

Distant Ties and Troubled Bonds in Trans-cultural Family Relations: A Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Hell-Heaven"

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Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian-American writer, highly recognized for her exquisite investigation into human relation, vividly pictures the heartbreaking transformation of family ties and loss of traditional bonds in the trans-cultural backdrop of the 21st century global village. Instead of celebrating transnational and multicultural identity, Lahiri poignantly portrays how, losing the traditional family bonds and merely becoming mechanical continuation of companionship, in the migrated land, the diasporic families exist and strive to move forward. This paper is an attempt to show the persisting unhappiness in the dismantled relation between husband-wife and parents-children in the light of "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Hell-Heaven." Delving into the untrodden areas of conjugal lives in a trans-cultural milieu, where echoes of the broken heart die in silence, the paper will also explore the dominant causes responsible for the breakage and transformation of family relations.

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri, the chronicler of diasporic communities, holds a unique place among Diaspora writers because of her emphasis on personal and familial lives of the immigrants rather than the external hardships they confront in the migrated land as Fakrul Alam says "Lahiri writes about the day-to-day world of Asian Americans" (362). Being a second generation immigrant, with her keen eye for detail, Lahiri precisely scrutinizes the familial and psychological complexities of Indian diasporas that unavoidably affect the familial relations between the first and the subsequent generations. In the twentieth century, even at the cost of being dismantled and dislocated from their motherlands, millions of people from distinct parts of the world migrated to America, a land of promise and infinite opportunities, to explore their fortune. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* perceives the spread of migrants as "one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age" (402). The mass migration produced not only "more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles" (Said 402) but also generated and spread the unhappiest generations of men and women throughout the world because "exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss" which, being permeated in their psychology, is transforming the lives of the immigrants into inevitable discontentment (Rushdie 10). This paper will exhibit the disheartening transmutation of family relations of Indian immigrants and explore the reasons why, in the trans-cultural milieu, loving and ecstatic relationships between husband-wife and parents-children are transforming into loveless bonds.

Conjugal relations at a crossroads

Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* asserts the following about marriage: "it is becoming a union freely entered into by two autonomous individuals; the commitments

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of the two parties are personal and reciprocal” (364). But in the marital lives of the diasporas, absence of commitment and reciprocal understanding is intensifying the deterioration of the marital relation and Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven” exactly reflect this disheartening deterioration. In the story “Hell-Heaven,” Shyamal, who decides to explore his fortune in the foreign land, consents to marry Aparna not with the intention of forming a happy family in a new land or out of love, but to “placate his parents” (HH 65) so that he should be permitted to go abroad to pursue his higher studies, that his parents were unwilling to permit unless “he had a wife” (HH 65).

After completing his training on Microbiology from Berlin, Shyamal, along with his wife settles in Central Square, America, where he works at Mass General as a researcher. Shyamal actually represents the vast population of male immigrants who, being attracted by the American myth of success, migrated to the land of promise that offered indiscriminate opportunities to explore one’s own fortune. In “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven,” Lahiri, along with telling the success story of Bengali male immigrants, also gives the readers a glimpse into the lives of their spouses and children who suffer, uncared for and unnoticed. Being oblivious to the loneliness of their spouses, the first generation male immigrants “toiled in unfriendly soil” (UE16) in their attempts to be acculturated in the migrated land. This, however, resulted in unavoidable disappointment and frustration in their wives who had “moved to the foreign place for the sake of marriage” (UE 11). According to George Eliot, “Marriage must be a relation either of sympathy or of conquest”(380). In his conjugal life, however, Shyamal was neither sympathetic to nor enthusiastic about conquering his wife’s heart. He was so insensitive towards Aparna that when she complains of her loneliness, “he said nothing to placate her” (HH76). Instead of paying her attention, Shyamal turns a deaf ear to her emotions and never attempts to provide her with solace or warmth through conversation. He further emphasizes the futility of Aparna’s existence in his life by offering to send her back to Calcutta, and “making it clear that their separation would not affect him one way or the other” (HH76).

