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## **“Intimate Strangers”: Problem of Intergenerational and Spousal Alienation in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Two Short Stories**

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Individuals’ conceptualizations of the term “family” have been diverse. While for some, “family” implies a social unit based on consanguinity, for others, relations of conjugality, or cohabitation have been deemed the constituting principles of a family.

In the present paper, however, I would examine how Jhumpa Lahiri’s two short stories---‘Unaccustomed Earth’ and ‘Hell-Heaven’---present a total deconstruction of this model of a family. Concentrating their focus on the theme of cultural alienation in immigrant families, the stories piquantly show the degree of spousal and intergenerational emotional estrangement that takes place in second generation diasporic homes. In respect to the issue of parent-child alienation, my purpose would be to explore how far the factors of intergenerational clash (dissonant acculturation, parallel dual frame of reference, high parental expectations, loss of native language etc.), enumerated by Desiree Baolian Qin, contribute to the protagonist’s emotional distancing from the parents in the story.

The postmodern era we now dwell in has posed problem to the conceptualization of many a concepts the earlier generations held sacrosanct. The monolithic grand narratives of, for example family, state, morality, have come to be frequently challenged. The task of the imaginative writer too as a result has undergone radical changes. In the present paper I would like to discuss the shifting paradigms of “family” as a concept in a postmodern globalized world and also of its depiction in the fiction of today.

Family and its depictions have for long occupied a centrality in literature and ethics. The private space of “home”/ “family”, based on the younger generations’ filial loyalty towards the older one, has been regarded as a microcosmic replica of the nation. Familial ties within the domestic space illustrate the same principle at work in the larger political domain. Just as bonds of parental affection and filial piety preserves the stability of a family, the longevity of the state too is dependent to a large extent on the willing loyalty of its citizens. In the celebrated Victorian novels, in the novels of Charles Dickens for instance, the reader has found elaborate, not to say highly sentimentalized, depiction of home and hearth. Family, with all its extended relationships of blood-line and conjugality, therefore, has been long championed as a stable unit, questioning whose authority seems almost blasphemous.

In the modern era, however, the concept of family has undergone remarkable transformation. Any simplistic definition of family as a unit constituted of individuals “related” to each other is now unavailable to sociologists. Rather, there have occurred complex alterations in the concepts of “family”, “relatives” and so on. In our present times, according to the nature of interpersonal relationships and the social context of individuals, conceptualization of the term ‘family’ has been so varied as to imply for some a unit based on consanguinity or blood relations, while for others, on conjugality or legal relations, or on relations of cohabitation. Neither of these, however, can be regarded as the sole constituting

principle of a family, because, for instance, if one defines family as based on conjugal relationships, then problem arises as to whether or not a divorce would mean the dissolution of family. Reflecting on the difficulty of reaching a stable definition of family, Irene Levin and Jan Trost comment:

“...individuals could have a variety of conceptualizations of family, for example, one for their own family of today, one for their own family in the near past, one for their family in the more distant past. We can also have a variety of more or less different perspectives of family generally. ...The individual’s interpersonal contacts and behaviour can also reflect the definition of one’s own family; for example, a friend can be included and a sibling can be excluded...there is no unity whatsoever in our definitions of family.” (350)

Acknowledging this difficulty of establishing a static or normative definition of family, we may, however, formulate a rather simple and basic way of conceptualizing family. Following Jan Trost, one can define family in terms of its two most prominent dyadic pairs, namely the parent-child pair and the spousal pair. “Family” as a term then refers to a social group consisting of at least one parent-child unit or at least one spousal unit. Nuclear family can be described as a social group constituted of at least one spousal unit and at least two parent-child units, that is, the child shares a close tie with both her parents who cohabit together as spouses.

Although there are multiple dimensions to the modern concept of family, for our present purpose we would attempt an analysis of the issue of cultural alienation that disrupts familial stability in diasporic homes and to illustrate the full complexity of this problem we would do well to concentrate our focus on two select short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction in general proffers an intensely postmodern picture of familial relationships, relentlessly falsifying all former idealizations of the homespace. Herself a second generation American, born to immigrant Bengali parents, Lahiri in her works like *Interpreter of Maladies* (collection of stories, 1999), *The Namesake* (novel, 2003) or *Unaccustomed Earth* (collection of stories 2008), focuses on the fact of intergenerational conflict within diasporic families. She interrogates the psychological dilemma of characters, often Indian immigrants to America, who must navigate between the traditional values of their homeland and their host nation. Commenting on the relatedness between the thematic concerns of her literary productions and the lived experiences of her own life, Lahiri wrote in a *Daily Beast* article on March 5, 2006:

“When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page, as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life.”

