

Unaccustomed Earth Study Guide

Unaccustomed Earth by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Plot Summary

“Unaccustomed Earth” by Jhumpa Lahiri is a collection of eight stand-alone short stories that detail the experiences of Indian immigrants, primarily those in America. When taken together, the final three stories form a novella.

In “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma’s father, reeling from the death of his wife, has taken it upon himself to travel the world –something both of Ruma's parents had originally intended to do. Before he is due to visit Prague, Ruma’s father hopes to come and visit Ruma’s family in Seattle. Adam, Ruma’s husband, will be away that week on business. She tells her father he is welcome. However, she is worried about the visit because her father is so traditional.

The visit goes relatively well, but Ruma’s father continually encourages Ruma to return to legal work after her next baby is born so that she will not be dependent on Adam. Ruma can’t help but feel judged. She tells Adam over the phone that she thinks her father wants to move in with them. Adam tells her he’ll accept any decision she makes on the subject. In the end, it turns out that Ruma’s father has no intention of moving in with his daughter and her family because he has begun a relationship with a younger Indian woman who lives on Long Island, New York.

In “Hell-Heaven,” Usha recounts her family’s experiences with Pranab, a recent Indian immigrant to Cambridge, Massachusetts, who fast became a family friend. Bright, friendly, and social, Pranab became irresistible to Usha’s mother, who fell in love with him. Her feelings were never acted upon, nor were they returned. Usha’s mother became heartbroken when Pranab married a white girl named Deborah. Usha disliked Deborah intensely, especially whenever Pranab brought Deborah around. Years later, Pranab cheats on Deborah, and Deborah takes comfort in speaking to Usha’s mother.

When Usha deals with her own heartbreak, her mother reveals that following Pranab’s marriage, she intended to commit suicide by lighting herself on fire in the backyard. She was stopped by a neighbor who happened to come outside at the right time.

In “A Choice of Accommodations,” Amit and his wife, Megan, travel to Amit’s old boarding school, Langford Academy, for the wedding of his old friend, Pam. Pam’s father was headmaster at Langford, and Pam was the only girl on campus. Conveniently, she notices that the dress she brought for the wedding has a burn mark on it. She requests that Amit stay by her side all night to help hide the mark, which he does.

Late in the evening, promising Megan he’ll return, he goes to the hotel room to call their daughters but passes out drunk. When he awakens, Megan relates her worry at not having been able to find him the previous night. While at the Academy to say goodbye to Pam, Megan and Amit wander into one of the dorm rooms and have sex.



In “Only Goodness,” Sudha blames herself for her younger brother Rahul’s alcoholism. Sudha had never rebelled against her parents until she attended Penn State, where she began to drink in moderation. While her brother Rahul was visiting her one weekend, Sudha allowed him to drink. He quickly became an alcoholic, something which she attempted to speak to her parents about, only to be dismissed. Later, while Sudha is studying for a master’s degree in London, she meets and marries an older Englishman named Roger Featherstone, and the two have a baby named Neel.

Rahul marries an American girl named Elena, and they have a child. Rahul visits Sudha in London, claiming to be sober. Rahul convinces Sudha and Roger to go out on a date. They return to find their baby in cold bath water. Rahul is passed out drunk in the guest room. This causes an argument between Roger and Sudha. Sudha orders Rahul to leave the next day.

In “Nobody’s Business,” Sang is in an emotionally abusive relationship with an Egyptian man named Farouk, who is seeing more than one woman. Sang’s roommate, Paul, has fallen for her. While Sang is away visiting relatives, an intoxicated woman named Deidre calls the apartment looking for Farouk. Paul discovers Farouk’s womanizing, which Sang later accuses Paul of making up to get her to dump Farouk.

Only when listening in on a conversation with Deidre does Sang learn the truth. She confronts Farouk with Paul, and the two men wrestle until Paul gains the upper hand and Farouk flees to his apartment. Brokenhearted, Sang leaves for London. Some months later, Paul sees Farouk and Deidre on the street. Farouk tells Paul that he is lucky no charges were pressed for the fight.

In the stories “Once in a Lifetime,” “Year’s End,” and “Going Ashore,” the lives of a girl named Hema and a boy named Kaushik are intertwined from childhood. In “Once in a Lifetime,” Hema and Kaushik are children when Kaushik’s family moves back to India from America. Kaushik’s family returns when he and Hema are teenagers. His mother dies from breast cancer.

The story continues in “Year’s End.” Kaushik must deal with his father’s decision to remarry a much younger widow for companionship. He also becomes a big brother to two small stepsisters. The situation becomes too much for him to handle. Kaushik drives up the East Coast of the United States. While driving, he reflects on having known Hema.

In “Going Ashore,” Hema and Kaushik meet in Rome in the late autumn and early winter of 2004. Hema is an academic engaged to be married, and Kaushik is preparing to leave for Hong Kong for a new assignment. They become lovers but do not commit to each other. On a layover in Thailand for a week, Kaushik goes swimming, only to be killed by the Indian Ocean tsunami on December 26.



Part One: Unaccustomed Earth

Summary

Unaccustomed Earth – Following the unexpected death of his wife due to heart failure during surgery, Ruma's seventy year-old father retires from his job at a pharmaceutical company and travels around the world. His travels were originally intended as family trips before his wife died. He sends postcards and updates on his travels to his pregnant daughter, Ruma, her husband Adam, and their three year-old son, Akash, who have moved to Seattle from New York. Having only visited Ruma and her family occasionally, Ruma's father asks to visit Seattle for a week before going to Prague in August. Ruma tells him he is welcome. Adam will be away that week for work for a hedge fund. Adam's job, though it keeps him busy, allows her to be a stay-at-home mom rather than a part-time lawyer.

Ruma worries that her father's visit may only make him an added responsibility, since her mother used to wait and dote on him as is traditional. Ruma never guessed how difficult motherhood could be until she herself became a mother. She had always wanted to avoid the path her mother had taken –having children, moving somewhere new for her husband, and caring for the household. Now, that is exactly what she does. She has raised Akash to speak English. She prefers the language to her own native Bengali because she feels that English is more authoritative.

Ruma's father is an immigrant to Pennsylvania who still values the old ways of his country. He now enjoys the freedom he has to travel around the world to other countries. He reflects on visiting his own parents in Bengal years before with his family. The trips continued until his parents died. In his current travels, Ruma's father has met a Bengali immigrant named Mrs. Bagchi, who has been widowed since the age of twenty-six. She lives on Long Island. Though she opposes remarrying, she enjoys seeing Ruma's father. They are planning on future trips together. He believes he is so attentive to her because she expects so little.

When he arrives, Ruma believes her father looks exactly the same as the last time she saw him. He is not very wrinkly, and he has a full head of hair. He removes his shoes upon entering the house, which strikes Akash as strange. As Ruma shows her father the house, she can sense criticism from him. He tells her that her delphiniums need watering. Immediately, he goes out to do it himself. Akash watches. Ruma thinks about how little Akash will know of his grandmother. She also reflects on how her mother was unhappy to learn that Ruma preferred pants and skirts to saris. She also remembers how her mother never cut corners in mothering and tending to the household.

Ruma makes Bengali dishes for her father while he stays with her, but Akash doesn't like the food. He also does not understand why his grandfather eats with his fingers. On the phone with Adam that night, Ruma reveals that she thinks her father wants to move in with them. Adam says that it is Ruma's call, and he'll support her decision. She



remembers how her parents had opposed her marriage because Adam is white and she is Indian. However, her parents grew to love and embrace Adam. She also remembers how her relationship with her mother improved tremendously after Akash was born.

Ruma's father notes how much Ruma has come to resemble her mother. He misses his wife. He reflects on how he has not bothered to tell his children he is seeing a new woman not for passion, but simply for companionship. The next morning, he and Akash go to the lake early and return for breakfast.

He explains to Ruma that he is hoping for a quiet vacation away from his vacations. He doesn't have to be constantly on the go to see things in Seattle as she has offered. Instead, he wants to be involved in day-to-day things, such as Akash's swimming lessons. He worries about Ruma not being self-reliant enough or employed. He also gardens with Akash in the yard, and he teaches Akash some words in Bengali. Ruma's father explains he likes it in Seattle. Ruma offers to let him move in, and she asks him to think about it. Ruma's father says he will, though he secretly knows he does not want to be part of another family and be tied down by it. He also knows that Ruma is asking him to move in not for his sake, but for hers.

When Ruma's father leaves, he encourages her to return to work. He says that he will come back to visit after the new baby is born. He tells Ruma he is too used to living on his own to move in. After he leaves, Akash finds a postcard Ruma's father had intended for Mrs. Bagchi, and it makes sense to Ruma why her father does not want to move in. She looks at the hydrangea bushes that her father has planted in honor of her mother, a show of respect before moving on to a new woman. Ruma then mails the postcard.

Analysis

"Unaccustomed Earth" is a collection of eight short stories detailing the experiences of Indian immigrants, primarily in America, by Jhumpa Lahiri. In the first short story of the collection, each of the five themes prevalent throughout the collection can readily be seen, beginning with family. Family is very important to Ruma and her father, though they do not outwardly say as much. During all of his travels, Ruma's father wants to come and see his daughter, son-in-law, and grandson before leaving on his next trip.

Ruma loves her own family very deeply. She is absolutely devoted to her husband and her son. She relishes the fact that she can be a stay-at-home mom, even if it is not what she had originally intended to do. Ruma long looked with disfavor upon her mother for being a stay-at-home mom who subordinated herself to her husband and took charge of caring for the home and her children. Ruma has voluntarily done the same thing, and it causes her to reconsider her opinions about her mother.