In the migrated land, Aparna, the “third-world woman,” as Gayatri Spivak calls women like her, is used as a ladder in the fulfillment of her husband’s material success. Her marriage to Shyamal transports her to a land where everyone is unknown, the language is unwelcoming, and the culture is shocking. In her “homesick and bewildered life” (*The Namesake* 38), though the husband is expected to be the best support, the patriarchy demands her to be “listless and silent” (*The Namesake* 11). In the “Hell-Heaven,” Aparna stands for the unheard voices who, being entangled in the demand of modernity and engaged in an unresponsive relationship with the husbands of materialistic mentality, feel like fish out of water and suffer silently. In the migrated land, the displacement and the suffering of the Indian women like Aparna, can aptly be understood by Spivak’s words in her semiotic essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is a displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization. (102)

In the din and bustle of everyday life, loneliness is the only company for the first generation Indian female immigrants. Aparna’s distress in her forlorn life gets

expression in the comment of Usha, Shyamal and Aparna's daughter, who says: "The older I got, the more I saw what a desolate life she led" (HH 76). In "Hell-Heaven," Lahiri, delineating Pranab as the "foil" for Shyamal, refers to the possible picture of a perfect family even in the distant land (Abrams 225). The foundation of family lies in dependency and understanding but in her conjugal life Aparna felt the absence of both. Through Pranab's attentive and caring attitude, Lahiri sheds light on the rudimentary issues that can essentially make a family happy under any circumstance. In the company of Pranab, as they discussed their lives in Calcutta, Aparna felt transported to the world she had left behind because of her marriage. In her lonely life, like all other first generation migrated women; she searched for solace in the memories of her family and motherland. But Aparna did not get such psychological support from Shyamal, which she might have expected from him. Usha, the constant observer of the agony and isolation of her mother, point blank declares that it was Pranab Kaku who "brought to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt" (HH 67). Shyamal's unusual and careless attitude causes the tie between them to deteriorate with disheartening consequences. In his conjugal life, Shyamal neither tries to step beyond the boundaries of his professional life nor gives his wife and daughter any access to his heart. Usha believes that her father "existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate" (HH 65). Therefore, in her marital life, Aparna lived a life of complete alienation. Through the psychological alienation of Aparna, Lahiri epitomizes the heartrending picture of the conjugal lives of the Indian immigrants where marriage, being derailed from its conventional notion, exists merely as a mechanical continuation of companionship. Salman Rushdie's term "translation" is useful in understanding this deviation from the traditional familial bond. Living across the world, the diasporas are Rushdie's "translated men" and in their transplanted lives, the quintessence of the familial tie is "lost in translation" (Rushdie 17). In "Hell-Heaven," Shyamal, frustrating his conjugal relations and disappointing his wife, undeniably, epitomizes the "loss" that the diasporas must lament for.

Lahiri delineates that, against the trans-cultural backdrop, matrimonial relationship is destined to suffer, irrespective of whether the spouses are Indians or Indian-Americans. Although a thread of silence and compromise bind Shyamal and Aparna together, nothing helps Pranab and Deborah, an Indian-American couple, to continue their relationship and the mixed marriage ends in a divorce. In his companionship with Shyamal's wife, Aparna, though Pranab shadowed the qualities of a possible better husband, in his marital life he was no better than a loveless and negligent one. The accusation is clarified in Deborah's confession that, in all the years of her marital life, she "had felt hopelessly shut out of a part of" (HH 82) Pranab's life. Actually, from the very initiation of their cross-cultural relation, the Bengali acquaintances considered the affair as "fun" and were waiting for the ultimate catastrophe, firmly believing that "she will leave him" (HH 73). Indeed, Pranab could not overcome the prejudice that, by marrying an American, he had thrown "his life away" (HH 73) and because of his diasporic prejudice and confusion, Pranab made the divorce inevitable, proving that "mixed marriages were a doomed enterprise" (HH 75).

In the title story "Unaccustomed Earth," Lahiri portrays an unmitigated breach in the matrimonial relations of the subsequent two generations of couples. Instead of being grieved at the sudden death of his wife, Ruma's father, the first generation Indian immigrant, started to enjoy his newly-found freedom which deplorably reflects the

absence of any emotional connection with his wife. In this story, Lahiri uncovers the untold estrangement of another heart-broken woman, Ruma's mother, who was continuing her marital relation without any loving response in return. Because of the unbearable shock of her mother's death, Ruma was so traumatized that she failed to continue her career as a lawyer and confined herself in the very role of her mother "caring exclusively for children and a household" (UE 11). Ruma's striking resemblance to her mother forebodes the melancholic life that is in store for her. Ruma's obsession with the grief of her mother's absence affected her conjugal life so severely that "she could not explain what had happened to her marriage after her mother's death" (UE 25). On the other hand, Ruma's father, without hesitation, wiped out all the memories of his wife by selling their old house where they had invaluable memories together.

