

Death and Dying in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Story Collection *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Abstract: This research paper analyzes death and dying as structural, emotional, and symbolic elements in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*. Although death is explicitly present in the titular story and the triptych "Hema and Kaushik," its repercussions permeate the entire collection, manifesting as sorrow, emotional alienation, cultural disconnection, unsuccessful intimacy, and the subtle deterioration of familial relationships. The study examines the demise of Ruma's mother in "Unaccustomed Earth" and its repercussions on Ruma, her father, Akash, and Adam. The text next examines the illness and demise of Kaushik's mother in "Hema and Kaushik". The discourse examines Kaushik's evolution from a traumatized youth to an emotionally aloof, peripatetic photojournalist, whose existence is profoundly influenced by maternal bereavement. The examination of Hema's view of illness, secrecy, and Kaushik's subsequent accidental death constitutes the elegiac structure of the book's latter half. The research contends that Lahiri perceives death not solely as biological termination but as a reconfiguration of household space, memory, language, family, and diasporic identity.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth*, death, dying, grief, diaspora, Hema and Kaushik, Ruma, elegy, loss.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Death in Literature

Death has consistently been an important theme in literature, as it transforms mundane existence into a dramatic conflict. In epic, tragedy, elegy, realism fiction, and diasporic literature, death reveals the fragility of identity, the volatility of familial bonds, and the incomplete essence of human desire. Philippe Ariès contends that contemporary societies progressively sequester death, relegating it from public awareness to private and domestic obscurity (Ariès 85–87).

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* has received considerable critical attention for its exploration of migration, identity, family conflict, memory and emotional displacement within the Indian-American experience. Scholars frequently examine the collection

as a representation of second-generation immigrant life, particularly the tension between inherited cultural values and the desire for personal independence (Yun 141–44). The stories portray characters who attempt to construct stable lives in unfamiliar social and emotional environments, yet remain deeply influenced by family histories, unspoken grief and unresolved relationships.

Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* is part of the contemporary tradition of subdued grief. Her characters seldom express sadness through overt wailing; rather, grief manifests in deferred dialogues, altered behaviors, vacated spaces of the deceased, unsent correspondence, concealed images, and unexplained travels. The collection's title, derived from Hawthorne's "The Custom-House," establishes a

connection between death, inheritance, and transplantation:

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 (Nathaniel Hawthorne; "The Custom-House").

In Lahiri's collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* signifies both the alien terrain of migration and the transformed foundation upon which the living must exist following death. Ruma must embrace parenting following her mother's demise. Kaushik must embrace adulthood following his mother's fatal illness and his father's remarriage. Hema must navigate everyday existence following the accidental death of Kaushik. Consequently, death serves as a lens through which Lahiri examines transformation, dislocation, and endurance.

Dying in Literature

Dying is distinct from death as it constitutes a process rather than a singular event. It encompasses disease, anticipation, secrecy, caregiving, dread, physical deterioration, and the psychological readiness of both the dying and the bereaved. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* notably addresses denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and acceptance as emotional reactions to terminal illness; however, subsequent grief research advises against seeing them as fixed stages (Kübler-Ross 34–121). Lahiri's literature defies conventional expressions of grief. Her characters frequently encounter grief indirectly. Kaushik, for example, does not go smoothly from denial to acceptance. His mother's ailment engenders silence, hostility, evasion, guilt, and a persistent distrust of stable domesticity.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, mortality is most poignantly depicted through Kaushik's mother's sickness. Hema, still a child, lacks a complete comprehension of the sickness, yet she senses its weight through secrecy, adult unease, and Kaushik's abrupt revelation. The dying of Parul Choudhuri therefore permeates through certain span of time: the Choudhuris' return from India, their temporary stay with Hema's family, Hema and Kaushik's visit of the snowy cemetery, and the perception that an unarticulated conclusion is imminent.

Research Objectives

This study aims to: first, investigate the influence of death on the narrative of "*Unaccustomed Earth*"; second, analyse the implications of Kaushik's mother's death in "Hema and Kaushik"; third, trace Kaushik's psychological and social development following his mother's demise; fourth, examine Hema's views on illness and death, as well as her subsequent reaction to Kaushik's accidental death; and finally, identify the symbols, metaphors, and literary devices employed by Lahiri to establish the elegiac tone of the collection.