Ruma loves her father, but is apprehensive about his visit because her father is very traditional. Here, the themes of immigration and assimilation become incredibly important. As an immigrant himself, Ruma's father has had a somewhat difficult time accepting that things in America are different than what they were in India. For example,



the American conception of a stay-at-home mom is much different than the Indian conception of a stay-at-home mom.

Marriage also becomes an important theme through the idea of staying at home. While Ruma's father enjoyed and expected to be waited on hand and foot by his wife, Ruma is not the same as her mother. She is more an equal to Adam in their marriage. Though she cares for the house and predominantly cares for their child, her say in household matters is sometimes even superior to Adam's.

Adam defers the decision for asking Ruma's father to stay, with Adam saying he'll be supportive of whatever Ruma chooses. Ruma almost feels a constant gaze of criticism from her father for the way she keeps house and tends to her husband's needs. Interestingly, Ruma feels criticized both for not keeping house properly according to her father's standards and for not pursuing a career. Ruma knows that she would not have time for both in her present situation.

In terms of assimilation, Ruma considers herself to be an American of Indian descent, preferring American clothing and culture to Indian clothing and culture. She prefers to use English over Indian as a language at home, and she prefers American foods to Indian foods. As such, she has raised her son to speak only English. In one scene, Akash doesn't want to eat Indian food because he is not accustomed to it. Indeed, Ruma's decision to marry a white American man does not sit well with her parents at first, but they later come to love and embrace Adam.

The title "Unaccustomed Earth," which is borrowed from "The Custom-House" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is itself symbolic of immigration and assimilation. The unaccustomed earth –or new home –for Ruma is Seattle. For her father, unaccustomed earth includes all of the countries and new places, such as Seattle, that he visits. Life after the death of his wife is in and of itself something of unaccustomed earth. Indeed, his immigration to Pennsylvania from India in the first place speaks to the idea of a new place and a new way of life.

Throughout the short story, numerous references are made to the past, and numerous past events are recalled. The past has a strong bearing on the present and heavily influences the events of the plot. For example, Ruma's father's desire to travel is spurred on by a dream between all members of the family to have traveled the world together. Ruma's mother's death leaves Ruma's father alone in his travels, and so he seeks out companionship in Mrs. Bagchi. The primary reason that Ruma's father does not want to move in has to do with his wanting to be free and live near Mrs. Bagchi.

Ruma herself has wanted to live her life in spite of the past. As previously mentioned, Ruma did not want to become a stay-at-home mom who cared for the house and children and did things according to her husband's wishes. However, the move to Seattle was based on her husband's new job. Better pay meant that she was able to stay home to raise their son –something she thought she would never want to do. Ruma has, in other words, become her mother. Ruma's father even notes how similar Ruma now seems to her mother.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Ruma believe her father wants to move in with her family? How does she feel about this prospect? Why? Does Ruma's father actually want to live with Ruma? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Immigration and assimilation are important themes in this story. In what ways is Ruma embracing the American way of life? In what ways is she raising her son as an American? How does Ruma's father feel about this? Why?

Discussion Question 3

At the end of the novel, Ruma decides to mail her father's postcard to Mrs. Bagchi. Why does she decide to do this?

Vocabulary

prearranged, presumptuousness, diminish, daunting, bereavement, adamant, modulated, anomaly, bewilderment, fastidious, harmonious, frivolous, reciprocity, flippancy, inevitable, enamored



Part One: Hell-Heaven – A Choice of Accommodations

Summary

Hell-Heaven – Pranab Chakraborty is such a close friend of Usha's family that Usha refers to him as Uncle Pranab. As a recent immigrant to Cambridge, Massachusetts, Pranab had sought out their friendship due to their roots in India. Usha's father is a microbiology researcher at Massachusetts General, while Pranab is a wealthy graduate student at MIT. Both the Usha and her mother look forward to Pranab's visits. While Usha's father is very serious and committed to work, Pranab is friendly and well-cultured. Usha's father feels freed of many of the burdens of fatherhood and marriage as a result. Usha's mother falls in love with Pranab.

In autumn, 1974, Pranab begins dating an American girl named Deborah. Usha finds Deborah beautiful, but her mother finds Deborah unattractive. She resents the visits Pranab makes with Deborah, while Usha comes to admire Deborah. She enjoys speaking English with Deborah because she is required to speak Bengali at home. When Pranab and Deborah get engaged, Usha's father agrees to write a letter of approval about Deborah to Pranab's parents in Calcutta, though her mother secretly opposes this. Pranab's parents oppose the marriage, but Pranab doesn't care since he has the approval of Usha's parents. Her mother, however, secretly believes Pranab is throwing his life away.

Slowly, Pranab and Deborah fade from the social circles of the narrator's family. Everyone blames it on Deborah, saying she forces Pranab away from his roots. As Usha grows into a teenager, her mother opposes her wearing a bra and forbids her to date Americans. Usha secretly makes out with American boys, allows them to touch her, drinks beer, and pities her mother's routines. The family is surprised to be invited to Thanksgiving at Pranab and Deborah's Marblehead home the year before Usha begins college. They have been invited along with everyone else from the Cambridge social circles. Deborah's family is also there.

After Deborah's father prays Grace, Pranab tells everyone assembled that if it hadn't been for his friendship with Usha's mother, he would have returned to Calcutta. After dinner, Deborah's younger brother, Matty, goes for a walk with Usha. They smoke weed and kiss but never date. Fourteen years later, Pranab cheats on Deborah with a married Bengali woman, and they divorce. Deborah is comforted by Usha's mother. Usha's mother slowly becomes accepting of Usha's interest in American men and reveals a suicide story when Usha has her heart broken. Her mother explains she was jealous of Deborah and intended to commit suicide by setting herself on fire after Deborah's wedding. Only a neighbor coming outside unaware of what was about to happen managed to stop her.



A Choice of Accommodations – Amit and his wife, Megan, check into the Chadwick Inn in the Berkshires in Massachusetts. They are unhappy with the room because a pine tree obstructs the view from their balcony, but they do not change rooms. They have driven up from New York to attend Pam Borden's evening wedding at the all-male Langford Academy, where Amit was a student and Pam's father was headmaster. Amit and Megan's daughters are staying on Long Island with Megan's parents. Amit does not like Langford, having felt banished there by his parents. Megan is insecure about Pam, because she knows Amit once loved her, even though he and Pam never dated.

The business of family life and work has worn the marriage between Amit and Megan thin. Megan works long hours as a doctor in residency at Mount Sinai, while Amit works as a managing editor for a medical journal. Amit worries about how his girls are doing, and knows his wife is less fussy than he is about their daughters. Megan reveals her dress has a burn mark in it. She must either skip the wedding, or Amit must remain by her side all night to help hide the burn. Though she is five years older, it is Amit who looks older. Amit's wealthy parents frowned on their marriage because Megan is white and from an ordinary background. Amit and Megan's daughters have none of their father's Indian coloring.

During holidays, Pam's family took in children who were unable to return home. All the boys in the school are in love with Pam because she is the only girl around. Amit becomes a brother figure to Pam instead of anything else. It continues through college. A drunken pass Amit makes at Pam ends up going nowhere.

At the wedding, Amit tells Megan he feels old. He then accidentally introduces an old acquaintance, Ted, to Megan as Tim. Ted reveals that no one seems to know Ryan, the man Pam is marrying. What is known is that Ryan is older and writes for television. The wedding makes Amit realize he wouldn't change anything about his life, but would like to live it all again. Amit and Megan meet up with Pam and Ryan after the ceremony. They learn it is Ryan's second marriage, and that Ryan is a good man. While Megan goes to use the restroom, Amit goes to get them some drinks. He converses with Mr. Nagle, an English teacher, who is surprised Amit went into medical writing instead of reporting.

When Amit returns to Megan, he sees she is talking to Ted and is nervous about it. He thinks she might be flirting with Ted. It makes him feel relieved because he doesn't have to remain by her side. He ends up talking to a woman named Felicia, who is excited about having children. Amit explains that by the birth of their second child, their marriage had disappeared. This disgusts Felicia. Although Amit wants to explain that their energy is devoted to their kids and to finding time alone rather than to each other, he doesn't. When Amit excuses himself to call his daughters, Megan smiles and tells him she'll be waiting to dance the night away with him and watch the sun rise. It makes Amit feel loved.

Back at the hotel room, Amit falls asleep. Megan gets worried when he doesn't come back to the party, and she goes looking for him. She is not happy the next morning. Megan and Amit then go to say goodbye to Pam and Ryan. Megan says that she and Amit could have stayed in the dorms rather than a hotel, and they would have saved



two-hundred dollars. Amit said it wouldn't have been romantic, but he becomes aroused by Megan being in the dorms. They then have sex in a dorm room. Afterwards, Megan puts her hand on Amit's chest, and Amit can feel his heart beating against her hand.

Analysis

The Indian immigrant experience in this section of the book is immediately front and center in the story "Hell-Heaven." The reader meets a recently arrived Indian immigrant, Pranab, who seeks out friendship and comfort in the familiar. This happens to be in the form of Usha's mother. Indeed, Pranab takes comfort in the Indian community he is exposed to through the narrator's family. Ironically, as he becomes Americanized, he rejects this part of his life in addition to his Indian past. His American wife, Deborah, does her best to keep Pranab connected to his roots, but he wants very little to do with them.

