



## Unaccustomed Earth and Freedom

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### **Abstract**

The present study attempts to carry out the idea of freedom in selected works from the short stories collection under the title *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) by Jhumpa Lahiri. Based on this, the upcoming research tries to take a close look at the selected stories of this collection and examine it from view point of the prominent Irish philosopher Philip Noel Pettit (1945- ) in the theory of freedom. Regarding, *Unaccustomed Earth* is another Lahiri's short stories collection that consists of two parts. The collection depicts the lives of Bengali-American characters who handle their mixed culture. Also, the characters try to find their freedom in the two different cultures. In this collection, Lahiri describes the lives of people who try to create an identity in the host country. The people who maintain and improve their identity as they wish. Besides, this collection of stories contains the life stories of immigrants who try to preserve their lost identities and freedoms in another country to show their true personalities. With reference to, this study tries to show how Lahiri's character afford to remove slavery bond to reach freedom according to Pettit theory of freedom.

**Keywords:** Freedom, Identity, Pettit, Lahiri, Immigrant



## 1. Introduction

Like most of Lahiri's works, the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) are about Indian-Americans trying to take root in the new land to which they immigrated. The characters in these stories are all Indian immigrants and their Americanized counterparts, who are located between two different countries and cultures and do not belong to either. The book contains the stories that take place in places such as Cambridge and Seattle, Washington India, and Thailand. Confront the inadequacies of this elitist America and the racist sentiment in its minds, and as a result, the strange soil of a book is not motivating or creative and innovative. It seems that Lahiri in this work, like her other works, is still faithful to the theme of homelessness, and this theme is the main axis of this author's stories. Characters who have either taken refuge in exile from their paternal homeland or were born to parents living in a foreign land. Before writing *The Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri told the story of the first generation of Indian immigrants to the United States and their efforts to run a family in the new society. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the author replaces first-generation immigrant characters who were born in the United States and have culturally adapted themselves to the norms of the new society. Naturally, with the advent of new generations, the ropes of connection with the past and the Indian tradition become older and rottener, and human beings are formed without belonging to a specific land, who find foliage like a tree in *The Unaccustomed Earth*. The collection of *The Unaccustomed Earth* stories, which includes eight short stories, is divided into two parts. The first part consists of five separate stories that begins with the story of "The Unaccustomed Earth" which is the longest and most beautiful story, but the researcher specifically centers on the three stories from the mentioned collection.

*Unaccustomed Earth* depicts the life of an Indian girl named Ruma in Seattle with her white husband Adam and her young son Akash. Ruma and Adam are examples of a young family that brings together Eastern and Western cultures. Ruma's father, who has recently lost his wife, decides to travel to Europe and sends postcards to his daughter in the United States. Unexpectedly, the father comes to Seattle to see his daughter, and Ruma welcomes her father to their new home in Seattle with concern. Nevertheless, Ruma's meeting with her father will surely force her to face the differences between the first generation, and the second generation. Traveling to new countries or settling in another land, postcards from foreign countries, and the distances between human beings and cultures in the fictional space all serve the symbolic aspects of the title of the story of "Unaccustomed Earth," but the sad ending of the story is formed only by a simple postcard that has not reached its destination. Indeed, Lahiri focuses on the group of Indians in the United States seeking academic degrees, economic opportunities, and better opportunities.

The other four stories in the first part of the *Unaccustomed Earth* collection also have common thematic aspects with the first story. In the story of "Hell of Heaven," a young woman remembers her childhood, and that is when a young Calcutta becomes a family friend. The other one is the story of a middle-aged couple named Amit and Megan, who, like other stories, are two people from two different cultures.



