is as if Hema’s mother is setting a postcolonial stage. She is trying to present an Indian American home and to show that her family is successfully negotiating American culture whilst remaining grounded in Indian culture. She ensures that everything is spick and span, that the colours and fabrics that are on display are as modern and comfortable as possible. They also make sure to remove signs of how they have embraced certain aspects of American culture, for instance by removing the Christmas cards from ”where my mother and I had taped them one by one as they came by mail” (230). Hema’s family has obviously taken pleasure in the celebration of Christmas and in having an Americanized set of friends, but feels that this is not acceptable Indian behavior. To Hema, it must have felt strange to remove these treasured cards, thus denying the impact of Christmas on their home. As the story progresses, the irony of this denial becomes apparent. The Chaudhuris are far from being traditional Indian immigrants, and Parul even addresses Hema in English (232), something she is not accustomed to in her home. Parul’s clothes and her westernized habits indicate that she and her family may be far more Americanized than Hema’s family, and that the preparations that the host family makes in their home are misunderstood and unnecessary.

The idea of setting a postcolonial stage implies getting ready for a theatre of the home. One of the ways in which this is illustrated is through the false politeness that Hema’s family upholds in order to accommodate their guests. For instance, they clearly disapprove of alcohol and tobacco, and yet upon discovering that their guests enjoy both, they wonder if perhaps they should buy a bottle of whiskey and an ashtray. Significantly, it is Hema’s mother who worries about these things, and suggests that they take further pains to make sure that everything in their home is presentable and to the liking of the guests. Dhingra has identified this preoccupation with striking the correct balance in the home as a female endeavour. He argues that Asian American mothers and wives feel the pressure to raise their children in homes that assert a ”strong ethnic environment, while appearing sufficiently American in
order to avoid the racialized impression of their homes as *too* Asian” (Dhingra 158). An example of such a sufficiently American aspect is the piano that Hema practices on, which is an important marker of American middle class values, and also, significantly, of upwardly mobile immigrants.

Parul’s image, and Hema’s mother’s reaction to this image, sheds light on the different behaviours that are deemed appropriate for Indians and Americans. Hema describes her mother’s interest in Audrey Hepburn’s outfits as ironic considering the conservative Indian style that she herself dresses in. And yet her mother admires the fashion sense of the American movie star. When Parul arrives, she is dressed in fashionable western attire and her cheekbones protrude ”glamorously” (232). These descriptions evoke an image of an Indian woman who has much in common with Mrs. Hepburn, for whom elegant slimness was a trademark. But for Hema’s mother it seems that whilst looking up to an American actress is unproblematic, looking up to a fellow Indian for the same attributes is a completely different matter. She comments that Parul has become “stylish,” which is “a pejorative term in her vocabulary, implying a self-indulgence that she shunned” (236). However, it is poignant that Parul’s slimness may be the result of her illness rather than any wish to be gloriously thin. Hema’s mother’s reaction to Parul shows how different things are acceptable for different people, and that specific rules apply for Indians that Americans and others are exempt from.

As Hema shares a room with her parents, this space corresponds to a backstage area where she is privy to how her mother becomes increasingly frustrated with their visitors. Hema is torn between sympathizing with her guests and sympathizing with her parents. She channels her mother’s opinions when she describes the restaurants that the Chaudhuris take them out to as “overpriced mediocre” (246). This description echoes how her mother feels about these non-Indian meals that take place outside the safe confines of their home. However, Hema also admires the Chaudhuris and their various possessions. She finds Parul beautiful and stylish, and thus does not agree with her mother who describes Parul’s sense of style in a negative manner. The often conflicting feelings that Hema has toward the Chaudhuris means that their visit is a complicated experience for her. She recognizes herself as the “only one who didn’t mind you staying with us” (246) and thus as the person who needs to bridge the gap between their families and accommodate both. This intermediate position mirrors the position of immigrant children in general: always acting as mediators between the culture of their parents and the new culture that they encounter in their new homeland. Hema feels the tug of both families, and finds that she must keep her affection for the Chaudhuris a secret from her mother.
The sense that the home and the way that one furnishes and inhabits it in a sense is putting on a theatrical show, also applies to Parul in her new and final home. Despite the fact that she is dying, she insists on displaying goods and artifacts that imply a living, thriving environment. For instance, the dining room table would typically feature a “generous cluster of fresh fruit or flowers” (259), which are symbols of health. Parul’s project of decorating the guest room is another project that seems to have been more about setting a stage for an imaginary future than a practical, useful project. Kaushik feels that she “had devoted a disproportionate amount of attention to setting up the guestroom” (266-267). This project of getting the house ready seems to be a project that Parul undertook in order to keep her mind and body occupied with matters other than her illness. But it could also be that she felt a need to make the house stand in the future as a symbol of her.