The relationship between Ruma's parents was nothing but a compromise, especially on the part of her mother. Like a typical Indian wife, she nurtured her children in a land where she felt "un-homed" and a "psychological refugee" and her alienation was more intensified when she failed to instill her traditional Indian values into her children (Tyson 241). Leading a life together for nearly forty years, Ruma's father failed to love his wife in the way Mrs. Bagchi loved her husband within the two years of their marriage which shows that, although Ruma's parents spent forty years together, no strong bond was created with the passage of such a long time. Guy de Maupassant's words in *A Woman's Life and Other Stories* aptly applies to Ruma's parents: "two people can never reach each other's deepest feelings and instincts, that they spend their lives side by side, linked it may be, but not mingled, and that each one's inmost being must go through life eternally alone" (56).

The statistics that denote "long term spouses typically dying within two years of one another, the surviving spouse dying essentially of a broken heart" is not applicable to her parents because Ruma knew that "her parents had never loved each other in that way" (UE 33). In fact, in both of the stories, Lahiri depicts that neither of the first generation couples are in a harmonious relationship. Even the off-springs of the first generation are affected by the persisting lovelessness in the conjugal lives of their parents. The unhappy marriages of their parents cast their shadows on the lives of the second generation immigrants as well. In "Unaccustomed Earth," Ruma's marriage with an American man, Adam, not only created a discontentment in her parents as it was an act of defiance against Indian tradition, but it also entangled her in a very uncaring relationship like her mother. The cross-cultural marriage offers nothing atypical other than the same disappointment and dismay. By marrying Adam, Ruma dreadfully experiences the similar distance in her conjugal life that persisted between her parents.

In "Unaccustomed Earth," Lahiri, through gardening, symbolizes the struggle of the first generation immigrants who "toiled" to find their niche in the dynamics of the "last superpower" (Said 341). One day, before starting his work in the garden, Ruma's father wanted to "borrow some old clothes of Adam's, and Ruma gave him a pair of khakis and a torn oxford shirt, . . . The clothes were large on her father, the shoulders of the shirt drooping, the cuffs of the pants rolled up" (UE 43). The mismatch of Adam's clothes on Ruma's father's body clearly indicates that the immigrants do not belong to this land. They are outsiders who need to struggle to become accustomed to the unaccustomed earth. In the pursuit of attaining their American dream of success, they

hankered after it so much that they had to pay the price of becoming strangers to their near and dear ones. Giving work the supreme priority, they strived in the 'unfriendly soil' to strengthen their roots.

Ruma's husband, Adam, in no way is different from this mentality of forsaking his family for the quest of more material success. Although Ruma married the person she loved, disregarding her parents' disapproval, nowadays no glue of love, no care or understanding exist between them. She feels no sympathy for him even though she knows "Adam was doing everything in his power to make Ruma happy. But nothing was making her happy" (UE7). Ruma felt the same sort of uprootedness because she was also in the process of migrating from one place to another for Adam's job that put her in eternal adjustment. Ruma's father realizes, "like his wife, Ruma was now alone in this new place, overwhelmed, without friends, caring for a young child" (UE 40). He had always desired to see Ruma's life in a different way and "wanted to shield her from the deterioration that inevitably took place in the course of a marriage" (UE 54). In her married life, Ruma experienced the exact alienation that her mother went through and the lifelong anxiety of her mother becomes the ultimate present for her. In both of the stories, Lahiri depicts how family life is undergoing heartbreaking changes where love has vaporized and sympathy is non-existent. In the migrated land, turning away from the traditional definition, family is assuming the face of frustration, anxiety and disappointment. The relations between spouses appear like nothing but a recurring vision of a mechanically continued relationship and "the trauma of loss and death of love" (Alam 365).

Deviation in parents-children relation

It is a universally acknowledged truth that parents constitute the world for children. In "Unaccustomed Earth," a poignant picture of parent-child love and dependency stirs the emotion when Ruma's father, being nostalgic about his children, reminisced "how young they had once been, how helpless in his nervous arms, needing him for their very survival, knowing no one else" (UE 54). But, needless to say, as they grow up, their needs dissipate and they start to live a life of their own. From the very inception of immigrant life, the breach in the relation between parents and children begins.

Lahiri associates disappointment with the very word "migration." When the first generation immigrants, forsaking their motherland, create spatial and physical gaps with their parents, in spite of living under the same roof, the second generation immigrants create a psychological distance with their parents. Once "in the name of ambition and accomplishment," Ruma's father "had turned his back on his parents" (UE 51). Pranab stopped maintaining any tie with his parents because they refused to acknowledge his mixed marriage. Thus Pranab's marriage to Deborah, an American girl, ended his connection with his family. Having migrated to America, the first generation male immigrants maintain only distant ties with their parents and, with the passage of time, their visits to India become less frequent, so the gap increases. On the other hand, choosing an American life and preferring their own choices, the second generation inevitably remains psychologically detached. In "Unaccustomed Earth," Ruma's marriage to an American disappoints her parents because of her violation of traditional Indian norms while her brother Romi "had crushed them by moving abroad and maintaining only distant ties" and it can be predicted that the same shock is awaiting Ruma through her own son Akash(UE 26). Although the land of promise