Significance of the Study

While immigration, alienation, marginalization, hybridity, identity crisis, pull between the homeland and host land are essential for understanding diasporic fiction, *Unaccustomed Earth* illustrates that diasporic lives are also altered by grief, widowhood, remarriage, inherited memory, and the death of close relationships. This interpretation links Lahiri's oeuvre to death studies, trauma studies, and grief literature.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Analyses of Lahiri's literature frequently highlight themes of migration, intergenerational discord, Bengali-American identity, household realism, and emotional suppression. Scholars have observed that *Unaccustomed Earth* transcends the challenges faced by first-generation immigrants seen in Interpreter of Maladies, delving into the intricate and complex choices of second-generation individuals. The second generation in this compilation is not merely positioned between India and America; it is also ensnared between ancestral duty and self-made life.

Marta Pascual Garrido interprets "*Hema and Kaushik*" as a narrative that thematically and formally addresses closure, whereas Monika Mianowski's examination of place and placelessness emphasizes the significance of space, absence, and Hema's consequential progression toward marriage, juxtaposed with Kaushik's unsettled life. (Open Edition Journals) Lahiri has articulated that she revisited Hema and Kaushik after several years and altered the perspective, allowing Hema to recount the narrative to Kaushik, a deliberate choice that enhances the elegiac essence of the triptych. (The Guardian)

Sushree Smita Raj's article on isolation in "Hema and Kaushik" highlights that Lahiri's characters exhibit feelings of alienation, dislocation, and unsuccessful

connections; it further emphasizes that the demise of Kaushik's mother becomes the source of his sense of homelessness, with the concluding narrative permeated by motifs of mortality, such as sarcophagi, corpses, and the tsunami. This article extends that argument by positioning death as the focal point of the entire collection and by contrasting *Unaccustomed Earth* with Lahiri's previous exploration of death in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*.

Freud's differentiation between grief and melancholia is pertinent in this context. In grief, the bereaved slowly separates from the object of loss; in melancholia, the loss is internalized and remains unresolved (Freud 243–58). Kaushik's existence following his mother's demise embodies a sorrowful connection: he isolates himself from others and places, yet remains bound to his deceased mother through images, recollections, and an incessant urge to leave.

Death and dying form an important but comparatively less isolated area of study within the collection. Critics often discuss death as part of Lahiri's broader treatment of loss, separation and generational change. Mridula Chakraborty argues that Lahiri's death scenes connect intimate experiences of mourning with the migrant's uncertain relationship to home, belonging and the adopted country (814–16). In several stories, death becomes the event through which characters reconsider their responsibilities, emotional attachments and cultural identities. The death of a parent, spouse, friend or loved one is not presented merely as a biological conclusion; rather, it creates psychological and relational consequences for those who remain alive.

In "Unaccustomed Earth," the death of Ruma's mother shapes the relationship between Ruma and her father. Grief influences their communication, expectations and emotional distance (Lahiri 3–59). "Only Goodness" presents a different form of loss through Rahul's alcoholism and the gradual breakdown of family relationships (Lahiri 128–73). In the linked Hema and Kaushik stories, death becomes central to memory, migration and emotional attachment. Kaushik's mother's illness and death affect his personality and his relationship with home, while his own death gives the final story a tragic conclusion (Lahiri 223–333). Mianowski observes that place, placelessness and death are closely connected within the Hema and Kaushik sequence, while Pascual Garrido emphasizes the characters' liminality, secrecy

and inability to establish secure attachment to a single community.

Existing studies commonly interpret such experiences through themes of mourning, displacement, silence and fragmented identity. Chakraborty argues that death comes to occupy a continuing place in the psychological life of Lahiri's diasporic characters and connects mourning with memory and immigrant belonging (815–16). However, there remains scope for a focused analysis of how Lahiri represents dying, bereavement and the continuing presence of the dead in the lives of survivors. Such a study can examine how death transforms family roles, exposes suppressed emotions and connects personal grief with the immigrant experience. It may also explore Lahiri's restrained narrative style, in which death is represented indirectly through memory, absence, photographs, domestic objects, altered points of view and silence.

III. RESEARCH GAP

Limited focus on death as a central theme: Most studies on *Unaccustomed Earth* emphasize migration, identity, cultural conflict and generational differences, while death and dying are often discussed only as secondary themes [16].

Insufficient analysis of grief and bereavement: Existing criticism gives limited attention to how characters experience mourning, emotional silence and the long-term psychological effects of losing family members or loved ones [17].