Striking Roots into Unaccustomed Earth

When Lahiri chose to begin Unaccustomed Earth with a Hawthorne quotation, she chose one that illuminates certain central aspects of the stories: “My children (…) shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth,” evoking an image of people as living organisms that depend on being rooted in order to survive. Diaspora is defined as much by the initial movement as by the re-settling in a new home land, and this re-settling necessitates striking roots. On the whole, the characters in Unaccustomed Earth uproot their lives and settle in new places, and they all strive to identify themselves as belonging to a particular place. The pervasive pattern of movement and subsequent settlement in Unaccustomed Earth strengthens the claim that “Mobility ontologically implies its twin, stasis” (Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle 1). The characters in these stories, regardless of the extent to which they have been mobile, all seem to crave a secure and stable place to settle in. Thus, at the end and between all the journeys of Unaccustomed Earth, the characters slow down and settle in one place. In this final stasis the characters search a sense of home and belonging.

In the opening story, “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma and her family have uprooted their urban existence in Brooklyn in favour of a suburban home outside Seattle. In leaving her home in the east and travelling westward, Ruma is repeating the movements of her parents, who travelled from India to America. Living in American suburbia did not equate a happy life for Ruma’s mother, who passed away before her daughter moved to Seattle. Ruma’s father regrets the life that his wife led in America, comparing her with “morning glories” that are not intended to grow in the shade (29). Like this delicate plant, his wife needed the right
conditions in order to grow and thrive, but she was deprived of this in her solitary existence as a housewife in America. On the basis of this experience, Ruma’s father is worried about his daughter’s new life as a suburban housewife in a foreign place.

Ruma is new to Seattle, and although she has settled in a home that she seems happy with, she has not ventured out much and has not got acquainted with the city. Her reluctance to do so is evident when she mentions that she has not visited important landmarks of Seattle and has not bothered with getting in touch with potential employers. Also, she seems to have given up on making friends, as she merely mentions the friends that she made in Brooklyn as a young mother, and that she is losing touch with them. Thus she keeps within the confines of the home, and although she inhabits it by running the household and raising her son, she does not inhabit the space that surrounds her home, in fact, she does not even bother with the surrounding garden, let alone the neighbourhood or greater Seattle. It seems that history is repeating itself in that Ruma, like her mother before her, only half-heartedly strikes her roots into unaccustomed earth. This half-heartedness might stem from insecurities surrounding her role as mother and wife, but also the fact that she is in a new location that she feels no connection with, where she has no previous acquaintances and where she struggles with finding herself and successfully negotiating her identity. In a sense, she is unable to strike her roots afresh because she misses and grieves the loss of her original roots. To Ruma, her mother constituted her roots, and when her mother passed away, Ruma lost her footing and her sense of self, and she is unhappy (7). While Ruma was rooted to her mother, it seems that her mother was rooted to India and her life there, and that after being uprooted, she was unable to strike new roots in America.

Parental approval is important to Ruma in her domestic life in Seattle. When her father comes to visit, she wants to impress him with her new home, and is disappointed and even embarrassed when he does not compliment her on her home or her choice of being a stay-at-home-mother. Karttunen’s ideas about negatives and the disnarrated are interesting when considering the roles of Ruma’s father and her deceased mother, regarding their real and hypothetical reactions to Ruma’s new home. When Ruma shows her father around the house,

Her father looked out the window but said nothing. Her mother would have been more forthcoming, remarking on the view, wondering whether ivory curtains would have been better than green. (14)

Here the mention of how Ruma’s father remained silent brings attention to how impolite he is, and how uncomfortable he makes his daughter feel. This is immediately juxtaposed with an
instance of the disnarrated, namely a hypothetical construct that relates what Ruma’s dead mother would have said, had it been her who inspected the new house, and this hypothetical construct brings attention to how lacking Ruma’s father is in his response. However, this might also be a case of Ruma trying to convince herself that her mother would have approved of her new life in Seattle. Ruma later admits that some of her mother’s final words to her daughter, were a warning: “Don’t go (...) It’s too far away. I’ll never see you again” (45-46). Perhaps Ruma feels that because her mother advised against it, her new life in Seattle is jinxed from the beginning, and she desperately seeks the acceptance of her father as a reassurance that she has made the right choice, but he only disappoints her by his silence, and later by his reluctance to stay.