Through Pranab's experiences, the theme of assimilation is presented. It is a degree of assimilation that is rapid and all-encompassing as Pranab truly does turn his back on his Indian roots in order to thoroughly embrace the American way of life. Pranab's desire to assimilate and blend in contrasts sharply with Amit's from the story "A Choice of Accommodations." Amit resents the fact that his parents dropped him off at a boarding school, essentially severing the ties to their Indian past for him. While Amit has had no problem with the America's culture and he loves his American-born wife, he still cannot forgive his parents.

Usha's mother cannot forgive Pranab for attempting to leave his Indian roots in the background and for wanting to marry an American girl. To some degree, this has to do with her unrequited, unmentioned love for Pranab. However, to a large degree, it has to do with her own desire to retain as much of her culture and heritage as possible. Usha wants to immerse herself in the American way of life. She loves to speak English with Deborah because Usha is forced to speak Bengali at home. Usha continues to rebel against her parents and her traditional Indian heritage by drinking liquor, allowing boys to touch her, and smoking weed.

Pranab rebels against Indian culture by marrying an American woman instead of an Indian woman. Also, he dismisses his parents' disapproval of the marriage as inconsequential. Usha's mother rebels against her Indian heritage by keeping company with another man despite being a married woman. She ends up falling in love with a man she knows she can never be with. Divorce is an unthinkable thing in Indian culture, but in American culture, it is commonplace. Usha's mother unwittingly becomes Americanized to a very small degree in this fashion, and her distress at Pranab's marriage leads to a near-suicide attempt.

Likewise, the marriage between Amit and Megan seems to be straining to some degree. Megan is obviously jealous of Amit's past with Pam, marginal though it may be as in the case of Usha's mother and Pranab. Nevertheless, despite the strains that Amit and Pam



feel, both are also reassured that the bond of marriage that unites them –and their love –is strong enough to weather difficult times and annoyances.

The view from the hotel where Amit and Megan stay is representative of their marriage. The obstructing pine tree represents the problems of daily life –and the past –that threaten the marriage, just as the tree threatens the view. The act of sexual union between Amit and Megan later in the story is representative of an emotional reconnection and Megan triumphing over the past. Physical love follows the strength of emotional love –something recognizable to Amit and Megan afterwards when Amit can feel his heart against Megan’s hand. Having his heart in her hands demonstrates, symbolically, that their love for one another is unabated despite the strains of life or the pull of the past.

In both of these short stories, the past holds tremendous sway over the present. Megan’s jealousy of Amit’s past with Pam is clearly evident through the course of the story. She is delighted that Pam is getting married because it is one less thing that Megan must worry about. Likewise, by Amit’s return to Langford for the wedding, he is confronted with his forced assimilation by his parents into American culture. In a similar way, Usha’s mother still broods on her love for Pranab to such a degree that she almost commits suicide. The past is very powerful.

Discussion Question 1

Though Usha’s mother falls in love with Pranab, she does not act on her feelings. Why is this? Why do you believe that Pranab himself does not return Usha’s mother’s feelings for her?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Pranab at first seek out the blessing of his parents to marry an American girl? Why does he later reject his Indian heritage?

Discussion Question 3

Though Megan is happy that Pam is going to be married, she is unhappy about having to attend the wedding with Amit. Why is this so? How does Amit try to handle the situation? Is he successful in the end? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

ravenously, cavalier, nonchalance, methodically, quarreled, vulnerability, diaphanous, oblivious, flaccid, elated, solicitous, mortified



Part I: Only Goodness – Nobody's Business

Summary

Only Goodness – Sudha, older sister of Rahul, blames herself for her brother's alcoholism. She allows him to drink when he visits her at Penn State. Sudha herself had welcomed being set free from strict, parental rules when she started attending college. However, despite sleeping with boys and drinking, she never does anything to excess. When Rahul graduates high, he attends Cornell in Ithaca, New York. His parents buy him a car for it. Sudha prepares to go on to study for a master's degree at the London School of Economics. Rahul returns home for Christmas smoking cigarettes and asking his sister to buy him beer and vodka, which she does. Over time, his grades slip, and he takes on English literature and film, dropping organic chemistry and biology. Sudha's mother asks her to intervene. Rahul says his life is fine the way it is.

Sudha reflects on how her family had previously lived frugally in London and how much more delighted her parents were about Rahul's birth than her own. She also encouraged her parents to shower Rahul with gifts and things she never had, to give Rahul a childhood she never had. In Wayland, a small Massachusetts town, they rely heavily on their children to help them assimilate, as both children find fitting into America to be far easier. For example, Sudha must tell her father what to do with raked leaves.

Rahul is arrested for underage drinking. His mother blames it on racist police. Sudha says that she thinks Rahul has a drinking problem. Her mother says that all American kids drink, but Sudha says not all drink like Rahul. Her mother believes the problem with America is that there is too much freedom. Rahul's license is suspended, and the family has to pay two thousand dollars in fines and fees.

In London, Sudha meets a man named Roger Featherstone while admiring the Van Eyck wedding painting "The Arnolfini Marriage" in the National Gallery in November. He is fourteen years older, well-cultured, and divorced. He is incredibly responsible and kind, and Sudha quickly falls for him. The two get engaged. At the same time, she learns that Rahul's grades have gotten worse and that he has stopped speaking to their parents. When Sudha tries to speak to Rahul, encouraging him not to drop out as he wants, he hangs up on her.

She returns to Wayland in April. Rahul has dropped out of school. He is living at home and working as a part-time manager at the local laundromat. This embarrasses his parents and is the source of gossip among other Bengalis. Sudha becomes her parents' prized child, and they willingly accept her marriage to an Englishman. Rahul falls for a woman named Elena, who is eight years older. He wants to marry her. Her parents oppose this because Elena is older and Rahul is irresponsible. They worry about his drinking.



At Sudha's wedding reception, Rahul makes a drunken toast which embarrasses his family. He leaves the reception early. Then, he sets out across the country. Though it angers Sudha, she settles into a happily married life with Roger in London. She later gives birth to a baby boy named Neel. Sudha's parents are thrilled.

Later, Sudha receives a letter from Rahul, who is now living with Elena in upstate New York. At Elena's insistence, he is attending rehab. He is now the father of a little girl named Crystal. Rahul comes to visit Sudha in London. He is surprised to learn from Sudha that their parents have moved back to Calcutta.

The visit goes well enough until Rahul convinces Sudha and Roger to go out for a date night while he watches Neel. When they return, they find Neel in cold bath water and Rahul passed out from drinking. Roger forbids Rahul from ever stepping foot in their house or coming near their child again. Sudha confesses the truth about her brother's past to Roger, who becomes angry. They go to sleep without speaking anymore. In the morning, Sudha orders Rahul to pack and leave. She is more heartbroken than angry.

Nobody's Business – Sangeeta "Sang" Biswas, who has a degree in philosophy from NYU, is thirty, pretty, unmarried, and receives constant calls from potential suitors. Her roommates, Paul and Heather, always see how annoyed she is to receive these calls. The calls are the result of an Indian community determined to see her get married. Paul, an English and European literature PhD student, has already failed his examination once, though he has not told this to Sang. He has a crush on her. Sang has been seeing an Egyptian man named Farouk who is unpleasable and not very affectionate. Their relationship is very difficult at best.

Sang later goes to visit her sister in London, and a woman named Deirdre Frain from Cleveland calls the apartment to learn about this. She drunkenly confesses while crying that she loves Farouk. During a call the next day, Deidre calls back and explains that she is also dating Farouk, and that he was with her the previous night. Paul hangs up. When Sang returns, he tells her about Deidre. Sang cannot get a hold of Farouk, so she decides to call Deidre but cannot find her number. She asks Paul for more details about the calls, which causes her to become angry for Paul not telling her more sooner.

She later speaks to Farouk, who says that Deidre is only a former love interest from Vancouver, Canada, and that Deidre never cried on the phone to Paul. She accuses Paul of exaggerating the story to make her break up with Farouk so Paul could date her. She calls him pathetic. Paul later searches for Deidre in the phone book, discovers she lives in Belmont, and calls her until she answers. She says she'll call back at ten. Paul then buys an extra phone and an adapter for two phone jacks and has Sang listen in on the phone call. Deidre confesses the truth of everything being Farouk's idea. She says that Farouk told her that Sang was her cousin, and that Farouk operates by making women believe he cannot live without them.

Sang then has Paul drive him to Farouk's apartment where she confronts him. Farouk tries to fight Paul but Paul overpowers him. He then rushes into his apartment behind Sang. The two argue while the superintendent and a police officer arrive. The apartment



is a wreck. Sang says she has done it to herself. She then leaves to stay in London with her sister. Paul passes his exams. He runs into Farouk and a woman on the street who tells Paul he may need surgery, and that Paul is lucky he didn't sue. Paul then notices the woman must be Deidre.

Analysis

Family proves to be an important theme in "Only Goodness". Sudha blames herself for not having been a better sister, because she introduced Rahul to alcohol in the first place during her gentle college rebellion against her heritage and Indian culture. Sudha has long obeyed the desires and will of her parents for three reasons.

First, total submission to parents is expected and required in Indian culture. Second, Sudha knows that behaving now will allow her greater freedom in the future, giving her a better chance to Americanize. (Here, the theme of assimilation also comes to the fore.) Third, although she often disagrees with her parents, Sudha loves them. Hoping to give her baby brother greater freedom than she herself had to wait for, she introduces Rahul to alcohol, which ends up being a mistake.

Years later, Sudha has her own family. Married to a much older Englishman named Roger Featherstone, Sudha is both deeply in love with him and with their son. She is happy with her family, and happy with her life. Rahul's visit—leaving the baby in the bathtub and passing out drunk—not only causes a fissure between Sudha and Roger, but forces Sudha to confront the past.