Lack of comparison across the stories: Few studies systematically compare the different forms of death, loss and emotional deterioration represented throughout the collection [18].

Limited study of narrative techniques: There is insufficient analysis of how Lahiri uses memory, silence, absence, objects, restrained language and indirect narration to represent death and the continuing presence of the dead [19].

Need to connect death with immigrant experience: More research is required to examine how death intensifies cultural displacement, family separation, identity crisis and emotional alienation among Indian-American characters [20].

IV. METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Methods

This study employs qualitative literary analysis, careful reading, comparative interpretation, and topic synthesis. It interprets *Unaccustomed Earth* as a compilation where death functions both literally and symbolically. The analysis focuses primarily on “Unaccustomed Earth,” “Once in a Lifetime,” “Year’s End,” and “Going Ashore,” while also drawing examples from “Hell-Heaven,” “A Choice of Accommodations,” “Only Goodness,” and “Nobody’s Business.”

Data Interpretation and Synthesis

The analysis unfolds in three tiers: initially, the depiction of death as a familial occurrence; subsequently, the portrayal of dying as an extended process impacting the survivors; and finally, the metamorphosis of death into symbols including photographs, residences, travel, water, dilapidated spaces and sarcophagi. The study consolidates these data to assert that Lahiri’s writing renders grieving a diasporic condition.

V. RESULTS

A. Analysis of *Unaccustomed Earth* with Reference to *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, death is inherently fundamental to Lahiri’s moral and emotional framework. “A Temporary Matter” commences following the demise of Shoba and Sukumar’s stillborn son. The missing child is not depicted in the narrative but is evident in every gesture, meal, quietude, and confession (1–22). “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” contextualizes death during the time of war, partition of country and the apprehension of familial disintegration in East Pakistan. “The Third and Final Continent” concludes with the recollection of Mrs. Croft, whose demise signifies the end of an older world and the commencement of stability in the narrator’s immigrant life.

In *The Namesake*, death compels readers to understand redefinition of identity. Ashoke Ganguli survives a train accident before Gogol’s birth; this near-fatal experience influences the naming of his son. Ashoke’s abrupt demise in America makes Gogol grapple with familial ties, legacy, and the significance of his name. Ashima’s widowhood similarly transforms her home: she learns to partition her existence between America and India, no longer fully belonging to either (179–

291). In Lahiri’s earlier works, death frequently produces identity revision.

Unaccustomed Earth further elaborates on this issue. The commencement of the titular narrative presents death prior to action: “After her mother’s death” (3). This sentence positions bereavement as the foundation from which the narrative develops. Ruma’s mother has already died, yet she misses her mother every now and then. Ruma experiences a sense of abandonment while also feeling liberated into an unwelcome likeness to her mother.

“Growing up, her mother’s example-moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household-had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma’s life now.” (11)

She has abandoned her legal profession, resides in a suburban residence, is raising Akash, and is expecting another child. The household existence she once linked to her mother now envelops her.

The mother’s death engenders remorse, isolation, and ambiguity for Ruma. She longs for her mother’s authoritative presence, including the overconfidence and arrogance she previously opposed. This disparity causes Ruma to perceive the disintegration of a traditional familial framework. The deceased mother served as a cultural and emotional bridge. Subsequent to her demise, Ruma’s proficiency in Bengali deteriorates, and her self-assurance in her domestic responsibilities becomes tenuous.

Ruma’s father reacts in a distinct manner. Widowhood enables him to assume the role of a traveler, a solitary individual, and ultimately a romantic partner to Mrs. Bagchi. His European excursions are not merely acts of escapism; they also constitute a form of late self-discovery. Since a very long time he had lived a life consisted of the duties related to work, marriage and immigrant existence. Following his wife’s demise, he refrains from relying on his daughter. Rather, he safeguards his autonomy. His gardening in Ruma’s residence serves as a symbolic gesture: he cultivates life yet declines permanent relocation.

Akash perceives the demise of his grandma vicariously. He is too young to even understand what is death, however he acquires remnants of his Bengali heritage from his grandfather. The garden, Bengali lexicon, dietary practices, and tender rituals serve as

replacements for the deceased grandma. Death manifests as intergenerational transmission: Akash does not get the opportunity to see his living grandmother but receives a Bengali potpourri from a world that is already fading.