Other than settling in a suburban home and building one’s life in it, this story presents few alternative life choices. Ruma’s husband’s job does not allow him to stay in the same place for any length of time, and he consequently travels a great deal. Ruma comments on this when she acknowledges that “Tagging along with him wasn’t an option” (5). Here Ruma is in line with most of the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*, and with Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle’s opinion of migrants that “most people still become mobile with the intention of settling once more and making the new locality a meaningful site for daily life.” (1). Being grounded to one place, to her home in Seattle, should grant Ruma a sense of security and a sense of self as mother and housewife. Was she to become rootless and tag along with her husband, she might not feel as an agent in her own right, but rather a burden, a role-less entity.

It is precisely this rootlessness that is at the core of the problems between Kaushik and Hema in the final story, “Going Ashore.” Kaushik has traveled extensively throughout his life, and finds that he craves a more settled existence. Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle describe this need as how “in a fluid world of movement, place remains a deeply contested and symbolically rich site in which to constitute the self, even for those on the move” (1). This confirms the importance of being grounded to one place and its centrality to the negotiation of identity. The inclusion of “those on the move” indicates that migrants are not exempt from this identity formation. Kaushik’s restless lifestyle stands as a contrast to the other characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*. But even he, who throughout his life has been perpetually on the move, finds that he needs stasis. Although he is pessimistic about entering into office life and building a home somewhere, imagining that he will hate it, he realizes that he needs to lead a different life and “be still” (308). However, he is unable to plan for more than perhaps a few years into the future, and does not have anyone else’s feelings to consider, until he meets
Hema in Italy. Unlike Kaushik, she has settled and lived in the same place for a number of years. Here she has bought an apartment, which she inhabits by herself, and she is intent on continuing to live and work in this same space for the foreseeable future. Navin, the man she plans to marry, has agreed to these terms, and is moving to come and live with her, a sacrifice that Hema rates highly. When Kaushik proposes that she cancel her wedding, and join him on his way eastward to his new job in Hong Kong, Hema is infuriated and hurt by the suggestion. Just as Ruma is unwilling to accompany her husband on his various business trips, nor is Hema prepared to let Kaushik’s movements run her life. Both women find that they need a secure place to strike their roots, and that a rootless existence as migrant women, totally dependent on their men, is not an option.

Rome and the greater Italy is the place where Hema and Kaushik meet and part with each other, and as it is a place that they both have ties to, it is a fruitful setting for their love affair and for the negotiating of their roles as Indian American lovers. Hema likens Rome to Calcutta:

Like Calcutta, which she’d visited throughout childhood, Rome was a city she knew on the one hand intimately and on the other hand not at all – a place that fully absorbed her and also kept her at bay (299).

When Kaushik and Hema travel to the Italian countryside, they find themselves jealous of the locals who are obviously deeply rooted in the place where they have spent their whole lives (320). As postcolonial subjects, Hema and Kaushik lack this belonging to a particular geographical location, and are at best partially connected to Calcutta and Rome, the cities of their past.

Settling in a new location is a complex and ambiguous matter, and it has been described as “a process in which migrants often unwillingly and passionately engage” (Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle, 10). This juxtaposition of seemingly contrasting unwillingness and passion clearly indicates the ambiguous connection between immigrants and their new homelands. In “Only Goodness,” Sudha and Rahul’s parents possess contrasting emotions regarding their new homeland. Initially they revel at the opportunities that are offered them as immigrants in America, and they exhibit a naive belief in how safe it is to raise their children there (142). However, their arrival in American suburbia is a shock, and their American dream sours when they realize that settling in Wayland is equivalent to a “life sentence of being foreign” (138). Likening their existence in American suburbia to such a severe punishment as life time in the prison of foreignness is a strong anomaly. As the story progresses, it is suggested that just as a lifetime in prison might inscribe and change the
prisoner, so is their family inscribed by the act of settling in Wayland. The name of their hometown is interesting in how it may be associated with wayward, by the way and wasteland. Such connotations indicate that this is a place that one would not wish to stay in for any great length of time, and as the story turns out, Sudha’s parents do eventually leave Wayland and return to India.