## 2. Methodology and Approach

The methodology used in this study is based on the library research method and relies on qualitative research. Moreover, the current research applies an interdisciplinary approach, which means that it integrates perspectives from two fields of knowledge in humanities, political theory in line with social theory. Besides, the collecting data are from books, essays, the different sites (based on the subject), and specifically the email from the theorist to reach the goal of this study. Furthermore, the theorist chosen for this research is Philip Pettit. Pettit is one of the Irish philosophers and political theorists who works on political theory in line with social subjects. His theory about freedom is in this field. He takes a fresh look at the freedom debate. Although other thinkers have argued on this point, no one has viewed freedom like Pettit.

Philip Noel Pettit was born in 1945. He is a Professor of Politics and Human Values at Princeton University. He was educated in Ireland. He was interested in political philosophy, so he was a professorial fellow in social and political theory for many years. Pettit defends civic republicanism. As regards, he writes *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* which focuses on moral, political theory. Moreover, he concentrates on philosophical psychology and social anthology.

From Pettit's point of view, the concept of freedom has a peculiar definition. As he claims, In his article titled "Freedom as Antipower", freedom, as anti-power, Fare in terms of the familiar dichotomy between negative and positive concepts of liberty? I am negatively free, Berlin says, "to the degree to which no human being interferes with my Activity," I am positively free to the extent that I achieve "self- Mastery, with its suggestion of a man divided against himself" (Pettit 577).

As regards, Pettit planned the question in the dichotomy of negative and positive items to freedom. To him, this concept is neither negative freedom nor positive freedom. Accordingly, Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909 - 1997) who was a political philosopher, and one of the liberal thinkers of the twentieth century, he believed in positive freedom. Because to him, everyone has self-mastery in which no one can interfere with his/ her power. In contrast, Pettit believes in negative freedom. To him everyone is free, and no one is a master to others even though everybody lacks the will and wisdom. Pettit concentrates on Berlin's point of view on the idea of positive and negative freedom to convey his notion.

Regarding this, Pettit compares people's freedom to the market situation. He claims that, in the market, the people are free to choose and buy, so nobody interferes with others by his/ her interference. He depicts the type of freedom which all people are free in any situation, position, and mood. Besides, from Pettit's point of view, freedom has a social aspect that leads to social liberty. The republican government is the place where everyone has social freedom to convey his/ her idea of *freedom* as non-interference with others' mastery. In this regard, to prove his idea of freedom, Pettit explains that some thinkers before him had the same idea in this field. According to Pettit in his book *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*:

Neither, I should say, is the claim idiosyncratic. I am not alone in finding the republican tradition of thought a fruitful source of ideas and ideals. Historians like John Pocock (1975) and Quentin Skinner (1978; 1983; 1984) have not only made the





tradition visible to us in the past couple of decades; they have also shown how it can give us a new perspective on contemporary politics. Skinner, in particular, has argued that it can give us a new understanding of freedom and my argument builds on this.  
(7)

Undoubtedly, Pettit is one of the philosophers and political theorists who concentrates on the concept of freedom in the social field, because as he depicts in his article "Freedom as Anti power", "I am free to the degree that no human being has the power to interfere with me: to the extent that no one else is my master, even if I lack the will or the wisdom required for achieving self-mastery" (578). Also, to Pettit in political liberty, the concept of freedom lies in non-domination. Hence, he concentrates on his idea that "we are free to the extent that we do not find ourselves under the domination of others, subject to their will and exposed to the vicissitudes of their desires" (Larmore 2).

As a result, Pettit is one of the thinkers who puts his focus on the modern idea of freedom. To him, freedom centers on non-domination. He does not concentrate on the negative conception of freedom as non-interference; however, he precisely focuses on the absence of domination as Anna Wierzbicka mentions this notion in her book *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words*. Besides, according to Pettit in his article, "The Globalized Republican Ideal" people extremely are free and should enjoy non-domination. As the facts state, liberty is a concern with the absence of interference due to the absence of domination by others. From Pettit's point of view, asked personally by email, he believes that "I think of freedom (non-domination) as a property of the person but one that the individual can enjoy only under the norms and laws of a society that offers protection and empowerment" ("Republicanism" 7). Indeed, he concentrates on the type of freedom carried by each person in the context of the social life. In particular, the American revolutionary war that led to American independence. The intention of people to obtain freedom gave rise to freedom under the yoke of Great Britain.