On the other hand, Adam is unable to understand Ruma's dilemma of whether her father should reside with them. He highlights the evident fact that she is already responsible for a young child and expecting another. He reminds her that her father is in fair health for his age, content with his circumstances. However, he does not oppose the idea of her father residing with them. His eagerness is intended with kindness and generosity, exemplifying the reasons for her affection for Adam, yet it causes her concern. She recognizes his intentions to assist, while simultaneously perceives that his tolerance is diminishing.

In the other narratives, death frequently manifests figuratively. In "Hell-Heaven," Aparna's unrequited affection for Pranab nearly leads to self-destruction, transforming romantic disillusionment into a confrontation with psychic death. In "A Choice of Accommodations," the marriage of Amit and Megan appears emotionally depleted, indicating the gradual demise of intimacy. "Only Goodness" depicts Rahul's drinking as a catalyst for the erosion of trust, the negative shift in sibling dynamics, and the degradation of family pride; Sudha's apprehension for her child Neel, stemming from Rahul's neglect, imbues the narrative with profound emotional depth. "Nobody's Business" illustrates the demise of romantic idealism through Farouk's treachery and Paul's passive observation. These narratives acclimate the reader to the graphic fatalities in "Hema and Kaushik."

B. Identification of Key Themes and Motifs of Death in *Unaccustomed Earth*

The primary theme is the absence of mother. The deceased mother of Ruma and the ailing mother of Kaushik influence the adult lives of their children. Lahiri demonstrates that mothers retain influence posthumously as their absence restructures family environments, language, and recollection. Ruma's mother leaves behind expectations; Kaushik's mother bequeaths images that cannot be securely exhibited.

The subsequent issue pertains to widowhood and remarriage. Ruma's father prioritizes travel and emotional prudence. Kaushik's father opts to remarry Chitra. Both men outlive their wives, although their

survival is perceived differently by their offspring. The distinction illustrates Lahiri's sensitivity to perspective: one child perceives widowhood as harbinger to paradigm shift, while another views it as betrayal.

The third motif is the house. Residences in *Unaccustomed Earth* are never neutral. Ruma's residence in Seattle serves as a potential locus for intergenerational rejuvenation, although it also engenders apprehension. Following his mother's demise, Kaushik's family residence becomes intolerable as Kaushik's stepmother Chitra and her daughters inhabit rooms linked to Kaushik's deceased mother. The residence, rather than providing solace for sorrow, becomes into a disputed archive.

The fourth motif is the photograph. In "Year's End," Kaushik's mother survives through photographs hidden by Kaushik. Upon Rupa and Piu's discovery of those photographs, Kaushik responds with fury, as they have not merely handled paper, but have touched the innermost corners of his grieving heart. The photos reveal the distinction between memory and ownership. Kaushik desires the preservation of his deceased mother, but just under conditions he can regulate. His subsequent profession as a photojournalist amplifies this theme: he chronicles death publicly while remaining unable of processing his own personal grief.

The fifth motif is travel. Ruma's father journeys through Europe following his widowhood; Kaushik travels across continents as a photographer; Hema travels to Rome and subsequently to India for marriage. Travel embodies both liberation and ascension. It enables characters to endure long suffering; however, it hinders them from establishing deep connections.

The sixth motif is water. The enclosed pool in Kaushik's residence evokes memories of his mother's past vitality and later withering of health. Kaushik retreats to Penobscot Bay following his outburst. After having a brief but intense affair with Hema, Kaushik goes to a beach in Thailand. The sea there ultimately returns as a tsunami, the force that claims his life. Lahiri transforms water into a dual representation, linking it to motion, recollection, aesthetics, and destruction.

C. Evaluation of the Validity and Usefulness of Death in Understanding "Hema and Kaushik"

In "Hema and Kaushik," death signifies something beyond an ending; it constitutes the framework of the entire triptych. "Once in a Lifetime" encompasses the concealed information of Kaushik's mother's ailment. "Year's End" illustrates the repercussions of that loss on Kaushik's fractured relationships with his father, Chitra, Rupa, and Piu. "Going Ashore" concludes with Kaushik's inadvertent demise and Hema's tardy lamentation. The affliction and demise of Parul Choudhuri that Hema observes has been influenced by her adolescence. Upon Kaushik's revelation, Hema experiences a dual sensation of burden and betrayal. The secret creates a closeness between her and Kaushik, and also instils fear as it introduces death into childhood fascination.