Her first novel *The Namesake* depicts the growing alienation from parents that the two second generation Indian American siblings Gogol and Sonia must continuously cope up with.

In the present paper, however, I would concentrate chiefly on two particular stories in the collection *Unaccustomed Earth*---- the opening short story that shares its title with the book, and ‘Hell-Heaven’. My purpose is to examine how they fiercely deconstruct the conventional model of family as a stable, cohesive unit. While the former concentrates its focus on the problem of parent-child estrangement in immigrant families, the latter shows a rupture in the spousal unit of second generation diasporic homes.

The problem of emotional disengagement between parent and child is rather common amongst immigrant families. Alienation, as Desiree Baolian Qin defines, is a process whereby “parents and children grow emotionally apart. It is characterized by the absence of meaningful interaction between parents and their children, and a lack of communication around academic and personal issues”(162). Such emotional distancing is a commonplace phenomenon of adolescent development, as the teenager’s increasing desire for autonomy makes her grudge parental authority. Yet, the problem turns out to be more acute, and its impact more far-reaching, in the case of immigrant families. Intergenerational cultural gap and the disparity between the values of immigrant parents and their native-born offspring contribute to their discord. After migration, children, being more exposed to the foreign culture through their multiple social intercourses, develop a culture distinct from the pre-migration one their parents still cherish. This results in cultural disharmony, or, in words of Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, “dissonant acculturation” (qtd. Qin, 163) between two generations. Related to this is what Qin terms “parallel dual frame of reference” (163). This refers to the conflict between the values of parents and children. While the parents evaluate their children’s activities in terms of the values of their homeland, according to which they themselves have been reared, their children judge their parenting methods by comparing them with those of the American parents. The obvious contrast between two sets of values, peculiar to two distinct cultural contexts, thus generates for the two generations parallel, yet incompatible expectations from each other. The present paper would explore to what extent these factors cause parent-child alienation in the textual world of ‘Unaccustomed Earth’.

The story depicts the lives of two generations of an immigrant Bengali family. Ruma and Romi are the two second generation American-Indians of the story. ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ from the very start foregrounds the fact of emotional estrangement in parent-child relationship. The lack of personal contact between Ruma and her father is suggested by the author’s reference to a number of impersonal mediums of public communication, interfering in the intimate father-daughter relationship. During her father’s prolonged Europe tour, Ruma scarcely ever has contact with him. Rather, she watches news to ensure that he is safe and there has not been any plane-crash anywhere. His experiences on the tour are communicated to her not through any personal correspondence, but through picture postcards, bereft completely of “a sense of her father’s presence in those places.”(4)

The rupture of the parent-child dyad in case of Romi, Ruma’s brother, has been so complete that we never see him in the story. Unlike Ruma, he maintains not even a tenuous connection with his family. Detached from them, he lives in New Zealand, working on the crew of a German documentary filmmaker. Emotional distancing has been so acute for him that the sale of their parental home has not “made a difference to Romi” (6).

In this connection, it may be noted that the gender of the second generation immigrant child determines to a great extent the degree of his/her alienation from parents. Immigrant girls tend to spend more time at home and consequently identify more with parental cultural values, developing less of an acculturation gap or parallel dual frame of reference than boys. Contrary to Romi’s absolute separation from the family, Ruma assimilates some of her parents’ values and evinces cultural hybridity. She has learnt to speak Bengali, however labored her attempts may have been---

“Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. ...On the rare occasions Ruma used Bengali anymore, when an aunt or uncle called from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya or Akash a Happy Birthday,



she tripped over words, mangled tenses. *And yet it was the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life.*" (12, my Italics)

She has tried to prepare Indian food for her American husband Adam and even following her mother's example has quitted job to spend more time with her family. Yet at the same time, Ruma has absorbed American cultural values. She is independent in her choice of profession and has married an American man.

'Unaccustomed Earth' records multiple instances of dissonant acculturation between parents and children. Ruma and Romi do not share their parents' longing to visit their homeland in Calcutta. Ruma's father was alive to the fact that while he and his wife "had lived for those journeys" (8), his children were reluctant to go. Ruma's mother's regret, that she can never pass on her Indian clothes to her daughter who prefers "pants and skirts" (17), amounts to a lamentation that there is none to bequeath their Indian culture to. On the other hand, Ruma seems to represent all second generation immigrants when she resents her father's disengagement from her interests. She recalls that he had not taught Romi to play baseball and had never taken his children to learn skating. His detachment from the alien culture had prevented his children from participating in typically American pleasures.