### 3. Unaccustomed Earth

"Unaccustomed Earth" narrates the life story of Ruma. She is the main character of the story. Ruma is a lawyer from a second-generation Bengali living in the USA. She has given up her job because she wants to look after her son. She is married to Adam an American man. She is a thirty-eight years old woman. Ruma is a Bengali- American who lives with her husband, Adam, and his son, Akash, in America. Since Adam in his new job gained a generous salary, he could purchase a beautiful and large home, and Ruma decided to stay home to care for their son. Akash is their three years old child and Ruma is expecting her second child. Recently, they moved to Seattle because of her husband's work, so Ruma was alone because she did not know anyone. Ruma's mother died unexpectedly after moving. Since Ruma's father was alone, he decided to travel. Also, her father had a romantic relationship with a woman whose name was Mrs. Baghchi, but he kept his secret from Ruma. It is explained in the text from the story that:

After her mother's death, Ruma's father retired from the pharmaceutical company where he had worked for many decades and began traveling in Europe, a continent he'd never seen. In the past year, he had visited France, Holland, and most recently



Italy. They were package tours, traveling in the company of strangers, riding by bus through the countryside, each meal and museum and hotel prearranged. He was gone for two, three, sometimes four weeks at a time. When he was away Ruma did not hear from him. Each time, she kept the printout of his flight information behind a magnet on the door of the refrigerator, and on the days, he was scheduled to fly she watched the news, to make sure there hadn't been a plane crash anywhere in the world. (*Unaccustomed Earth* 7)

After his wife's death, Ruma's father decided to travel and wanted to see places where he had never seen in his life. Concerning Ruma's father sending a postcard to Seattle, it was the first piece of mail that she had received from her father during her thirty-eight years. He sends the postcard to the place where Ruma and Adam and their son Akash lived. The postcards illustrate the churches, stone fountains, crowded piazzas, and terra-cotta rooftops mellowed in the afternoon sun.

In *Unaccustomed Earth* the writer attempts to depict the relationship between two generations who try to keep their freedom in their privacy. The story illustrates how two generations struggle for their freedom. Ruma, whose father now decides to travel after her mother's death, fears that her father will decide to stay with her on one of the trips. Although they have a big house, Ruma knows that like her mother, she cannot take care of her father and cook Indian special foods for him. Lahiri on page ten describes Ruma's fear about her father in this way that:

In January, conceived just before the move. She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare. Still, not offering him a place in her homemade her feel worse. It was a dilemma Adam didn't understand. Whenever she brought up the issue, he pointed out the obvious, that she already had a small child to care for, another on the way. He reminded her that her father was in good health for his age, content where he was. But he didn't object to the idea of her father living with them. His willingness was meant kindly, generously, an example of why she loved Adam, and yet it worried her. (*Unaccustomed Earth* 10) She was afraid that her father took away her freedom. Considering the mentioned narration of the story and with relation to the Pettitian philosophy, Pettit believes that freedom is ownership and everyone attempts to keep his / her freedom. This type of freedom expands on the owning of a house, dog, and a car, the rights of ownership center on non-domination and specifically centers on non-interference. In this respect, "it will certainly affect the Range or the ease with which people enjoy their status as un-dominated agents, and it may warrant complaint on that account, but it will not itself be a source of domination." (Pettit, "Freedom in the Market" 139).