Here, the past becomes incredibly powerful thematically as Sudha must face the reality that it was she, and no one else, who introduced Rahul to the vice that would come to destroy his life. The fissure between Sudha and Roger is too great for Sudha's liking, so she takes quick action by ordering Rahul to leave in order to preserve and repair her own family.

Assimilation can also be seen in other ways in both short stories in this section as well. Sudha and Rahul have a much easier time adjusting to American culture because they are younger, more open-minded, and less set in their ways than their parents. Sudha must continually help her parents orient themselves to common American activities, such as raking leaves. Sudha's parents contend that there is too much freedom in America, and this is one of the reasons why they refuse to assimilate completely.

Sang herself is more prone to assimilation in "Nobody's Business." Sang is very much a modern American woman of Indian descent. Her Americanization has occurred to such an extent that she is annoyed with the constant encouragement by her parents to get married at what they consider to be the very old age of thirty.

The suitors who consistently call Sang are organized by her parents and the Indian community, but Sang never follows up on any of these attempts at arranging marriage. Instead, she is seeing an Egyptian man named Farouk. The clash between native Indian culture and Islamic culture is extreme in parts of Southeast Asia, including India.



So, the fact that Sang would date an Egyptian man is also evidence of rebellion against her heritage and her parents –and an example of her adoption of relaxed American ideas about dating.

Rahul's own behavior is also striking for his rebellion against his heritage. When he marries an American girl, he violates two Indian norms. The woman should be younger, not older, and the woman should be Indian, and of no other race. Elena is not only not an Indian, but she is several years older than Rahul as well.

The past becomes especially important for Sang in the last part of "Nobody's Business." Her past relationship with Farouk becomes too much to bear, and it causes her to leave the country in order to get away from him. By doing so, she turns her back on her life in America in favor of moving closer to where her sister lives in London. In effect, she seeks to forget her past in American to return to her Indian past by way of her family. In other words, immigration is the only solution for Sang's broken heart and her past.

Discussion Question 1

Do you believe that Sudha is correct in holding herself accountable for her brother's alcoholism? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Sudha react so quickly to her brother's drunkenness in London by ordering him home the next morning? Do you believe she is justified in her actions against Rahul? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe Sang has such a difficult time accepting Paul's revelation about Deidre? Do you believe her reaction is justified? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

precocious, portent, perplexing, impermeable, jovial, penitent, cadence, vigilance, equilibrium, abject, diminutive, intricate, cloying, transgressed, infrequently, infatuated, incredulous, convoluted



Part Two: Hema and Kaushik: Once in a Lifetime – Year's End

Summary

Once in a Lifetime – A little girl named Hema is six years old in 1974 when nine year-old Kaushik and his family return to Calcutta from Cambridge. Hema's family throws Kaushik's family a farewell party, their mothers having met in a park while Hema's mother was pregnant with Hema. After the party, Kaushik's father drives people home, relishing his last chance to drive the family car. Several years later, Kaushik's family decides to return to America. No one knows why, but Hema's parents and others in the Bengali community know it is impossible to ever go back.

Kaushik and his family will be staying with Hema's family for the time being. Hema, now thirteen, will stay in her parents' room on a cot, while Kaushik takes over Hema's room. Kaushik's parents take the guest room. They have flown back in first class, a once-in-a-lifetime experience for Kaushik's mother's fortieth birthday. Everyone talks about Reagan being President and all the ways Carter failed as a President. Hema immediately develops a crush on Kaushik, who says he missed the cold. His family is now much more Americanized since living in India, which perplexes Hema's mother.

While shopping for bras, Kaushik's mother buys Hema her first three training bras as a gift. He discovers that Kaushik's mother secretly smokes cigarettes. The family takes its time house-hunting, which annoys Hema's mother. Hema worries that Kaushik doesn't like her, but Hema's mother explains that Kaushik is merely adjusting. In the woods behind the suburbs, he discovers an old family cemetery, with the last child, Emma, having died in 1923. The similarity of Hema's name startles her. Kaushik then explains his mother is dying of breast cancer. Trips to house hunt often mask hospital visits. The family has returned to America where no one knows this so his mother can have some peace. The family soon moves out, after which his mother's health declines quickly.

Year's End – Years End continues the story of Once in a Lifetime. While a senior at Swarthmore, Kaushik's father remarries a much younger widow named Chitra without Kaushik's knowledge. Chitra is a schoolteacher who has two daughters, Rupa and Piu. The marriage has been arranged by relatives out of Kaushik's father's desire for companionship. It stuns and saddens Kaushik, who cries about it to his girlfriend, Jessica. At home for Christmas, Kaushik finds little of the house changed. He is no longer accustomed to the Indian food that is served by Chitra, who waits on Kaushik and his father in the old ceremonious way.

Kaushik finds it difficult to reconcile Chitra being in his mother's place. He also finds it interesting that his father drinks much less alcohol, as Chitra is much more old-fashioned. He also announces they will be celebrating Christmas, something they haven't done since Kaushik's mother died three years before. Kaushik converses with



Chitra in English, while she speaks to him in Bengali. Kaushik brings Rupa and Piu to Dunkin' Donuts. The girls are thrilled with receiving donuts, and ask to bring one home for their mother. Kaushik gives them money for donuts and encourages them to use English. Rupa and Piu ask about Kaushik's mother, and explain that Chitra has been looking for a picture of her.

At home, an anxious Chitra is happy to see the girls have had such a good time. Chitra asks Kaushik why there are no curtains or railings on the outside steps. He explains the lack of curtains are for the view, and there are no railings because the family liked it that way. Setting up the Christmas tree, Kaushik pretends he cannot find the family's old decorations because he cannot bear the thought of Chitra going through things that meant so much to his mother. Instead, he goes out to buy new decorations. Chitra finds Christmas to be lovely. The next day, Kaushik's father brings Chitra, Rupa, Pui, and Kaushik on a tour of Boston.

On Christmas morning, Kaushik's father gives Kaushik a thousand dollars, and explains the entire family will be going to Disney World for five days. The girls are thrilled, but are unhappy to learn that Kaushik will not be joining them. When Kaushik's father and Chitra attend a party, Kaushik brings the girls out for pizza. At the same time, Kaushik's relationship with Jessica becomes strained as he doesn't want to invite her to his house.

Later that night, he finds the girls in his bedroom, where they have discovered old photos of Kaushik's mother. He becomes enraged, yelling at them, telling them their mother is not as pretty, and that their mother is merely a servant. The girls break out in tears and Kaushik leaves the house, traveling up to Maine. He calls his father the next day. He is angry that Kaushik has left without a word. The girls, Kaushik learns, haven't said anything about the events of the night before. He also learns that Chitra believes that his fleeing is her fault.

Kaushik continues to drive up the coast. His mind wanders, and he thinks about Hema. He later learns that his father has sold the house, and the family now lives closer to Boston. Kaushik and his stepsisters never grow close, and any event where they must be together, such as at his graduation, are very strained.

Analysis

The stories "Once in a Lifetime" and "Year's End." explore the theme of family. The two families – Hema's and Kaushik's – do everything as family units. The move to America from India is made by the families as a whole. Kaushik's family's return to India later on is made by the entire family. No one remains behind, but everyone immigrates together. This underscores the importance of family unity in Indian culture and demonstrates how much family means socially. Family is everything –from safety and encouragement to guidance and support.

Indeed, the families of Hema and Kaushik end up living together at one point when Kaushik's family returns from India. Here, the theme of immigration is apparent in the



return to America. As Hema's father previously notes, "going back" to India is impossible for any reason imaginable. One family helps out another family—a sign of familial and Indian community between both families. Within Kaushik's family, the decision to return to America is not one made out of joy or happiness, but it is out of concern for Kaushik's mother, who is dying of breast cancer, and the desire for privacy.

Hema finds out why Kaushik and his family have returned to America when she and Kaushik find an old cemetery in the woods. They discover the tombstone of a child named Emma who had died in 1923. With the name on the tombstone being so similar to hers, Hema recognizes death for the first time in her young life. It is at this point that Kaushik tells her that his mother is dying and that his family returned to America so that his mother could die in private and in peace. His mother's health declines quickly after he tells this to Hema.

Hema, a growing teenage girl, worries whether or not Kaushik likes her. Her mother explains that Kaushik seems off because he is adjusting to life in America. In reality, the reader later understands that Kaushik's difficulty stems from his mother's terminal illness. Here begins the past that will come to fuel Kaushik's actions in the story "Year's End." Kaushik cannot abide another woman taking his mother's place, no matter how sweet or kind that woman is.

Kaushik is further unhinged by the fact that Chitra is so traditional and so unwilling to assimilate more readily, despite her allowing her daughters to embrace the American culture more readily. Chitra insists on speaking to Kaushik in Indian, while Kaushik insists on speaking to Chitra in English. Likewise, Kaushik—thoroughly removed from his Indian heritage—dislikes the fact that Chitra waits on him and his father hand and foot. He dislikes the fact that she eats alone as is customary. However, much can be said for Chitra's willingness to participate in Christmas, which she finds to be a beautiful holiday and a beautiful event.

Kaushik's mother herself was much more modern and Americanized than Chitra. Kaushik's mother had no problem drinking alcohol, whereas Kaushik's father must hide the alcohol around Chitra. Kaushik's mother enjoyed shopping for bras and bought Hema her first three training bras, although Hema's mother did not approve.

Indeed, Kaushik feels as if his life is being pulled into the past by Chitra. Her presence reminds him of what he has lost—his mother—and her presence reminds him of his Indian heritage, which he does not dwell on. Indeed, Kaushik doesn't even care to dwell on his Indian ancestry, much preferring American culture and society.