Kaushik undergoes significant transformation during and after his mother's illness. In her final moments, he matures prematurely, becoming secretive and irate. He observes the deterioration of the body, perceives anguish during the night, and resides in a house fraught with medical assistance. Following her demise, his father's union with Chitra appears to constitute an obliteration. Chitra and her girls are innocent, yet Kaushik perceives them as trespassers in a hallowed realm of grief. His brutality towards Rupa and Piu following the discovery of his mother's photographs exposes unresolved anguish. He experiences remorse subsequently, although the damage is irreparable.

Kaushik's latter life amplifies this disjunction. He becomes mobile, disengaged, sexually and emotionally unmoored, and professionally dedicated to capturing images of violence and grief. He does not merely opt for mobility; he becomes incapable of trusting permanence. Hema's subsequent acknowledgment that "You belonged elsewhere" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 236) encapsulates Kaushik's predicament. Elsewhere is not a location; it is his enduring psychological state.

Hema's reaction to Kaushik's demise is of similar importance. His sudden demise in the tsunami precludes closure. Their affair in Rome had momentarily presented an alternative life a few choices, although Hema opts for the stability of marriage to Navin. Kaushik's demise makes that decision irreversible. Hema copes with loss through recollection and storytelling. The second-person address to Kaushik transforms the triptych into an elegy directed at the deceased. Lahiri's storytelling

technique embodies mourning: Hema sustains Kaushik's memory by recounting their story to him.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Interpretation and Synthesis of the Results

The findings indicate that mortality in *Unaccustomed Earth* engenders contrasting dynamics: rootedness, rootlessness and replanting. Ruma's father reacts to death by declining to relocate to his daughter's residence. He cultivates a garden for her, implying that existence may necessitate transient acts of nurturing rather than enduring reliance. In contrast, Ruma is compelled to attain a heightened consciousness of familial legacy. She increasingly resembles her mother, although acknowledging the gap between them.

Kaushik's reply is more detrimental. His mother's demise irrevocably displaces him. The residence does not seem conducive to live any more for Kaushik; the family gets fractured, and recollection becomes perilous. His father's remarriage may be interpreted as a pragmatic necessity, while Kaushik perceives it as an act of betrayal. Lahiri does not entirely denounce either individual. She presents two conflicting expressions of grief: the father's yearning for revival and the son's rejection of substitution.

The elegiac tone of "Hema and Kaushik" arises from Lahiri's consistent use of symbols and narrative techniques. The cemetery in "Once in a Lifetime" presages death. The winter backdrop and the title "Year's End" imply a sense of temporal closure. The concealed photos transform into relics. The Roman ruins in "Going Ashore" juxtapose personal affection with historical deterioration. Hema's forthcoming marriage is linked to "deadness" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 301), but Kaushik's photojournalism surrounds him with public images of mortality. The ultimate tsunami amalgamates water, travel, and chance factors into a lethal combination.

B. Implications of the Study

This analysis suggests that Lahiri's diasporic fiction should be interpreted not merely as literature of migration but also as literature of mourning. Death reveals the constraints of assimilation, as mourning frequently compels individuals to revert to languages, rituals, and familial frameworks they believed they had transcended. Simultaneously, death can erode tradition.

The research indicates that Lahiri's minimalism is profoundly elegiac. Her restraint does not mitigate grief; it exacerbates it. The lack of dramatization renders loss evident in subtle details: a garden, a postcard, a covered pool, a shoebox of images, a child's fragmented memory, an unrealized potential.

VI. CONCLUSION

Contribution of the Study to the Field

This study's contribution is its focus on death as the central theme in Lahiri's diasporic imagination. Lahiri's literature illustrates migration not only between nations but also across life stages: from childhood to adulthood, marriage to widowhood, rootedness to mobility, presence to absence, and love to memory.

Final Thoughts and Recommendations

Unaccustomed Earth posits that death does not terminate relationships; it transforms their nature. The deceased persist in residing within language, dwellings, gestures, pathways, and decisions. Lahiri's artistry resides in illustrating how sadness persists without consistently revealing its presence. Her characters express mourning not alone via words, but also through movement, quiet, substitution, and recollection. In this regard, *Unaccustomed Earth* is one of Lahiri's most profound reflections on the enduring presence of the deceased.

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