Ruma is more bored than before because of her pregnancy and she does not even have the patience to talk to her son like before. At the same time, he does not want a second person like his father to disrupt the process of their lives and take the freedoms of his life, which are part of the



property of their lives. She wanted to live free from any strict principles and rules. Moreover, Ruma had forgotten to write Bengali. Hence, she could not even read her father's postcards in Bengali, which were sent between her father and Mrs. Baghchi. Also, she did not try to learn it because she did not want to limit her freedom. Along with Ruma's view, there is his father's view. He does not want to lose the freedoms that he gained after the death of his wife by staying in his daughter's house; because after his wife's death he travels wherever he wants free from any interference and disturbance, and he can do what he loves. That is why he refused Ruma's request to stay with them because he did not want to tie to his past life again, because he could not stand the time of living with his children and always tried to get rid of the house. Hence, he did not accept Ruma's request to stay and continued his journey.

Furthermore, he hides his acquaintance and friendship with Ms. Baghchi as a secret from his daughter; because he did not want to lose his liberties by explaining Ms. Baghchi to his daughter. According to the writer's explanation: It was an opportunity to tell Ruma. It was more difficult than he'd thought, being in his daughter's home, being around her all day. He felt pathetic in deceiving her. But what would he say? That he had made a new friend? A girlfriend? The word was unknown to him, impossible to express; he had never had a girlfriend in his life. It would have been easier telling Romi. He would have absorbed the information casually, might even have found it a relief. Ruma was different. All his life he'd felt condemned by her, on his wife's behalf. She and Ruma were allies. And he had endured his daughter's resentment, never telling Ruma his side of things, never saying that his wife had been overly demanding, unwilling to appreciate the life he'd worked hard to provide. (*Unaccustomed Earth* 38)

With regard to the above-mentioned factors, Pettit in his article under the title "The Globalized Republican Ideal" explains that people need to be free because freedom brings an enjoyable time for each person. Hence, the free person can choose whatever he/ she needs freely. Furthermore, the only option for the choices is non-domination which centers on non-interference. Pettit claims that:

On the republican ideal of freedom as non-domination, you are free in making a given choice, whatever that choice may be, to the extent that you are not subject to a power of arbitrary interference on the part of another — you are not dominated — in making it. I will have the power of arbitrary interference in the choice to the extent that I can interfere intentionally in one of the options without your permission or control; in the limit case, I can interfere at no cost, with no difficulty, and subject to no opposition or obstruction. (6)

Unlike Berlin, who considers only one category to choose from in the debate on freedom, Pettit believes that every person in the category of freedom needs several options to choose from, otherwise the debate on freedom makes no sense. Pettit believes that everyone should be free to choose their preferred option based on free will and thought, without disturbing it.





#### 4.Hell-Heaven

“Hell - Heaven,” tells the life story of people who are far from their hometown. Hence, they try to find their lost freedoms in hands of others. Pranab belongs to this type of people. He was from Calcutta. According to the narrator, “He was from a wealthy family in Calcutta and had never had to do so much as pouring himself a glass of water before moving to America, to study engineering at MIT” (*Unaccustomed Earth* 58). Since he missed his family and homelands when he saw Usha and her mother, he decided to make friends with their family. The story is narrated through the narration of one of the characters in this way that: After Pranab Kaku was befriended by my parents, he confessed that on the day we met him he had followed my mother and me for the better part of an afternoon around the streets of Cambridge, where she and I tended to roam after I got out of school. He had trailed behind us along Massachusetts Avenue and in and out of the Harvard Coop, where my mother liked to look at discounted housewares. (*Unaccustomed Earth* 57)

According to Usha’s narration, since Pranab and her mother had common interests, they quickly became a friend. It is narrated that:

They had in common all the things she and my father did not: a love of music, film, leftist politics, and poetry. They were from the same neighborhood in North Calcutta, their family homes within walking distance, the facades familiar to them once the exact locations were described. They knew the same shops, the same bus and tram routes, the same holes-in-the-wall for the best jalebis and Mughlai parathas. My father, on the other hand, came from a suburb twenty miles outside ‘Calcutta, an area that my mother considered the wilderness.’ (*Unaccustomed Earth* 60)



The story narrates by Usha. The narrator is a girl who was born in Berlin to Indian parents. Usha narrates that they lived in Central Square, “for three years before that day; before that, we lived in Berlin, where I was born and where my father had finished his training in microbiology before accepting a position as a researcher at Mass General, and before Berlin, my mother and father had lived in India” (*Unaccustomed Earth* 58).