Situated in the North East of America, Wayland lies in a geographical area which was once settled by Puritans. Interestingly and somewhat ironically, Lahiri compares the values of the parents in “Only Goodness” with puritan values, describing Sudha’s parents as being “prudish about alcohol to the point of seeming Puritanical” (129). Living in Wayland inscribed the family in various ways, the parents becoming “passive, wary, the rituals of small-town New England more confounding than negotiating two of the world’s largest cities” (138). The idea that Sudha’s Indian parents, who belong to a culture that is traditionally Hindu, should become Puritan by living in New England suggests that the act of settling in a new homeland is such a forceful and altering experience that it is able to transcend hundreds of years of cultural traditions. Puritanism is one of few referrals to religion in the story, and indeed throughout most of *Unaccustomed Earth*. Lahiri’s characters do not consider themselves to be particularly religious, and it is ironic that they are so adept at settling in America, on the north-eastern coast that was once colonized almost exclusively by people who had been persecuted in England for their religious beliefs. Their development from Indian immigrants to Indian Americans with puritanical values shows how instrumental place can be in the production and negotiation of identity.

**Mediating Indian American Identity**

Rather than being something fixed and universal, identity is a process, a “a multi-faceted and often contradictory process, situationally deployed” (Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle 3-4) that must be continuously renegotiated and which is ever-changing in accordance with where one is. In the final story, “Going Ashore,” Kaushik enjoys living in Rome both because he is so far from his family and past, and at the same time because he is so much in touch with his memories of his family and their past. He feels a deep connection with the city as it is there that he has his last fond memories of his mother. These memories remain in his mind although he has later spent some days there with his father and

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41 the cities being London and Calcutta.
stepmother, Chitra. Interestingly, he feels that unlike his mother, they “left no dent on the place, and he never thought of their presence on the streets of Rome as he continued to think, now and again, of his mother’s” (307). Thus, his mother has marked Rome for him, and by living there, he feels more in touch with his former self and with her. The motherless young man who avoids contact with his family and his Indian and American roots, revels in the connection that he feels to his deceased mother, on the streets of Rome. This connection is what causes him to retain physical ties to the Italian capital, in the shape of an apartment and some acquaintances. His choice of a semi-permanent home thus allows him to get in touch with his former self, and affords him a sense of belonging and identity. At the same time, it offers him the anonymity of being one of many in the metropolis of the Old World, and he is granted the freedom to identify himself as he wishes, either as a citizen of the world, or, as when he encounters Hema and embarks on a relationship with her, as an Indian American.

In “Only Goodness,” the different ways that Sudha and Rahul inhabit their family home are interesting as signifiers of identity. Rahul is forever retreating to his room and isolating himself from his family in the only place that is his own. Sudha, on the other hand, stays away from her family home for large periods of time under the pretext of studying. Her studies, and the fact that they carry her ever further away from her family seem to be a welcome development for her, and offer her a sense of freedom that she lacks when she is at home. When she does return to her family’s home in Wayland, she does her utmost to inhabit it through eating copious amounts of the Indian food that her mother serves, helping around the house and spending time with her parents, in a sense making amends for her absence for the rest of the year. Interestingly, their home in Wayland seems to be regarded somewhat like a prison by both Rahul and his sister Sudha, but they differ in their approaches to transcending it. Sudha physically escapes the confines of her home by going away to college, whilst Rahul escapes mentally through alcohol. What neither of them seems to be interested in, is negotiating their Indian American identities, choosing rather to suppress this aspect of themselves as they suppress their family home.

When looking back upon her childhood, Sudha identifies Rahul’s birth as a source of transformation to her family’s home. Before him, she recalls a sense of emptiness and orderliness in the home that was changed by Rahul’s arrival. Upon receiving an Indian American boy, there was a “swelling and disorder” (134) with all the various articles that a baby boy needs, and to Sudha this made her home more like the homes of her American peers. It seems that to the parents, giving birth to a baby boy in America was their “key” to becoming American, and when Rahul ultimately fails as an American, so too have his parents
failed and they lose their connection with America and return to India. The project of Americanizing their home and Rahul particularly, was one that Sudha took on wholeheartedly. Thus their Wayland home did not look so different from the neighbouring houses, sporting a swing-set in the yard and sprinklers on the lawn (136). Americanizing their home for Rahul played a part in him turning out more American and less Indian than Sudha, and she feels guilt-ridden about this.