Kaushik's father's marriage to Chitra is emblematic of Indian culture. His father has not remarried a woman of his choosing, nor has he remarried a woman of similar age for passion. He has married a woman not much older than Kaushik. He has remarried for companionship, and the marriage itself has been arranged by friends and relatives in India. When Kaushik's stepsisters find old photos of his mother, it is a physical manifestation of the return of the past. It is too much for Kaushik to bear; so, he flees home.



Discussion Question 1

Hema's father makes the observation that reverse-immigration, "going back" to one's homeland, is always an impossible thing. Why? Do you believe he is correct? Why or why not? Do you believe he is correct as far as Kaushik's family is concerned? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Kaushik flee his house after Rupa and Piu find old photographs of his mother? Do you believe his reaction is justified? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Kaushik so irked by his father's decision to remarry? How does Kaushik feel about Chitra herself? Do you believe his treatment of her and his reaction to her are justified? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

embroidered, bequeathed, curios, accentuated, proprietary, pejorative, voluptuous, acrid, morosely, mediocre, seldom, incongruous, inane, extravagantly, disproportionate, pedantic, idiosyncratic, unfathomable, impenetrable



Part Two: Hema and Kaushik: Going Ashore

Summary

Hema, now a professor at Wellesley, travels to Rome on a grant to continue her studies. From there she will head to visit her parents in Calcutta, where they have moved back to from Massachusetts. Then, she will return to the States to marry Navin, her arranged fiancée, who is a professor of physics at Michigan State. She has been to Rome before. In Rome, she stays at the apartment of her friend, Giovanna. In the past, she stayed with Julian, a professor with whom she carried on a ten year affair. Edo, a friend of Giovanna's, calls Hema to see how she is getting along. His wife, Paola, is a photo editor at "L'Espresso," and has worked with Kaushik, now a photojournalist. He has traveled extensively in South America, covering the violence in many different countries.

Kaushik's work keeps him away from the United States, except on small trips for meetings or to purchase photography equipment. Rupa is married to an American named Peter, while Piu is in medical school. His father is retired and playing golf. Kaushik himself spends most of his down time in Rome, though he is preparing to take on work for a magazine in Hong Kong as a photo editor. At a party hosted by Edo and Paola, Kaushik finds Hema. They spend much of the evening talking and catching up. He wonders why Hema is marrying Navin. She says that she hopes it will "fix things." However, Kaushik and Hema quickly become lovers.

Hema and Kaushik begin spending all of their time together. Hema is amazed by his photography, but Kaushik explains he doesn't like the way that photography affects him sometimes. For example, during a car accident where no one was hurt, Kaushik ran to take pictures before even asking if everyone was okay. Hema and Kaushik travel north to Volterra, where they take in the sights and visit museums. Hema is envious of the people who have lived there all their lives, wanting to belong in one place.

Kaushik is not envious. He tells Hema not to marry Navin. He wants her to come with him to Hong Kong instead. Hema is both flattered and angered that he is telling her what to do. She suggests they might be able to continue to see each other, but Kaushik calls her a coward. This causes her to cry. On her flight out of Rome, she realizes she has left a bangle bracelet in security, a gift from her grandmother. She feels incomplete without it. By the time Kaushik gets to his layover in Thailand, he is no longer angry, but regretful.

After returning to America, Hema is married. She later learns that Kaushik was killed during the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami.



Analysis

The past emerges as a very important theme in the story “Going Ashore.” The story picks up almost twenty years after the events of “Year’s End.” It is now 2004, and Kaushik and Hema meet up quite unexpectedly in Rome. They reconnect quickly and become lovers, even though Hema is engaged. Hema’s commitment to a sexual affair with Kaushik despite her being engaged is emblematic of her rebellion against Indian culture. Although the West also disapproves of cheating, their sexual affair seems to be one more rooted in rebellion against the arranged marriage tradition of India than of the Western opposition to affairs in general.

The sexual relationship between Hema and Kaushik is more than their past history or rebellion against their Indian culture. Both individuals are desperately lonely without having realized it. However, while Kaushik is able to retreat from his Indian culture by engaging in a sexual affair and telling Hema not to marry Navin, Hema is unable to totally disengage herself from her Indian heritage. When Hema realizes that she has forgotten her bangle bracelet, she feels a terrible loss. She feels incomplete without it. The lost bracelet is representative of her lost attempt at happiness with Kaushik, through no fault of her own.

She will carry on with the arranged marriage for two reasons. First, it is now her obligation to marry Navin as she said she would. Second, Kaushik doesn’t offer her the possibility of marriage with him. While marriage may not be important to Kaushik, it is very important to Hema. Hema cannot imagine a life without being married, for she has accomplished everything else in life she has set out to do. It will help to “fix things” in her life.

Kaushik himself is still running from his past. His mother’s death has irrevocably scarred him, and his father’s remarrying still isn’t something Kaushik has been able to move beyond. As a result, feeling alone and without a real home, Kaushik becomes something of a permanent immigrant, traveling throughout the world as a photojournalist. He is, in effect, running from the past. Only lately is he coming close to settling down professionally as a photo editor in Hong Kong. However, marriage is a degree of settling down. Kaushik is not ready for that.

Hema’s decision to go along with her arranged marriage appears to be the logical choice. Furthermore, Hema’s decision to get married and not go along with Kaushik to Thailand means that she does not die alongside Kaushik in the tsunami. The old ways pay off for Hema and demonstrate that, although some assimilation is important and even necessary, there is no need to completely abandon the past. At times, one must live in spite of the past, which is something that Kaushik is never able to do.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Hema refuse to break off her engagement to Navin at Kaushik’s insistence? Is her decision justified? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Kaushik relishes the fact that photojournalism keeps him away from the United States. Why?

Discussion Question 3

How does Kaushik become a man without a country, a constant immigrant? Why does Kaushik insist on keeping on the move by taking a regular job in China, thousands of miles away from the United States?

Vocabulary

languorous, chastely, infectious, inauspicious, surliness, implacably



Characters

Ruma

Ruma is one of the central characters in the short story "Unaccustomed Earth." An American of Indian descent, Ruma is the pregnant wife of Adam and the mother of Akash. Trained and licensed in law, Ruma has decided to become a stay-at-home mom now that her husband's new job in Seattle has come through, and it pays very well. During the story, Ruma plays host to a visit from her father, who lives in Pennsylvania. Ruma feels constantly scrutinized and criticized by her father, believing him to be an antiquated throwback to India. Having long been critical of her own dead mother for being a stay-at-home mom, Ruma now finds herself in the surprising and willing role of stay-at-home mom. She gets along reasonably well with her father during his visit. At first, she believes that he wants to move in with her and her family. Ruma later learns that this is not the case, as he is seeing a new woman.

Ruma's Father

In "Unaccustomed Earth," Ruma's father is a traditional man of seventy who is traveling the world after the death of his wife. A native of India, he now lives in Pennsylvania. Originally, Ruma's family intended to travel the world together, but her mother's untimely death has launched her father into traveling on his own. At first, he is looking to escape, but he later comes to find solace in traveling. While traveling, he meets and begins seeing Mrs. Bagchi, a young widow from Long Island. The two become an item, and Ruma's father hesitates to tell his children about Mrs. Bagchi. He goes to visit Ruma in Seattle. He disapproves of her lack of ties to her Indian culture and encourages her to get back into the practice of law. When Ruma offers him the opportunity to move in, he refuses. She only later learns that this is because he wants to be close to Mrs. Bagchi on the East Coast.

Usha's Mother

Usha's mother is a kind, traditional first-wave Indian immigrant to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she has moved with her husband and with Usha. She is central to the story "Hell-Heaven." Usha's mother becomes fast friends with a young graduate student, Pranab, who has recently arrived from India. Usha's mother ends up falling in love with him, but she will not leave her husband to pursue Pranab because that is impossible in Indian culture. Her love itself is unrequited, and she is heartbroken when Pranab marries an American girl. Only years later does Usha's mother reveal to her daughter that she had intended to commit suicide by fire in the backyard after the marriage, only to be stopped by the presence of an unassuming neighbor who came outside at just the right time.



Pranab

Pranab Chakraborty is a recently-arrived Indian immigrant and graduate student in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the story “Hell-Heaven.” Early on, Pranab is desperately lonely and misses India. He becomes fast friends with Usha’s mother and her circle of Indian friends, desperate for the familiar culture of India. Over time, he comes to feel welcome and comfortable in America, and he rapidly assimilates, throwing off his heritage almost entirely. Despite the protests of his American wife, Deborah, Pranab wants little to do with his heritage. He later cheats on Deborah, and the two get a divorce.

Amit and Megan

Amit and Megan are a married couple in the short story “A Choice of Accommodations.” They have gone to Amit’s old school in the Berkshires of Massachusetts to attend a wedding for his old friend, Pam. Megan is jealous of how Pam and Amit were close when they were younger, though they never dated. Naturally, Megan is thrilled that Pam is getting married because it will close one chapter of her husband’s life. Though Megan and Amit are deeply committed to one another, they feel the strains of everyday life in their marriage. The wedding allows them to reconnect and rediscover this bond. The renewal of their marriage commitment is physically consummated before they head back home.

Sudha

Sudha is one of the central characters in the short story “Only Goodness.” She is incredibly patient and kind. Sudha is the older sister of Rahul, and she blames herself for her brother’s alcoholism and failures in life. It was Sudha who first introduced Rahul to alcohol while she was attending Penn State and Rahul came to visit. Whereas Sudha obeyed her parents as a teenager, she rebels by drinking while away at college. She wants her brother to have more freedom as a teenager than she did, which is why she first lets him drink. It is a mistake as she later comes to realize.