Usha talks about a man named Pranab who was not his father’s brother but called his uncle. Usha narrates, “Pranab Chakraborty wasn’t technically my father’s younger brother. He was a fellow Bengali from Calcutta who had washed up on the barren shores of my parents’ social life in the early seventies, when they lived in a rented apartment in Central Square and could number their acquaintances on one hand” (58).

The term Hell and Heaven was used by the narrator’s mother when another woman fell in love with a man who Usha’s mother loved him. “It is clear to me now that my mother was in love with him” (*Unaccustomed Earth* 62). It was the fall of 1974 when Pranab Kau met Debora an American girl and a student at Radcliffe. Her mother believed that they were not suitable for each other and that they were separated:

In the end, my mother was right, and fourteen years after that Thanksgiving, after twenty-three years of marriage, Pranab Kaku and Deborah got divorced. It was he who had strayed, falling in love with a married Bengali woman, destroying two families in the ‘process. The other woman was someone my parents knew, though not very well. Deborah was in her forties by then, Bonny and Sara were away at college. In her shock and grief, it was my mother whom Deborah turned to, calling and weeping into the phone.’ (*Unaccustomed Earth* 73).





This part specifically centers on the idea of freedom of Indian people who tried to keep their freedom even in another world. The idea develops from Pettit's theory about Global freedom. Pettit claims in his article "The Globalized Republican Ideal" that:

The idea of being a free person is conceptualized in almost every tradition, and certainly within republican circles, as a universal idea that everyone in a society ought to be able to enjoy at the same time. That means that being a free person can only require the enjoyment of freedom — say, freedom as non-domination — in certain choices available to all; for example, it cannot feasibly require the freedom to interfere arbitrarily with others (12).

Since humans are inherently free beings, and this idea can be seen in republican systems, no one can encroach on their inherent freedom. In addition, there is the idea of being free in almost every tradition, and certainly in republican systems. Besides, it's a universal idea that everyone in a society should be free to enjoy themselves at the same time. This means that being free can only require freedom. For example, freedom is a non-domination in certain choices that are available to everyone. Of course, this freedom must be within the framework of ethics and law. Hence, Lahiri characters in any part of the world try to maintain their freedom.

### **5.A Choice of Accommodations**

"A Choice of Accommodations" is a short story about a married couple. Amit and Megan visit Amit High School in Langford for the wedding of Pam who is a former Amit classmate and daughter of the Langford school principal. Amit and Megan are both very different on the eve of the wedding; Amit, because he called one of his classmates by another name, and Megan because her skirt had a slight burn. Moreover, during a brief visit, the couple discovers new things about each other and thinks about their relationship.



The story begins with Amit and Megan, a married couple staying at the Chadwick Inn. The hotel near Amit High School, Langford Private, and Exclusive Academy is an all-male boarding school. They are supposed to be the guests at Pam Borden's wedding. Pam is the daughter of the manager of Langford the place where Amit graduated from there eighteen years ago. Amit and Megan drove from New York for the wedding. They prefer to leave their daughters with Megan's parents and leave a short weekend alone and stay at the Chadwick Inn. They quickly found their accommodation disappointing. Although the hotel was next to a lake where Amit had learned boating and kayaking since he was a teenager, Amit and Megan immediately encountered several problems at their hotel accommodation - from the decoration and darkness of the room to the large pine tree in front of the window, which prevents them from seeing.