Sudha was born in London, and upon returning as an adult, she feels an immediate sense of belonging. Her sense of herself as English is interesting when considering that she does not remember their life in England, but has pieced it together from stories and photographs. One story in particular has taken on the shape of a family myth, namely the circumstances of her birth. When her mother became pregnant, Sudha’s parents were evicted from the place where they were living, and struggled to find a new place to stay. In the end a Bengali landlord, Mr. Pal, took them in, and baby Sudha was born under his roof. Lahiri presents this as an almost biblical story (135), and indeed it brings to mind the story of how Joseph and the pregnant Mary were refused a place to stay for the night, and Jesus was born in a stable. The biblical implications of this story are strengthened and become slightly humorous in a photo of baby Sudha wearing “a white lace dress intended for a christening but that her mother had simply thought pretty” (135). The photo signifies upon the family myth of Sudha being born in circumstances not wholly different from the birth of Jesus, as the photo shows how irrelevant Christianity was to Sudha’s family. The fact that they might not even have been aware that their Indian daughter was wearing a gown intended for a Christian ritual, is ironic and in perhaps not understanding the implications of their actions, they are mediating their identities as Indians in the West. In a sense, we may read this act of dressing Sudha in a baptism gown as an act of imitation; her parents have seen this lace gown, noticed that it is bought by English parents, and so they dress their daughter in it and take photographs of her. Bhabha discusses the distinction between imitation and identification and makes use of an interesting example to explain these terms: “It is imitation...when the child holds the newspaper like his father. It is identification when the child learns to read” (Bhabha, 87). Like the child with the newspaper, Sudha’s parents are able to dress their baby up in the baptism gown and take her picture, but they are not yet able to identify the implications of wearing such a gown with the action of baptizing their Indian girl. While Sudha’s parents are keen to become assimilated Indian Britons, and later Indian Americans, they remain oblivious to central aspects of the culture and traditions of their new homeland, such as the Christian faith.
The interest with which Sudha studies the photographs of her childhood in England, searching for clues about her past, is reminiscent of how Salman Rushdie describes a photograph of the home that he was born in. Just like Sudha, he too is trying to extract from the photograph some deeper source of understanding and belonging. Looking at the photograph, Rushdie feels a sense of continuation with the place of his birth, despite all the years that have gone in between. He describes it thus: “I felt as if I were being claimed, or informed that the facts of my faraway life were illusions, and that this continuity was the reality” (Rushdie, 9). This mirrors Sudha’s feelings upon returning to London. Just as Rushdie is surprised to still find his family’s name in the phone book, Sudha is surprised by how easily she is welcomed to England. She obtains a British passport and upon presenting it to an immigration officer at Heathrow, he “welcomed her home” (144). Thus it is as if her whole American life has been erased, and she is immediately a naturalized English citizen. Rushdie also talks about how the pictures he looks at are all in black and white, and he comments on how he has begun to view his childhood “in the same way” (Rushdie 9). In this he is also similar to Sudha, as she sees her family’s time in London as a time of romantic hardship, a one-dimensional existence, which is juxtaposed with the dreary life that they subsequently led in Wayland and all the different aspects and nuances of it. Both Rushdie and the fictional Sudha desperately want to restore the past to themselves, in order to feel a belonging and a sense of identity that would otherwise be lost. In this project of restoring the past to themselves, they use photographs as clues to uncovering their identities and histories, and they buy into the myths surrounding their origins. To Sudha, this project of settling in London and finding herself becomes a life-long endeavor, as she marries and starts a family there.

In “Hell Heaven,” Usha’s memories of her family home are inscribed by the presence of Pranab Kaku, and how he brought their home to life. Usha remembers that “in my memories of our apartment, in a dark brown shingled house (…), Pranab Kaku is always there” (61). Through Usha’s descriptions, it becomes clear that Pranab Kaku signifies the complete opposite of the mood in the flat. He is a ray of light that temporarily saves Usha’s mother from the gloomy mood of her home with “his exuberant laughter and the sight of his lanky body slouched or sprawled on the dull, mismatched furniture that had come with our apartment” (62). The manner in which Pranab Kaku behaves in their rented apartment shows that he regards it as his home away from home. It also signals that in his Indian home, he is accustomed to being treated as a king, to slouching and sprawling across furniture. The descriptions of the furniture as “dull” and “mismatched” shows that this obviously is no Indian palace, but rather a gloomy Indian American home, which the inhabitants have not
bothered to decorate. Maybe Usha’s mother is hoping that her life in America is a temporary exile from India that will be succeeded by a return to India, and perhaps because she does not identify her life in America as happy, there is no reason why her home should be beautiful. If this is the case, living in a dull and gloomy home becomes part of her project of martyrdom.

Usha’s father, on the other hand, might consider the luxury of decorating a home an unnecessary extravagance and his only mentioning of interior design is the rather humorous description of how he “liked to remark, in mixed company and often with no relevant provocation, that starving Russians under Stalin had resorted to eating the glue off the back of their wallpaper” (65-66). Usha’s father is frugal in his tastes (65), and it is possible that they are not sufficiently wealthy to contemplate spending money on interior design. No matter what the reason for this gloomy state was, it is momentarily remedied when Pranab Kaku enters their home. Through his presence and behaviour he transports this Boston home back to Calcutta, “knocking on the door the way people did in Calcutta and calling out ‘’Boudi!’” (63). After his arrival, he and Usha’s mother begin listening to the Indian music that they grew up with, and through this music and their reminiscing about Calcutta, they are transported back to India. To Usha, this shows a different side of her mother, a side that subsequently disappears as Pranab Kaku slips out of their family, and thus the period of leading a heaven-like Indian existence is exchanged with the hell-like existence of mediating identity and everyday life in America.