Sudha tries to help her brother straighten out over the next several years, even attempting to get her parents to intervene against his alcoholism; but, she is unsuccessful. While in London studying for a master’s degree, she falls in love with a much older Englishman named Roger Featherstone. They marry and have a child named Neel. Rahul, who claims to be sobered up, comes to visit, only to endanger the life of Neel by passing out drunk while bathing Neel. This causes a fracture in Sudha’s marriage and reminds her that her son and husband must come first. She orders Rahul to leave.



Rahul

Rahul is the younger brother of Sudha in the short story “Only Goodness.” First introduced to alcohol by Sudha, Rahul quickly becomes a full-fledged alcoholic. His grades soon slip. He drops out of college, and he marries an older American girl named Elena. They have a child. Elena forces him into rehab, but it doesn’t help. While visiting Sudha and Roger in London, Rahul passes out drunk while bathing Sudha’s son, leaving him alone in the bathtub. Fortunately, the child is fine, but Rahul’s reckless and selfish act is the last straw for Sudha, who orders Rahul to leave.

Sang

Sangeeta “Sang” Biswas is a pretty, unmarried thirty-year old girl who is thoroughly Americanized. She dislikes her parents’ attempts to arrange marriages for her. She is secretly dating a man named Farouk, an Islamic Egyptian whom her parents would highly disapprove of. Sang is horrified to learn that Farouk has been cheating on her with another woman, though she at first believes that her roommate Paul has concocted the story to get her to break up with Farouk so Paul can date her. Sang is so devastated by Farouk’s cheating that she leaves the country for London to be with her sister.

Hema

In Part II of the book, Hema is a central character in “Once in a Lifetime,” “Year’s End,” and “Going Ashore.” Hema is a sweet girl who grows into a woman over the course of these three stories, her life intertwining with Kaushik’s as children, teenagers, and later as adults. Hema loves America, and she does her best to fit into her new homeland. Her desire for a bra, for example, clashes with the traditional nature of her mother, who opposes the wearing of bras. However, in other ways, Hema appreciates the traditional Indian ways of her parents. For example, she decides to allow her parents to arrange a marriage for her to Navin. While studying the Western civilization of the Etruscans in Rome, Hema runs into Kaushik. The two begin an affair which ends when Kaushik urges Hema to break off her engagement, but he doesn’t offer to marry her. Hema is heartbroken, but she marries Navin. She is later saddened to learn of Kaushik’s death in the East Indian Ocean tsunami of December, 2004.

Kaushik

Kaushik is a central character in Part II of the book in the stories “Once in a Lifetime,” “Year’s End,” and “Going Ashore.” Three years older than Hema, Kaushik much prefers the American way of life to Indian culture. He does everything he can to divest himself of all of his Indian past. Kaushik is emotionally scarred by the death of his mother from breast cancer, which is further compounded by his father’s decision to remarry. Though Kaushik tries at first to accept the new marriage, he cannot get used to it. He leaves home. He ends up working as a photojournalist, which allows him to travel all over the

world, running from his past. In Rome in 2004, he meets up with Hema, and the two begin an affair. Kaushik urges Hema to break off her engagement, but he doesn't offer to marry her. On the way to his next job in China, Kaushik stops in Thailand for a week, where he is killed in the East Indian Ocean tsunami that December.



Symbols and Symbolism

Postcards

Postcards are a feature in the short story “Unaccustomed Earth.” Postcards depicting various attractions, cities, and destinations are purchased by Ruma’s father and sent to Ruma and her family as he travels around the world. While visiting Seattle, Ruma’s father purchases a postcard to send to his girlfriend, Mrs. Bagchi, though he misplaces it before he leaves. Akash finds the postcard, which leads Ruma to realize her father does not want to move to Seattle because he is seeing Mrs. Bagchi. Ruma mails the postcard.

Matches

Matches are a feature in the short story “Hell-Heaven.” Matches are used to light fires. When Usha’s mother discovers that the man with whom she is in love has decided to marry an American girl, Usha’s mother is beside herself with grief. After the wedding, Usha’s mother intends to light herself on fire using matches. Only an unassuming neighbor coming outside at the right time stops Uma’s mother from going through with her suicide attempt.

Pine tree

A pine tree features into the short story “A Choice of Accommodations.” A pine tree has grown in front of the balcony of the hotel room of the Chadwick Hotel where Amit and Megan are staying. It obstructs their view. The view from the balcony is symbolic of the marriage of Amit and Megan, and the obstructing pine tree represents the problems of daily life –and the past – all of which threaten the marriage, just as the tree threatens the view.

Alcohol

Alcohol features into the short story “Only Goodness.” It is consumed in copious amounts by Rahul, who was introduced to alcohol by his well-intentioned but unthinking older sister, Sudha. Sudha wants Rahul to have the freedom she never had as a teenager, but Rahul’s penchant for drink quickly turns into alcoholism. While babysitting Sudha’s son, Rahul passes out drunk, leaving Sudha’s son in the bathtub. Sudha’s son is fine, but the incident irreparably destroys the relationship between brother and sister.



Telephones

Telephones feature into the short story “Nobody’s Business.” Paul learns by telephone that Sang’s boyfriend, Farouk, is cheating on her with another woman. Sang is disbelieving of Paul’s assertions until she listens in on a telephone call where she learns the truth. The telephones, meant to relay conversations, are symbolic of the truth being relayed from one person to another.

Bra

Bras feature into the story “Once in a Lifetime.” Bras are seen as a distinctly Western style of clothing, and a girl’s first training bra is considered a female rite of passage in America. Hema is thrilled to need her first training bras, but her mother opposes them as they are not in accord with Indian tradition. Although Hema receives the bras anyway, they show a clear mark of distinction between the old world of India and the new world of America. They also represent the different views between the older generation and the newer generation.

Photographs

Photographs are a feature in the story “Year’s End.” Photographs are taken by Kaushik, as he has an interest in photography. He also keeps numerous photographs of his dead mother, which are found by his new stepsisters. Their finding of the photos brings Kaushik face-to-face with the past, physically manifesting everything he knows he has lost. This becomes too much for him to bear. He screams at his stepsisters, shakes them, and flees the house as a result.

Bangle bracelet

A bangle bracelet is a symbol in the story “Going Ashore.” A gift from Hema’s grandmother, the bangle bracelet is one of the few pieces of Hema’s Indian heritage that she keeps with her. She forgets the bracelet in airport security in Rome on her way back to America, and she feels lost without it. The bracelet comes to symbolize her failed romance with Kaushik. She feels the loss of a chance at love with him.

Western clothing

In each of the stories, Western clothing –consisting of shirts, pants, and skirts –is worn primarily by younger Indian immigrants and second-generation Indian immigrants. The clothing becomes symbolic of the divide between the old world of India and the new world of America. For example, in “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma loves to wear Western clothing, while her mother never gave up the traditional Indian saris. Ruma is happy and eager to fit into her home in America, while her mother did not want to abandon the

ways in which she had been raised. This includes the style of clothing that women wore in India.

Cigarettes

Cigarettes are a vice in American and Indian cultures. However, in Indian culture they are expressly frowned upon. In Indian culture, it is very frowned upon for women to smoke. Throughout the stories in this collection, many of the characters, including the women, smoke cigarettes. Among them is Kaushik's mother in "Once in a Lifetime." She smokes cigarettes in the bathroom so that no one can see her smoking.



Settings

United States of America

The United States of America is the country to which all of the Indian immigrants in the novel move. They see the United States as a land of opportunity, freedom, and justice. It offers a better life and a better tomorrow. While not everyone remains in the United States of America –Sang flees America for England after a failed romance, and Kaushik flees America when he can no longer handle the death of his mother –most of those who do remain in America fall in love with the country. For example, Ruma in “Unaccustomed Earth” has fallen in love with American culture and society, thrilled to be speaking English and thrilled to be a part of the rich fabric of the country’s diversity. Others, however, like Sudha’s parents in “Only Goodness,” find American to be full of too much fun and freedom. They see this as being detrimental to their son, Rahul.

India

India is the country in which all of the Indian characters in the short story collection have ancestral roots. India is beset by poverty and limited choices and opportunities. As such, everyone who leaves India seeks a better life elsewhere. All those in the collection travel to the United States. Those who return to India, such as Kaushik and his parents, do not remain in India for long for various reasons. For example, Kaushik’s parents in “Once in a Lifetime” return to America because India doesn’t have the proper medical care that Kaushik’s mother needs. Also, the family doesn’t want to be around people who know about Kaushik’s mother’s cancer so that she can have a peaceful ending to her life.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts is the setting for many of the short stories in the book, including “Once in a Lifetime,” “Hell-Heaven,” and “A Choice of Accommodations.” The state is located in New England, which is the northeastern section of the United States of America. In the book, Massachusetts is home to many immigrants from India and their children, including Usha and her family, Pranab and his family, and the families of Hema and Kaushik.

Rome

Rome is the capital of the southern European country of Italy. It is a major center of art, culture, and history. It was the birthplace of the Roman Empire which defeated the previously dominant Etruscan empire that Hema studies in “Going Ashore.” Rome is where Hema and Kaushik encounter one another for the first time in more than twenty years. They have an unhappy affair in Rome, which leads to their parting ways. Hema

returns to America to be married, while Kaushik heads to Thailand where he is killed in the December, 2004, tsunami.