Related closely to dissonant acculturation is the parallel dual frame of reference. There is marked contrast between Indian and American parenting methods. In the Indian culture, parents play a decisive role in guiding the course of the child's development. Parental authority, however repressive and restrictive, is deemed beneficial for the child's moral growth. American parenting, on the other hand, allows the child to be independent in her decisions. Intergenerational clash ensues in immigrant families when the parents try to curb the child's freedom and the latter being acquainted with a different parenting style, resents their interference. While yet a student at the high school, Ruma had worked as a bus-girl at a local restaurant. Her parents, however, found it difficult to support her decision as it conflicted with their middleclass Indian values. It was, for them, the sort of work "their relatives in India would have found disgraceful for a girl of her class and education" (40). Ruma recalls that despite possessing a license she was not permitted to drive the family car on her own. Ruma's father had tried to decide the course of his child's future when he insisted on her taking up biology, instead of history, as her major in college. Even in her choice of an American as her life-partner, Ruma had to face stiff parental resistance from her mother.

In addition to this dual frame of reference, parental pressure in academic matters too produces lack of emotional affinity between parents and children. Unlike their American counterparts, Indian parents are often overly concerned about their children's academic performance. The child's sense of guilt at having failed to live up to their high expectations causes her emotional alienation from them. Ruma's knowledge, that her inability to get through any Ivy League college had disappointed her father, contributed to her detachment from him. She knew that Romi, notwithstanding his itinerant life, is more respected by his parents "for having graduated from Princeton and getting a Fulbright to go abroad"(37).

Decline in parent-child attachment in immigrant families is a direct result of the loss of a common language between two generations. The second generation immigrant children learn the language of their host nation, which remains forever foreign for the parents as the latter's social intercourses outside workplaces, remain constricted chiefly to co-ethnic friend-circles. This loss of a common language shared by both the generations impedes effective personal communication, for exchange of the most private feelings depends on the

speakers' spontaneous command over the vocabulary of a particular language and also the listener's ability to grasp the meaning of all the words the speaker uses. The immigrant child's estrangement from the parental language entails an inability to use complex words and phrases that "[convey] deeper meaning and [enable] intimate and effective communication between people beyond the most superficial level. Thus, while most parents and children communicate relatively well around daily life topics (e.g. 'It's time for dinner'), the more meaningful and deeper personal communication becomes endangered. In relationships, it is precisely this type of communication that contributes to emotional closeness. When this type of communication is lost in families over time, alienation may occur" (Qin, 172). Parent-child estrangement arising out of this linguistic gap is suggested piquantly by the climax of 'Unaccustomed Earth'. Ruma discovers the letter her father has meant to post to Mrs. Bagchi. It is written in Bengali, a language spoken by her parents and which Ruma is not proficient in. "Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult." (12) Her lack of command over the tongue hinders her comprehension of her father's letter and she misreads its rather innocent content (a series of mundane facts like he had planted Ruma a garden and that his grandson had learnt to swim) as a proof of his infidelity to her deceased mother. The cultural-linguistic gap prevents the daughter from understanding her ageing father's helpless longing for companionship and the emotional breach between them now seems permanent.

However, parent-child discord may vary in degree depending on the parents' ability to negotiate their original cultural values so as to make them compatible, at least to some extent, with those of their adopted homeland. Ruma's mother's ability to partake in her daughter's American culture preserves her parental bond with her. It was she, who, in their childhood, had taken Ruma and Romi to swimming lessons and in spite of her initial resistance against Ruma's marriage, had finally come to love her American son-in-law---

"Ten years ago, her mother had done everything in her power to talk Ruma out of marrying Adam... [But] Over the years her mother not only retracted her objections but vehemently denied them; she grew to love Adam as a son...Her mother would chat with Adam on the phone ...e-mailing him from time to time, carrying on a game of Scrabble with him over the Internet." (26)

In the case of Ruma's father, however, parent-child relationship suffers a complete emotional disengagement due to his inability to overcome his acculturation gap with his children. His constant consciousness of the 'difference' between his Indian culture and the creolized hybrid culture his children evince, conspicuous in the fact that "they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way" (54), causes him to grow emotionally distanced from them. For him, their dependence on the parents seems to have terminated in their infancy and gradually as they grew up, the intimate filial connection "dwindled to something amorphous, tenuous, something that threatened at times to snap" (54). Although in the story his attachment with his grandson seems to promise a reconciliation between the old father and his daughter, the initial alienation continues to persist as he refuses to be a part of Ruma's family, which he finds impossible to claim as his 'own'---

"He did not want to be part of *another family*, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it. He did not want to live in the margins of his daughter's life, in the shadow of her marriage." (53, my Italics)

