

Perceptions on Generations in Expatriation: Reflections on Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Fiction 'Hell-Heaven'

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ABSTRACT

First generation women Diaspora find it difficult to survive in the host countries. Normally they accompany their husbands after marriage at a very young age and are confined to their apartments doing household chores. Nostalgia, fond memories of their mother land, alienation, identity crisis are some of the major predicaments experienced by them. In their lonely existence they long to go back to their home land. While the parents find it difficult to get acculturated to the host country, their children easily gets assimilated to the culture of the host country. The author herself being a second generation immigrant successfully portrays the problems of first, second and third generations in her works. The objective of the present paper is to bring out the dilemma of the intergenerational gaps between parents and children in expatriation.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri was shot into limelight by winning much coveted Pulitzer Prize for her debut work '*Interpreter of Maladies*'. She was born in Rhode Island, London to Bengali parents and was brought up in USA. *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Lowland* are her other famous works by which she got wide acclaim in the academic circle. Her works deal with diasporic experience of first, second and third generations in host country. Being a second generation immigrant, Lahiri portrays diasporic experience in general and predicament of second generation in particular. Hell-Heaven is the short story taken from *Unaccustomed Earth*. Lahiri borrows the title from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. *Unaccustomed Earth* is a collection of eight short stories focusing on second and third generation expatriates. The short story Hell-Heaven is portrayed through the perspective of Usha who recalls her fond memories of her childhood. The title 'Hell- Heaven' can be considered as a metaphor. This usage is the English version of Bengali Expression '*Akaash-Pataal*' which is used to express vast difference. Two different countries, two different cultures, two different families, two different generations are symbolized through the metaphor 'Hell- Heaven'.

Pranab Chakraborty entered into the life of Usha and her parents on one fine afternoon from the streets of Cambridge by learning that they are Bengalis. He became a regular visitor of their family. He addressed Usha's father as '*Shyamlal Da*' and mother as '*Boudi*', the polite form of addressing elder brother and his wife in Bengali language. He

recently arrived in America for pursuing engineering at MIT. Hailing from a wealthy family in Calcutta, Pranab Chakraborty found it difficult to manage everything by him for the first time in life. Usha was taught to call him as '*Pranab Kaku*' (the polite form of addressing father's younger brother in Bengali language).

Aparna, mother of Usha, represented the first generation women immigrants who accompanied their husbands soon after marriage. Most of their counterparts were busy either in research or in profession. Wives spent the whole day lonely in their apartments. Alienation, nostalgia, identity crisis were the predicaments undergone by them. They found it difficult to get acculturated to the main stream culture of the host country. Usha recalls her father's attitude to their family.

'He had married my mother to placate his parents; they were willing to accept his desertion as long as he had a wife. He was wedded to his work, his research and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate'.
(Unaccustomed Earth, 65)

Aparna found solace in the presence of Pranab Chakraborty. She could understand the difficulties of a Bengali in an alien land like America. Both of them shared their nostalgic feelings and a strong bond developed between the both. Presence of Pranab Chakraborty changed Aparna's life into a colourful one. She started to cook typical Bengali dishes every day, decorated her home, draped herself in beautiful sarees and awaited arrival of Pranab Chakraborty. He overcame his alienation in that foreign land by the presence of Aparna's family. Her cuisines were relished and savoured by Pranab Chakraborty. His presence made their home lively. She enjoyed talking to him about her nostalgic moments. Her husband always turned a deaf ear towards such simple things that made her happy. Usha reminisces,

'He brought to my mother the first and I, suspected, the only pure happiness she ever felt. I don't think even my birth made her as happy. I was evidence of her marriage to my father, an assumed consequence of the life she had been raised to lead. But Pranab kaku was different. He was the one totally unanticipated pleasure in her life' (*ibidem* 67)

Aparna and Pranab Chakraborty thus become the true representatives of first generation in expatriation. Nostalgia, isolation, homesickness, longing to go back to their roots was the common emotions of the first generation. They both find 'home' in each other. Whenever they spend time together they had so many common topics such as Indian film, music, culture, cuisines, and places in Bengal to talk about. Both of them were recreating their homeland in that small apartment. They were sharing together the memories of their homeland what Salman Rushdie observed as "Indias of the minds" (Imaginary Homelands, 10).

Soon the bond between Aparna and Pranab Chakraborty got shattered when he falls into a relationship with Deborah. His affair was unwelcomed in the Bengali group. Without the consent of his parents, Pranab Chakraborty married Deborah. Though he was nostalgic and alienated in the beginning of the story, soon he got acculturated to the mainstream culture and led conjugal life with Deborah for twenty three years. While Aparna was still standing on the phase of the nostalgic first generation expatriate, Pranab Chakraborty re-rooted him in to the culture of the foreign land. Usha's father also got easily acculturated in The United

States. This shows that men could easily get accustomed to the foreign culture while women cannot. Aparna conceived five times after her relocation in USA and had miscarriage all the time. This can be considered as a symbol of failure to re-root herself to the soil of USA (also with her husband).