To Pranab Kaku, Usha’s home is a valued site of Indian family life and stands as a stark contrast to the American house where he has rented a room, which is described as “the home of a divorced woman with two young children who were always screaming and crying” (62). This American space is thus upheld as a negative, making Usha’s home seem peaceful and loving, and Usha herself the perfect good little girl. The fact that the relationship between Usha’s parents is close to non-existing does not seem to factor in to Pranab Kaku’s vision of their home, and he does not seem to register that Usha’s mother is in love with him. Thus their home appears to him as a happy Indian American space, and in the end it is such a home that Pranab Kaku secretly seeks. The homes that Pranab Kaku and his American wife Deborah inhabit stand as stark contrast to the homes that Usha’s family inhabit.

As Pranab Kaku and Usha’s family begin to drift apart, their values and behaviours are juxtaposed. Pranab Kaku and Deborah move in together, before they marry (72). Thus they are not saving themselves for marriage, but rather embarking on the physical side of their relationship and showing none of the restraint by which Indians typically identify themselves. When it comes to public displays of affection, this would be unthinkable to Usha’s parents.
and other Indian couples, whilst Pranab Kaku and Deborah often touch each other in front of others. This development is contrasted by the next piece of information offered by the Usha, namely that she and her parents buy their first house and move into it. What makes this so contradictory to Pranab Kaku’s behaviour, is how Usha’s family keep saving the house, instead of really inhabiting it and making it their own. They do not dare put nails into the walls, and they draw the curtains every afternoon to keep the furniture from fading in the sun. There is a sense of Pranab Kaku wanting to experience all sensations and aspects of life, while Usha’s parents are almost afraid to feel, and the way that they live in their homes, and the varying degrees of restraint that they show, symbolises this contrast.

When Usha’s family is finally invited to Pranab Kaku and Deborah’s new home, the contrast between their respective homes becomes yet more pronounced. While one might expect that Pranab Kaku’s marital home should be an Indian American space, there is no discernible trace of Indianess in it. It is as if he has no use for the Indian aspect of his identity. Perhaps he has gorged himself on Indian food and family life in Usha’s home, and no longer has any need for an Indian lifestyle, or perhaps he is no longer interested in remaining Indian in America. Significantly, Usha’s family does not know much about his life outside their home, and it is possible that his relationship with Deborah is far from being his first venture into American cultural and social life. To Usha’s mother, his denial of his Indian identity must be particularly difficult as he truly represents India to her. He no longer purports any of this Indianess in his and Deborah’s new home, which is described as: “an impressive stone-faced house with a semicircular gravel driveway clogged with cars” (77). It stands as a beacon of American success and there is something regal about this description, reminiscent of the homes of the aristocracy. Thus, it signifies a sell-out of sorts; the Indian who gives up his Indian identity and trades it in for a privileged life in the colonial aristocracy.42

When Usha enters the home, she is struck by how flamboyantly it has been decorated, and how it is clearly marked by those who inhabit it and their various habits. The way that toys are strewn everywhere (77), along with dog hairs, stands as a stark contrast to the preservation, carefulness and restraint of Usha’s home. For Usha, being in this setting means that she finds it easier to defy her parents than she does in her home. She drinks alcohol, talks to a boy and smokes her first joint (80). When the boy drives her home and kisses her in the driveway outside her parents’ house, she is at once dreading and wishing that her mother should come out and see them. Thus the experience of visiting Pranab Kaku’s American

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42 which he later trades in when he cheats on his wife with a married Bengali woman
home emboldens Usha to act more as an American adolescent and less as the good Indian girl that her parents have raised her to be, and she defies the limits of her Indian home.