Concerning this fact, they had experienced exchanging their hotel room during the travel to Puerto Rico and Venice because of the dead lizard in the bath. According to the writer: It had been a long drive from New York and Amit was in the mood for a drink. But there was no minibar and no room service. The two double beds were covered in flowery maroon quilts, and across from them, a wide dresser held a television set at its center. A small paper pyramid sat on a square table between the beds, listing the local cable channels. The only pleasant feature in the room was a cathedral ceiling with exposed beams. Despite this the room was dark; even with the curtains to the balcony drawn apart, all the lights needed to be turned on.) *Unaccustomed Earth* 75)

Amit and Megan had given their two daughters to Megan's parents of their choice just to experience the freedom that was their inalienable right, so to have freedom, they must have the right to choose. Hence, Amit knew that Megan was relieved that Maya and Monica were not with them, and now she was free and comfortable. Amit wanted his heart to feel comfortable and to feel



free. A feeling that had come to him since Pam's invitation card had arrived and they had made a plan for her wedding ceremony.

Pettit's social freedom is a kind of freedom in that every person is free from social barriers. Additionally, this kind of freedom encompasses the individuality of each person. For Pettit, this kind of freedom is very enjoyable, because everyone can choose freely; "Suppose we want to know how much freedom someone enjoys in making a particular choice" ("Freedom in the Market" 132). He compares this type of freedom to the market. He explains why this kind of freedom is enjoyable. Hence, he focuses on selecting people without obstacles. According to Pettit, in such places, people can freely choose their desires. During the trip, they could reminisce about their past without any hassle. Moreover, they feel free at the wedding celebration. As the writer narrates the conversation between Amit and Megan:

Lots of kids here, Megan said.

The girls would have enjoyed this.

But then we wouldn't be able to enjoy ourselves. Cheers.

(*Unaccustomed Earth* 89)

At the opportunity, they wanted to experience their desires. Hence, Megan wanted to stay up until morning and watch the sunrise. Amit triumphantly shouts for their freedom in response to questions from others asking about their children's absence. According to the writer, "We left them with Megan's parents. It's our weekend of reckless freedom. I want to stay up until five in the morning," Megan announced cheerfully. 'I want to celebrate all night and watch the sunrise from our balcony'" (*Unaccustomed Earth* 92). Explaining this part, Pettit believes there is freedom in belief and desire. To him, desires shape the actions of people to achieve their desires. The narrator narrates a typical wedding event that takes place at every wedding. People who have been apart for a while see each other again and review memories, drink, dance, and enjoy for hours, but for Amit and Megan, it is a kind of achievement of freedom that they sought. *A Choice of Accommodations* was not the best hotel, but it was the place where Amit and Megan calmed down and Amit reveals the secret that he hides from Megan for years and frees himself from all restraints. According to the writer:

What about Pam? Megan asked, folding her arms across her chest, and glancing over at the bed. 'Did you ever have sex with her?' 'No.' She took a step toward him, looking at the shirt that clung coldly to his body, then directly into his eyes. 'What, then? Something passed between you two, it's Obvious.' 'It was nothing, Meg. We were friends and for a while, I had a crush on her. But nothing happened. Is that so terrible?' The information fell between them, valuable for the years he'd kept it from Her, negligible now that he'd told. (*Unaccustomed Earth* 109- 10)

As if, now they were a happy couple who lived without any obstacles and secrets and there was no secret between them. They were freed from the shackles of any captivity in the form of secrets. Moreover, the trip made them feel more satisfied because there was no more secret between them.





## 6. Conclusion

Generally, *Unaccustomed Earth* consists of two parts. The first part includes five stories that narrated the life events of people who found freedom in their privacy and their private situations, such as “Unaccustomed Earth” which revolves around Ruma and her father, Amit and his wife Megan in “A Choice of Accommodations”, and “Hell-Heaven” the story on Bengali rich man (Pranab Chakraborty) who found his freedom by a girl from her area. In fact, the theme, like most deal with Indian Americans who try to take root in the new land where they have immigrated to. The characters of the stories are all Indian immigrants and their Americanized counterparts who are caught between two countries and two different cultures and actually belong to neither of them. Moreover, this research show that Lahiri characters are not only looking for their identity, but also trying to achieve their hopes and dreams of freedom by removing obstacles in another land where is not a part of their identity.



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