The first generation immigrant parents always wanted to bring up their children culture of their country of ethnic origin. So they force their children to follow the culture of homeland through food, language, rituals, belief etc. The attitude of first generation parents to up bring their children in their native culture is explained by Pratik Khatri in his article ‘The ABCD Conundrum’ as

It seems there is a small amount of guilt in their subconscious that they are no longer physically close to their roots, so they try to forge some strands of connectivity between their ascriptive identity makers and their children. Unfortunately for the kids it is a very confusing situation, as they take a constant feed of a distant culture from their parents and do not see any marks of that culture around their physical space.(1)

The children always maintain equilibrium between the culture of host country and mother land. For them the country of their ethnic origin is only a place to sojourn. They found commonness with the culture of host country. Usha was also not different from that. She adored Deborah, the American lover of Pranab Chakraborty. She never had such a feeling towards her mother. Aparna, the typical Indian woman who values the culture of her country wanted to up bring her daughter in Indian way. But Usha wanted to follow American culture. The conflict among the two generations became acute here. Usha in her teens hid everything from her mother. She enjoyed the adolescent pleasures by fooling her mother. Usha memorizes her mother’s predicament in her adolescence.

‘When she screamed at me for talking too long on the telephone or for staying too long on the telephone, or for staying too long in my room, I learned to scream back, telling her that she was pathetic, that she knew nothing about me, and it was clear to us both that I had stopped needing her, definitively and abruptly, just as Pranab Kaku had’. (ibidem 76-77)

The growing fondness of the adolescent second generation to be a part of the mainstream culture can be identified here. The party culture of the youth and teen of America was influencing the children of Indian origin also. When the parents tried to imbibe the native culture to them, they showed their indifference by following what was forbidden. Usha valued her mother as an unimpressive woman always busy in performing domestic duties. Aparna was always worried about bringing up her daughter in a country of different culture. Whenever she complained about loneliness in the suburbs, her husband opined ‘If you are so unhappy go back to Calcutta’ (ibidem 76).Aparna is doubly marginalized and isolated. It took so many years for Usha to absorb the struggle undergone by Aparna to re-root in America. She turned towards her mother and it was her mother who helped her to overcome the betrayal of her lover.

The hyphenated identity of the second generation immigrants is narrated through the predicament of Usha. The narrator understood the emotions and feelings undergone by her parents during her stages of growth when she looked back into her past. Author too had the same experience. In *Trading Stories: Notes from an Apprenticeship* Lahiri opined,

In 1992, just before starting the writing program at B.U., I went to Calcutta with my family. I remember coming back at the end of summer, getting into bed, and immediately writing the first of the stories I submitted that year in workshop. It was set in the building where my mother had grown up, and where I spent much my time when I was in India. I see now my impulse to write this story, and several minded stories that followed, was to prove something to my parents: that I understood, on my own terms, in my own words, in a limited but precise way, the world they came from. For though they had created me, and reared me, and lived with me day after day, I knew that I was a stranger to them, an American Child. In spite of our closeness, I feared that I was an alien. This was the predominant anxiety I had felt while growing up. (81)

Deborah informed their separation after twenty three years of togetherness for she considered Usha's parents as 'quasi- in- laws'. Pranab Chakraborty was now after a married Bengali woman, 'destroying two families in the process'. (*ibidem* 81). Pranab Chakraborty's relationship with Indian woman can be identified in other words as an attempt to go back to his own native culture. In this situation Aparna consoled Deborah for what happened in their family. Both of their hearts was broken by the same man. Metamorphosis of Aparna to a strong woman can be visualized towards the end of the story. There were instances where she came to know about Usha's affairs with boys. She discovered that some of her relations had grown up to love making and living together.

It takes a long course of time for the first generation women diaspora to reconcile with the second generation. They understand very late that their attempts to up bring their kids in 'exclusive Indian way is futile'. When the story comes to a close Aparna becomes an empowered woman, who shares a happy life with her husband. Years of togetherness brings warmth in their life. Aparna recognizes that Usha is not only 'her daughter but a child of America as well'. She decides to do higher studies in library science at the age of fifty. For Aparna her life in foreign country is like living in a 'hell' in the beginning and she turns it into a 'heaven' by reconciliation. And it is sure that she must have gone through inexpressible trauma before such a compromise.

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