The concept of home is clearly central in Unaccustomed Earth, and although this is particularly true for the stories in Part Two, it applies to all the stories. The project of finding a place to settle in and constructing a home there lies at the heart of the human existence and migrants and members of the Indian Diaspora are not exempt from this ambition. Settling on the East Coast of America, in middle class, suburban neighbourhoods means embarking on a life that is far removed from life in India. For the second generation of Indian Americans this contrast is further complicated by the fact that they do not really know what their parents left behind in India, and yet being born to Indian parents means that it is difficult to feel the same rootedness to their American hometowns that their American peers feel. Thus the characters that make up the second generation in Unaccustomed Earth all share a feeling of being foreign and rootless, while their parents may feel more uprooted and ambiguous about their new homeland. The way that they remedy this rootlessness, is by making their homes fertile spaces for producing and maintaining their Indian, American and Indian American identities. Thus the homes that are presented in these stories are all significant and productive spaces for negotiating Indian American identities. Finally, the contrasts that emerge between the different homes and the extent to which they may be identified as Indian, are important markers of Indian American identity and the extent to which the characters are successful in negotiating their identities.
Conclusion

Indian American identity is a central concern throughout *Unaccustomed Earth*, and has been my main focus in the present thesis. As indicated by Homi Bhabha (73), identities are ever-changing and impossible to fix: the need to negotiate identities is therefore constant. However, within the Indian American Diaspora, there are some central values that all Indian Americans to some extent are aware of and try to live up to, and that arguably lie at the core of Indian American identities. Examples of these values, such as hard work, hospitality, politeness and the close-knit family, all with connotations of high morality, underlie many of the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Dhingra has defined these values similarly, and emphasizes:

putting the family first, obedience to authority, education, religion, and conservative gender and sexual norms, along with appropriate use of cultural symbols (58).

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the first generation characters in the main adhere more to these values than the second generation characters do. The second generation, having been brought up in America, also identify with typical American values such as freedom and marrying for love. In some cases, the second generation strive to live up to both sets of values. In “Only Goodness,” Sudha double-majors in college, works hard and honours her parents by eating their food and helping around the house. However, she later chooses to live in London and to marry the white Englishman, Roger. In her choices she is able to reconcile the two sets of values, and seems to successfully negotiate her Indian American identity. Thus Sudha in a sense becomes the embodiment of Salman Rushdie’s claim that being a member of the Indian Diaspora means to simultaneously “straddle two cultures” and “fall between two stools” (15). When Sudha gives birth to a son, she names him “Neel,” giving him a name which despite being Indian, sound like the English “Neil.”

In my reading and analysis of *Unaccustomed Earth*, I have found that three spheres are central to the Indian American subjects in negotiating their identities. These three spheres are Career, Family and Home, and together they represent some of the core goals for the

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43 Which despite being Indian, sound like the English “Neil.”
Indian American characters, and attaining these goals epitomizes success in America. However, my exploration of these three spheres also highlights that success can be difficult to achieve, and that happiness may be even more elusive than success.

Career is one of the central spheres in which to negotiate Indian American identities. A strong work ethic has been identified as being typically Indian American, and the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* are almost uniformly successful, boasting multiple degrees and impressive careers. The virtues of working hard and having a successful career are values that have clearly been transported from India, as all the successful first generation parents are testimonies of. But these values have not only been transported directly from India to America, but also via the first to the second generation. The second generation characters have all felt the pressure to excel in school and in their subsequent careers. “Only Goodness” is particularly representative as it shows how Sudha and Rahul were subjected to the expectations of their father. He would show them news clippings of extremely talented children, in the hope that his own children would turn out to be equally impressive success stories. But just as “Only Goodness” shows the extreme expectations that Indian American parents may have of their children, so does it show how terribly wrong such expectations can turn out. Rahul is a clever boy who is pressured into studying subjects that he does not care for. He subsequently drops out of Cornell, and out of his family and the Indian American community. Thus although the majority of the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* are hugely successful, we are also presented with the opposite outcome of parental and societal expectations, indicating how detrimental a one-sided focus on career and success may be.

Also, although the first generation characters that we encounter in *Unaccustomed Earth* are staunch upholders of a strong work ethic, they too find themselves doubting the importance of career. In the short story “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma’s father regrets leaving his parents in India and letting go of his duties toward them, admitting that “In the name of ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered anymore, he had forsaken them” (51). Thus he doubts that a successful career is the way to happiness, and to successfully negotiating his Indian American identity.