Thailand

Thailand is a nation in Southeastern Asia which borders the Indian Ocean. It is the site for a one-week layover made by Kaushik on his way to a photo editing job in Hong Kong. While swimming on Thailand's coast, Kaushik is killed by the December, 2004, tsunami which devastates Thailand and many other countries bordering the Indian Ocean.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is an important theme in the short story collection “Unaccustomed Earth” by Jhumpa Lahiri. Thematically, family encompasses the love, loyalty, and compassion shared by individuals who may or may not be blood-related. Family also include the emotional, physical, and spiritual support between individuals who act as a family unit. In the collection, family appears important in positive and negative ways.

In “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma and her father are dealing with the death of Ruma’s mother. Her death was unexpected, and it has left a large hole in the family. Ruma’s father, reeling from the loss, travels as a way of escape. His travels are also fulfilling a plan the family had prior to his wife’s passing. It is during these travels that he meets a new woman and begins to reorganize his life. Part of that includes a visit to Ruma and her family in Seattle. Ruma’s father loves his family, though Ruma often feels as if he is critical of her life and her new American ways.

While she heartily embraces the American culture, her father retains many of his Indian customs and attitudes, including a love of the Bengali language and of Indian food. This causes a divide between father and daughter that is only exacerbated by his insistence on continuing to critique her desire to be a stay-at-home mom. Nevertheless, the visit brings father and daughter, as well as grandfather and grandson, closer together.

In “Hell-Heaven,” Usha’s mother relates a story to Usha to help her deal with heartbreak. It is Usha’s mother’s own story of forbidden and unrequited love, leading to a near-suicide attempt. This establishes a level of trust between mother and daughter. It brings mother and daughter closer together.

In “A Choice of Accommodations,” Amit and Megan worry that there is too much strain on their marriage and their family, but a trip to a wedding in the Berkshires allows them to renew their love for, and loyalty to each other. It also reminds them just how much family matters to them.

In “Only Goodness,” a well-meaning but misguided effort by the elder Sudha to give her younger brother, Rahul, a sense of teenage freedom she never had leads to her brother’s alcoholism. Rather than initially protecting Rahul from alcohol, she introduced him to it and feeds his habit for years afterward before trying to get him help. When Rahul endangers the life of Sudha’s baby in London after passing out drunk, Sudha realizes that her own family –her husband and son –must be more important than her brother. She orders him away from her home and her family. Her love and loyalty must now rest with her husband and son.

In “Once in a Lifetime,” Hema’s family hosts Kaushik’s family as they return from India and look for a new house. Both families become an extended family for that time. For



example, Kaushik's mother buys Hema her first training bras while Hema's own mother opposes this form of Americanization. When Kaushik's family moves out, both families lose touch for years.

Kaushik must deal with his own family issues in "Year's End." Kaushik reels from the death of his mother, something he is never able to overcome. His father's decision to remarry and form a new family with a young, widowed mother ends up disenchanting Kaushik, though Kaushik tries at first to get along. As a result, Kaushik flees home and develops an antipathy toward marriage and family. He becomes a photojournalist so work keeps him away from his father as much as possible.

Immigration

Immigration is an important theme in the short story collection "Unaccustomed Earth." Immigration involves individuals, or groups of individuals, moving from one place to another for various reasons. In the novel, Indian immigration to the United States is explored in two ways, the act of immigration itself and the culture shock experienced by immigrants above a certain age. Immigration to an unknown land, or "unaccustomed earth," forms the title of the collection and one of the stories.

Each of the characters in the eight stories collected in "Unaccustomed Earth" hail from India, either as direct immigrants themselves or as second-generation immigrants born in America to Indian parents. Each of the characters in the novel have different reasons for coming to the United States of America. However, in general, it is for a better life and better opportunities. Specifically, Pranab comes to America for graduate school in "Hell-Heaven", while Kaushik's family returns to the United States for better medical care and privacy for his mother in "Once in a Lifetime."

Immigration itself is a startling experience for most of the characters in the novel. Having to adapt to an entirely new way of life other than that of their formative years, many of the characters are unable to handle even simple everyday chores. For example, Sudha must coach her father on how to handle raking leaves in "Only Goodness." Other characters, such as Ruma's mother in the story "Unaccustomed Earth," want to dress in traditional Indian clothing even though they now live in a Western country. Still others, like Rahul's parents in "Only Goodness," criticize America in the end for being too free. Pranab seeks out the Indian community for comfort immediately after immigrating in "Hell-Heaven."

However, any decision to return to India ends in disaster. As Hema's father notes in "Once in a Lifetime," it is impossible to "go back" to one's native country and remain. A taste of freedom and promise in America demonstrates how different and better things are in America. For Kaushik's parents, this is certainly the case. They return to India only to come back to the United States for better health care and privacy for Kaushik's mother.



Immigration of a sort later becomes a therapy for Kaushik and for Ruma's father. Kaushik, reeling from the death of his mother, takes to traveling to various countries throughout the world to escape his past. His ultimate decision is to immigrate to China, though he never makes it as he dies before then. Ruma's father in "Unaccustomed Earth" uses travel to escape heartache until he meets a fellow traveler, Mrs. Bagchi, with whom he begins a relationship. From there, the two begin traveling together, a kind of constant immigration. In both permanent and transitory forms, immigration always allows for the possibility of a better future.

Assimilation

Assimilation is an important theme in the short story collection "Unaccustomed Earth" by Jhumpa Lahiri. Tied directly into immigration, assimilation is the process of new citizens in a country seeking to integrate themselves into that new country's society. Assimilation is often easier for younger people, as they are less set in their ways and have much of their formative life still ahead of them. The assimilation of characters in these short stories is set against the difficulty or refusal others have in becoming a part of American society. They want to live in America, but they do not want to fully integrate themselves.

In "Unaccustomed Earth," the assimilation question is raised immediately. While Ruma is thrilled to have fully assimilated into American society –having married and given a son to an American man, wearing Western-style clothing, preferring American food, and preferring to speak English –her father has only partially integrated into American society. For example, he prefers Indian food exclusively, takes his shoes off in the house, and prefers to speak Bengali to English. He likewise criticizes Ruma for not pursuing her career more extensively. Then, he criticizes her for not keeping house better as a woman. Additionally, Ruma's love of Western clothing clashed with her mother's desire to continue wearing traditional Indian saris.

In "Hell-Heaven," Pranab has a very difficult time adjusting to American life at first, but his youth and desire to be a part of American society quickly win the day. Pranab's assimilation is total and complete. He shuns his former life in India and his early days as an Indian immigrant by shutting out his first Indian-American friends, marrying an American girl, and investing himself totally in all things American, including Thanksgiving dinner.

In "Only Goodness," the difficulty that Sudha's parents have in adjusting to American life annoys her, especially when she so easily adapts to and falls in love with Western living. For example, she must instruct her father on how to rake leaves. Sudha's parents come to believe that there is too much freedom in the United States. Others, such as Sudha, Rahul, and Usha (from "Hell-Heaven"), believe that to be American one must do all things associated with American living, whether or not these things are good choices in and of themselves such as drinking and smoking weed.

In Part II of the collection (includes the stories "Once in a Lifetime," "Year's End," and "Going Ashore"), assimilation can be seen clearly between the characters of Kaushik



and Hema. Both of them assimilate into American culture and society, Hema almost completely. They both love America and enjoy everything from Christmas to Western clothing. While Hema is excited to be wearing training bras, her mother believes no bra should be worn at all as is customary in India. Here, there is a clash between new and old ways.

The clash between new and old ways can be seen between Kaushik's mother, and Kaushik's new stepmother, Chitra. Kaushik's mother was thoroughly Westernized, drinking alcohol, smoking, and not acting as a totally submissive wife and mother to her husband and son, which Kaushik respected. Chitra, however, does not like alcohol or cigarettes, and she insists on waiting on her family ceremoniously in the old ways. While she does find Christmas to be lovely, Chitra refuses to change much of her life and assimilate with American society, which ends up annoying Kaushik. Hema later agrees to an arranged marriage, a small concession to her Indian heritage despite her being so heavily Westernized.

The Past

The past is an important theme in the short story collection "Unaccustomed Earth" by Jhumpa Lahiri. The past –the history of the various characters of the novel –plays an important role in present actions and circumstances of these characters. The past becomes very influential in many of the short stories as a result.

In the short story "Unaccustomed Earth," Ruma and her father are attempting to deal with the past. For Ruma's father, the past concerns the death of his wife and the unfulfilled plans to see the world with their family. As a result, Ruma's father embarks on the travels by himself, visiting numerous foreign countries and writing to Ruma about his journeys. It is on these journeys that Ruma's father later meets and falls for a younger widow, who happily begins to travel alongside him. Running from the past, Ruma's father has found his future.

Ruma herself takes the death of her mother badly. She misses her mother terribly and feels bad for having been critical of her mother's role in the home as a stay-at-home mom. Ruma herself is now a stay-at-home mom, something done happily and voluntarily. Ruma has become her mother in many ways, a fact that both she and her father recognize in the story. Ruma's own motherhood makes her more appreciative and respectful of her mother's role years before. She now has a better understanding of the past.

In "Hell-Heaven," Usha's mother recounts her unrequited, forbidden love for Praban following Usha's own romantic breakup. Usha's mother's past becomes a bond between mother and daughter, making their love and loyalty for one another stronger. In "Only Goodness," Sudha must confront the past in acknowledging that she originally introduced her brother to alcohol, which subsequently led to his alcoholism and the wrecking of their brother-sister relationship.