fulfilled the dreams of its immigrants by providing them “opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility,” it also transformed the happiest family relations into complete disarray (“American Dream”). For the offspring of the first generation, the trans-cultural atmosphere is the foremost ground of contradiction with their parents because they get more inclined to the host culture that offers them more freedom than the imposed Indian culture that they are completely unaware of. It is the alteration that parents must accept -- “the more the children grew, the less they had seemed to resemble either parent-- they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way” (UE 54).

Parents-children relation takes a distinct shape in the migrated land. Children of the Indian immigrants grow in the cross-cultural milieu struggling with cultural conflicts, partially absorbing the host culture and mostly deviating from imposed Indian culture. Since their childhood, Ruma and Romi had not been raised with any sort of sincere attention from their father as it should be. In the same way, they did not learn to take responsibility of their parents in return. After her mother’s death, the visit of her father made her fearful of the fact that “her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to” (UE 7). Although it is natural in India for a widower to live with his children, Ruma’s father knew that “Ruma hadn’t been raised with that sense of duty” (UE 29).

Life in a diaspora is full of scattered hopes and dismay. In the trans-cultural milieu, parents can hardly keep their grip on their children. The imposition of Indian culture at home and the influence of American culture everywhere put the second generation Indian-Americans in a dilemma. There is always the urge to get out of the grip of Indian culture and live like American children. In this conflict of cultures, family relations suffer and fail to play its traditional role. In this way, family exists merely as a continuation of a fragile bond, where love, care, duty, and respect are forgotten myths. The children of the immigrants advance with the unique pressure of a double reality because:

Paradoxically, although a majority of East Indian immigrant parents immigrated to the US in search of a better life for themselves, and to afford their children the opportunity to make the best of themselves, by getting the most from the US, many such parents often resist their children’s acculturation to the US culture as a means of preserving their native culture. (Baptiste 352)

Their parents’ misunderstanding, prejudice and rejection of their American self and their inevitable connection with the same from neighborhoods to schools, colleges, universities as well as working places throw the children into a life-long crisis. This eternal anxiety of multiple realities puts them in the world of psychological complexity and keeps them aloof from their parents just as Ruma’s use of English and her western dresses alienate her from her mother since childhood. The “fear that their children are becoming ‘Americans’ and abandoning the family’s values” (Baptiste 351-352) is once again the secret to Aparna becoming detestable to Usha in “Hell-Heaven.” With her “red and white bangles” and “common Tangail sari,” Aparna is still a typical Bengali woman who wants her child to grow up as an Indian. But Aparna’s daughter, Usha, an American child, finds herself when using English and wearing jeans and skirts. She is attracted to American culture and develops a friendlier relation with Deborah than her mother. Throughout the story, Lahiri shows that there is no affectionate,

compassionate, sharing relation between Aparna and Usha. Rather, Usha keeps secrets, evades her mother intentionally, increases her mother's agony by making her lonely and rejecting her in all spheres, and declaring several times that she hates her. Eventually the mother and the daughter make peace, but this peace is not out of realization or love or respect from the daughter's side; rather it is Aparna who compromises and takes it for granted that Usha "was not only her daughter but a child of America as well" (HH 81-82). In this way parents-children are newly identified, their relations are bound together with newly woven threads, where love and respect are absent.

Conclusion

Keeping diasporic families in focus, and scrutinizing the ties between husband-wife and parents-children, it can be concluded that the normalcy of relations is waning with the awakening of ambition, acculturation, and culture collision. Though people migrate to a foreign land to pursue success and the ultimate happiness that success promises, Jhumpa Lahiri shows that against a trans-cultural backdrop, "the attainment of happiness" is not so simple (UE 4). In point of fact, it cannot be known what would have happened to these people if they had not been migrated but for those who have chosen an immigrant's life, it becomes an unavoidable truth for them that the "previous life has vanished" and the new life in the foreign land is "a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (*The Namesake* 49). It must not be forgotten that wherever it is, a family is the temple of happiness but Lahiri shows that in a multicultural set up, the familial relationships, being consumed with rejection, secrecy and non-communication, are frustrated with distance and disappointment. Delineating the minute details of the lives of the diasporas in "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Hell-Heaven," Lahiri, thus, exposes the persisting unhappiness in the family relationships between husband-wife and parents-children that is negotiating the crossroads in the form of distant ties and troubled bonds.

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