The theme of family permeates *Unaccustomed Earth*, and even when families are absent, they remain central in the lives of the characters. The ties between first generation parents and second generation children are often problematic, as the parent generation were brought up in India, whilst their children have been raised in Indian American homes in America. Thus they do not feel the same attachment to the traditional Indian values, and do not identify themselves in the same way. In “Hell Heaven,” for instance, Usha’s parents were
raised in India and it was a matter of course to marry someone of their parents’ choice. To their Indian American daughter, Usha, marrying an Indian of her parents’ choice is completely irrelevant to her life in America, and she opts for a series of romantic relationships that have certainly not been arranged by her parents and that do not end in marriage. Thus the approaches that the first and second generations have to each other, and to love and marriage, are widely different. Interestingly, when free to marry who they wish, a majority of Lahiri’s second generation characters choose a partner outside their ethnic community, and thus seem to distance themselves from their Indian heritage, opting for more American marriages. However, when they, in turn, have children, giving birth to third generation Indian Americans, the characters of the second generation frequently opt for Indian or “vaguely Indian” names. Thus the third generation promise the hope of Indian Americans successfully negotiating their identities and fitting in anywhere. Although Neel and the other third generation children in *Unaccustomed Earth* represent the hope of Indian Americans becoming properly at ease with themselves and sure of their identities, the challenges that the second generation characters experience are at the core of Lahiri’s stories. Furthermore, just as Ruma’s father regretted and questioned the importance of ambition and career, he also questions the importance of families, thus throwing the importance of family life into question. He wants to shield his daughter from the conclusion he sometimes feared was true: that the entire enterprise of having a family, of putting children on this earth, as gratifying as it sometimes felt, was flawed from the start (54-55).

Homes emerge as a third central sphere in which characters can negotiate their identities. Whilst homes can be stalwarts of Indian culture and tradition, they may also be highly Americanized spaces where second generation characters grow up to be Indian Americans who do not feel much of a connection with their Indian heritage. In “Only Goodness,” for instance, Sudha makes sure their home is sufficiently Americanized for her younger brother, Rahul. By bringing American toys and books into the house, in addition to installing a swing set in the yard, the Mukherjee home has all the staples of an American home, and yet the family still retains ties to a culture that Rahul seems oblivious to. Though many of the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* are outwardly successful in their careers, family and home life, success does not necessarily represent happiness. In fact, more often than not, the second generation characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* attain successful careers,
marry, become parents, and inhabit comfortable homes, but despite this tremendous social
success, they remain unhappy. In “Unaccustomed Earth” Ruma has been successful as a
career woman, is married and has the three-year-old son Akash, whom she raises in a
beautiful and spacious house outside Seattle. But despite these beacons of a happy life in
America, Ruma’s husband has pointed out that “nothing was making her happy” (7). In this,
Ruma is similar to the other protagonists in Unaccustomed Earth, who despite living up to the
expectations that they have of themselves, as well as their parents’ expectations, find that
happiness eludes them as they struggle to make sense of themselves and their lives.

All the stories in Unaccustomed Earth show how characters negotiate their identities
as Indian Americans in the spheres of Career, Family and Home. This common ground is a
product of the dominating values in the Indian American Diaspora, and the stories appear
similar, despite their obvious contrasts. However, in my study of Unaccustomed Earth, and in
my study of Lahiri’s fiction in general, I have found myself following a common theme that
unites the eight different stories in Unaccustomed Earth. Noelle Brada-Williams found a
common theme in Interpreter of Maladies to be the contrast between extreme carefulness and
carelessness, and argued that Lahiri’s first collection corresponded to a short story cycle
(456). Though Unaccustomed Earth features a diversity of perspectives, styles and stories, a
common theme that ties all the stories together is the act of “letting go.” In “A Choice of
Accommodations,” being let go of by his parents lies at the core of Amit’s personal turmoil.
He fears that just as he was let go of, so might he too let go of the things that are important to
him, namely his marriage and daughters. Although the concept of letting go is most clearly
spelled out in “A Choice of Accommodations,” this is a central concern in all the stories. In
“Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma is unwilling to let go of the memory of her dead mother, and
has let go of her career in grief after her mother’s death. In all the stories, the act of letting go
is central, either in letting go of values and traditions, or letting go of ambitions and careers,
letting go of a loved one, or most of all, letting go of a part of yourself, and taking on a new
identity. At the end of the collection, Hema finds herself letting go of her great love, Kaushik,
and simultaneously letting go of her identity as an unmarried woman. In letting go of her
former self, she is embracing her new identity as an Indian American wife and mother,
pregnant with her first child. Thus the theme of letting go unites all the stories in
Unaccustomed Earth, not just the clearly cyclical Part Two of the collection.

Exploring Unaccustomed Earth as a short story cycle would be a rewarding approach
to these widely different, yet clearly related, stories. However, due to constraints of time and
space, this must remain a project for the future. In the richness of her prose, Lahiri invites the

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reader into *Unaccustomed Earth*, prompting an array of different interpretations. It is a testimony to her skill as an author that several different approaches to her work might be equally rewarding.
Bibliography


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