Parent-child alienation, though most prominent in the first generation immigrant homes, continues even in the second generation diasporic families. The second generation immigrants often choose native residents of their host nation as their spouses and the third generation, as a result, becomes more distant from the hybrid bi-culture of their native born immigrant parents. Forever an emotional exile in their adopted homeland, the second generation immigrants too, like their parents, fail to share in the lives of their children, often born to American father or mother and embedded in the foreign culture. Lahiri's story depicts Akash, the son of Ruma by her American husband, as being still in his childhood. Ruma's parental relationship with him has not yet reached the point of being strained. However there are bleak forebodings of its imminent breakdown. Ruma's father can foresee that with the onset of adolescence "her children would become strangers avoiding her" (54), just as Ruma and Romi once did. Ruma herself is conscious of Akash's growing detachment from her. His stubborn refusal to have Indian food has made her feel "the profound barrier she assumed would set in with adolescence". (10)

Familial relationships seem even more fragile in the homes of second generation Indian-Americans. Although of the two most fundamental units of family, the parent-child unit suffers at least partial dissolution in the first generation diasporic homes, the spousal dyad remains intact. Acculturation gap alienates the two generations, but the mutually shared experience of cultural rootlessness binds the two immigrant spouses. However, in the family of Indian-American and American spouses, the cultural barrier produces an unbridgeable emotional divide between the husband and wife, even when their relations of conjugality and cohabitation remain inviolate. Ruma's bonding with her mother had helped her retain a mediated connection with her cultural origin. But after her mother's death, Ruma feels herself engulfed by a sense of exilic rootlessness and grows emotionally distant from Adam. The cultural hybridity, which is integral to her self-identity, but is not shared by her American husband, causes a dissonant acculturation within the spousal dyad. Hence, notwithstanding Ruma's seemingly happy marital life, "an awareness had set in that she and Adam were separate people leading separate lives".(26)

This problem of emotional disengagement in conjugal bond acquires another dimension in the short story 'Hell-Heaven', that follows 'Unaccustomed Earth' in the collection. Despite her sense of emotional estrangement with Adam, the fact remains that the Indian-American Ruma to a large extent does share in her husband's American way of living. However, breach in the spousal relationship seems irreparable in the case of an Indian marrying an American. Unlike the relationship between Ruma and Adam, Pranab Chakraborty's marital bond with his American wife Deborah suffers a complete rupture, whereby not only the spouses' emotional affinity but even the relation of cohabitation too ceases to exist. Deborah, from the incipient stages of their relationship, had striven to assimilate Pranab's Bengali culture. She had allowed him to teach her Bengali words and how to eat with hands instead of using forks. Far from causing Pranab to be estranged from his cultural roots, Deborah had encouraged him to maintain ties with other Bengali families and to reconcile himself with his parents. Yet the cultural gap between them remains unbridgeable. Deborah's lament, that she had failed to understand her husband, points to the fact that the difference between their respective cultures had hindered intimate interpersonal communications on which familial relationships thrive. Cultural incomprehension impedes the creation of a bond based on shared interests---

"I was so horribly jealous of you back then, for *knowing him, understanding him in a way I never could*. He turned his back on his family, on all of you, really, but I still felt threatened. I could never get over that." (82, my Italics)

Markedly contrasted with this ruptured relationship, however, is the marital bond between Usha's parents. Usha, the narrator of the story, had recorded earlier the fact of emotional discord in the relationship between her father and mother. Their marriage was not a fruition of their love, rather, it was a means to "placate" (65) their parents. Usha's father never shared his wife's interest in "music, film, leftist politics, poetry" (64) and being "wedded to his work, his research" (65), never built up a romantic attachment with his wife. Yet with growing age, their mutually suffered experience of emotional alienation from their Indian-American daughter binds them into a new relation of shared sympathy. Usha's emotional as well as spatial distance (she had to live away from home in order to attend college) from her parents has served to strengthen their bond---

"I believe my absence from the house, once I left for college, had something to do with this, because over the years, when I visited, I noticed a warmth between my parents that had not been there before ...a solidarity, a concern when one of them fell ill. My mother... had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well." (81-82).

Their initial differences notwithstanding, Usha's parents ultimately grow "fond of each other, out of habit if nothing else"(81), whereas in case of Pranab and Deborah, even long twenty-three years of marital cohabitation prove inadequate to preserve their relationship. Pranab deserts Deborah for a married Bengali woman, able to share his culture. The inevitable result of this emotional detachment, growing out of "dissonant acculturation", is absolute dissolution of the spousal dyad, a prospect only darkly foreboded in 'Unaccustomed Earth' and enacted in its full complexity in 'Hell-Heaven'.

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