In “A Choice of Accommodation,” Amit and Megan attend the wedding of Amit’s old school friend, Pam. Megan is jealous of Pam because she knows that Amit once loved Pam, though the love was never returned. Amit does not look forward to returning to his old stomping grounds for the wedding because he remembers how he felt abandoned by his parents at boarding school. The wedding, however, causes a renewal between Megan and Amit, bringing them not only closer to the past, but closer to one another as well.

In Part II of the collection (including the stories “Once in a Lifetime,” “Year’s End,” and “Going Ashore”), the past serves as a jumping off point for the affair between Hema and Kaushik, who have known each other since children. The past itself is what drives Kaushik around the world as a photojournalist, seeking to avoid home after college following the death of his mother and his father’s remarriage. Without the past to drive him around the world, Kaushik’s and Hema’s lives would not have crossed again in Rome.

Marriage

Marriage is an important theme in the short story collection “Unaccustomed Earth” by Jhumpa Lahiri. Marriage is an important religious, cultural, and social institution in both the United States and in India. Both countries approach marriage in different ways. Marriage heavily influences the events of several of the stories in the collection.

In the story “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma’s father has fallen for a younger widow, who is happy to be with him but does not want to be married. Ruma’s father feels the same way. His marriage to his wife was productive and happy, but her death still haunts him. He feels as if he cannot marry again. His relationship with Mrs. Bagchi is more attuned to companionship rather than passion. Ruma herself is married to a white, American man named Adam, something her parents initially frowned upon, though they later came to embrace Adam.

The marriage between Ruma and Adam is one of separate jobs but equal say. While Adam is the principal breadwinner, Ruma tends to the home and to their child. Adam leaves the decision about inviting her father to stay with them up to her and tells her that he will support whatever decision she makes. They share a mutual love and respect for each other.

In “Heaven-Hell,” the marriage between Usha’s parents –boring and arranged –grates on Usha’s mother’s nerves. It is one of the reasons why she falls for Pranab. However, she never acts on her feelings for she will not violate the sanctity of her marriage with an affair. In “A Choice of Accommodations,” Amit and Megan attend a wedding under the strain of their own marriage. The time away for the weekend allows them to recognize their marriage is still incredibly strong and helps them to renew their passion.

In “Nobody’s Business,” Sang is annoyed to find that her family and their circle of Indian friends are trying to arrange a marriage for her. To be unmarried at the age of thirty is



frowned upon in Indian culture. In “Going Ashore,” Hema, though thoroughly Americanized, consents to a traditionally arranged marriage in order to find a good man to marry rather than choosing her own husband. In “Year’s End,” Kaushik is annoyed that his father has entered an arranged marriage for companionship, finding it too old-world for his liking. Between the death of his mother and his father’s remarriage, Kaushik has no fondness for the institution. His father’s remarriage is what helps drive him into photo journalism to get him away from home.



Styles

Point of View

Jhumpa Lahiri tells her short story collection “Unaccustomed Earth” from both the first and third-person omniscient, reflective perspective depending upon the story. Each story is told as though a past event or situation were being related to a friend or an acquaintance, enabling the narrators to fill in pieces of information they would not have otherwise known. For example, in “Coming Ashore”, Hema can say that it was the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 that killed Kaushik, though at the time she didn’t yet know he’d been killed. The stories “Unaccustomed Earth,” “A Choice of Accommodations,” “Only Goodness,” “Nobody’s Business,” and “Coming Ashore” are told from the third-person perspective, while the stories “Hell-Heaven,” “Once in a Lifetime,” and “Year’s End” are told from the first-person point of view. “Hell-Heaven” is told from the perspective of Usha; “Once in a Lifetime” is told from the perspective of Hema; and “Year’s End” is told from the perspective of Kaushik.

Language and Meaning

Jhumpa Lahiri tells her short story collection “Unaccustomed Earth” in language that is simple, straightforward, and dotted with Indian phrases and elements of language. The simple, straightforward language allows the author to convey important emotional scenes and sequences that are consequential to the plots of the stories of which they are a part. For example, Ruma’s relationship with her father is summed up by her decision to mail his postcard. It is a simple act that is simply described, and becomes one of closeness, trust, and love. The use of Indian/Hindi and Bengali language adds a sense of authenticity and realism to the novel, demonstrating the background and heritage of the Indian characters. For example, in the story “Unaccustomed Earth,” Akash is taught the Bengali words for red and blue –lal and neel, respectively.

Structure

Jhumpa Lahiri’s book “Unaccustomed Earth” is a collection of eight short stories in two parts. Each story can stand alone individually, but Part II comprises three short stories that can also form a novella. Part I includes the stories “Unaccustomed Earth,” “Hell-Heaven,” “A Choice of Accommodations,” “Only Goodness,” and “Nobody’s Business.” Part II comprises the short stories “Once in a Lifetime,” “Year’s End,” and “Going Ashore.” The shortest story in the collection is “Hell-Heaven,” which spans some twenty-four pages, while the other stories are variably longer. “Unaccustomed Earth” is the longest at fifty-seven pages. Each title is reflective of the story that is told. For example, the story “Once in a Lifetime” refers not only to the once in a lifetime opportunity of Kaushik’s family flying first class, but it also reflects how Kaushik’s mother is a once in a lifetime figure of importance in his life.



Quotes

She didn't understand how her mother had done it. 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 warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now.

-- Narrator (Unaccustomed Earth paragraph 18)

Importance: Here, Ruma reflects on the past, on changing times, and how the past seems to have repeated itself. Ruma had long criticized her mother's stay-at-home role. She didn't want to end up being the same way – yet she has become the same as her mother, voluntarily. Ruma comes to have a deeper appreciation and understanding for her mother as a result.

It is clear to me now that my mother was in love with him.

-- Usha (Hell-Heaven paragraph 10)

Importance: Usha reflects on how her mother fell in love with family friend Pranab. He provided a counterpoint to her father. He was younger, optimistic, warm, and open. He was everything that Usha never had in her marriage. Usha never acted on her feelings, and her feelings were never returned. She valued her marriage too much, and she was prepared to commit suicide rather than leave her husband when Pranab got married.

He learned to live without his mother and father, as everyone else did, shedding his daily dependence on them even though he was still a boy, and even to enjoy it. Still, he refused to forgive them.

-- Narrator (A Choice of Accommodations paragraph 59)

Importance: Here, the narrator reflects on Amit's forced Americanization, mandated by his parents when they sent him off to boarding school. Although Amit came to love America and to embrace its culture, he resented that he was thrust into change rather than allowing change to happen naturally.

He wanted to change none of it, and yet a part of him sometimes longed to return to the beginning of his relationship with Megan, if only for the pleasure of anticipating and experiencing those things again.

-- Narrator (A Choice of Accommodation paragraph 92)

Importance: By the end of the story, Amit – who has worried that his marriage with Megan is faltering – falls in love with her all over again. Despite the strain and dullness of everyday life, he recognizes that he is still deeply in love with her. The only thing he would change would be to do everything all over again, not differently, but the same. This speaks to the healing effect the wedding weekend has had on Amit and Megan and their marriage.

Sudha had waited until college to disobey her parents. Before then she had lived according to their expectations, her personal scholarly, her social life limited to other



demure girls in her class, if only to ensure that one day she would be set free.
-- Narrator (Only Goodness paragraph 3)

Importance: Here, the narrator reflects on how Sudha had been a model daughter and student in high school so that she might have greater freedom in college. Sudha's delayed freedom, however, leads to her introducing her brother to alcohol, giving him a chance at teenage freedom she never had. Though well-intentioned, her decision ends up proving destructive, as Rahul becomes an alcoholic.

How dare these men call? She'd say. How dare they hunt her down? It was a violation of her privacy, an insult to her adulthood. It was pathetic.
-- Narrator (Nobody's Business paragraph 4)

Importance: Here, the disconnect between the old world and the new world can be seen. Sang, very much Americanized, wants to choose her own husband. Her family and their circle of Indian friends, however, constantly try to set her up with various Indian men who call Sang relentlessly. This annoys and aggravates Sang, believing the old ways are childish and a challenge to her freedom as an adult.

Your parents had decided to leave Cambridge, not for Atlanta or Arizona, as some other Bengalis had, but to move all the way back to India, abandoning the struggle that my parents and their friends had embarked upon.
-- Hema (Once in a Lifetime paragraph 1)

Importance: Hema reflects on how Kaushik and his parents return to India following several years in the United States. Their reasons for returning have to do with business opportunities. Hema recognizes that life in a new country is indeed a struggle, but it is a struggle that most immigrants are willing to stick out.

They should have known it's impossible to go back.
-- Hema's father (Once in a Lifetime paragraph 7)

Importance: Here, Hema's father reflects on the not only the moving of Kaushik and his family back to India, but their subsequent return to the United States. Having tasted a better life in America, nothing else compares. This is certainly true of Kaushik's parents, who return to the United States for peace, privacy, and better medical care for Kaushik's mother.

I didn't know which was worse –the idea of my father's remarrying for love, or his actively seeking out a stranger for companionship.
-- Kaushik (Year's End paragraph 12)

Importance: Kaushik, reeling from the death of his mother, cannot stand the fact that his father is marrying another woman. This is compounded by the fact that his father has consented to a traditionally arranged marriage to a stranger. It is at odds with Kaushik's modern American conception of marrying for love and further revives the memory of his mother in his mind.



She refused to think of it as an arranged marriage, but knew in her heart that that was what it was.

-- Narrator (Coming Ashore paragraph 8)

Importance: Hema has accomplished all of her life's goals, except for getting married. She has been unable to find a good husband. Ironically, she turns to the traditional, Indian way of an arranged marriage by her parents and family friends. This contrasts with her American belief in marriage for love. Yet, she will do what she needs to do to be married.