

CULTURAL NOSTALGIA IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *HELL-HEAVEN*

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India has a rich tradition of ancient tales and stories. The stories not only amuse but also reflect about the culture that prevailed. Apart from excitements, adventures, and emotions, they also preach moral values and philosophy, rich in meaning. The short story as a literary genre is into existence from last two centuries. The modern time experiences short stories as a fine art. In the modern era of busy schedule and hectic life, there is an intense need for mental peace and relaxation. Short stories provide mental satisfaction in the hectic life of technologies. Many writers have used short story as a vehicle of expression. It helps in passing the culture, tradition, values and other important norms from one generation to the next. Short stories in Indian English have flourished with the efforts of a few writers. Writers of Indian diaspora like Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran, Mena Abdullah, Salman Rusdie, V.S. Naipaul, Jumpha Lahiri have added glory and dignity to short stories.

Jhumpa Lahiri has emerged on the literary horizon as a well known writer of two acclaimed books- *The Interpreter of Maladies*, her debut collection of short stories for which was honoured with the most prestigious Pulitzer Prize she has received in the year 2000. Her novel *The Namesake* was made into a major motion picture by Mira Nair. Other than Pulitzer Prize she has received many accolades like the O. Henry Award for short- stories, the PEN/ Hemingway Award for best fiction debut, The New Yorker's best debut of the year, and a Guggenheim fellowship. Born in 1967 in London, she was raised in Rhode Island and went on to study at Boston University where she earned a Ph.D in Renaissance studies. She has been a precocious child, writing since the age of seven. Born to Bengali parents, she grew in America and got married in Calcutta in the traditional Bengali style. She visits Calcutta which motivates her to have a different outlook of life and write differently about the Indian immigrants settled abroad. Calcutta has a greater impact of her mind, her writing, and her perspective to look at life. Her collection *Interpreter on Maladies*, subtitled, "Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond", reflects the impact of Bengali culture on

Lahiri. The stories deal with the theme of isolation, cultural clashes, estrangement, quest for identities, loss of faith, disillusionment etc. Being diasporic in her immigration Lahiri thinks of her roots deeply rooted in the soil of her motherland, her city Calcutta. Her periodical visits to Calcutta made her bicultural. Lahiri's recent short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) released recently. Her new book is, "a collection of short stories that all have the quietness and the cleanliness of a modern breakfast, is not about diasporic dilemmas, but about coming to terms with new habits and reconciling with broken ones" (Hazra 16).

Culture plays an important role in the growth and behaviour of an individual. It not only gives a sense of belonging but also provides set of norms and taboos for social stability. Passing the cultural aspects of life from one generation to other is done by a mother, wife, daughter, and sister. The diasporic writers too engage in cultural transmission. The displaced people try to preserve their native culture in the adopted country. Longing for the homeland, the near and dear ones, culture, tradition help the displaced to form small social circles, associations to celebrate the past memories of the native people.

'Hell-Heaven', a story from her new collection *Unaccustomed Earth* deals with the cultural conflict, generational rift, mother-daughter relationship, Indian immigrants, isolation etc. The story is narrated by Usha, the daughter of a second generation Indian immigrants settled in America. Pranab Chakraborty, an Indian immigrant befriends a married immigrant Bengali couple. Usha remembers the delightful Pranab kaku and his special place in the household. The story is about, "an immigrant man befriending a married immigrant woman and her husband, and entering the closed, precious world of an immigrant couple to upset its equanimity" (Hazra 16).

Pranab is a fellow Bengali from Calcutta. Being from a wealthy family, it allowed him to move to American for the study of engineering at MIT. The narrator calls him Pranab Kaku though technically he is not her father's brother. Lack of relational ties, homesickness, culture, Indian tradition is reflected throughout the story. Usha carries the tradition as a child y addressing Pranab as 'Kaku' which means 'uncle' and he in return refers to her mother as ' Boudi' which in Bengali means elder brother's wife. Pranab called usha's father as Shyamal Da which means elder brother. The immigrants find comfort in the acquired relations rather than inherited in the desolated place. Emotional bonding is an outcome of being from the same native. Language, culture, place brings them together in the foreign land. Pranab follows the narrator and her mother one day to be acquainted with them in

the foreign land. Homesickness, search for identity and quest for social acquaintances bring them together.

'Hell-Heaven' depicts a woman who follows and tries to pass the tradition to her daughter but without success. Boudi is a typical Bengali woman. The cultural norms of a married woman are followed by her. All the signs of a Bengali married woman she wears; like red and white Bangles, a common agnail Sari, a thick stem of vermilion powder. She has typical full round face and dark eyes typical of Bengali women she for her husband's love who fails to understand her emotional need. He lacks the mutual understanding and feeling of his wife. Alienation, isolation has become a curse for her in a foreign land. The routine life away from the homeland increased her boredom and made her so upset that she started finding emotional satisfaction in the immigrant Pranab who visits their place almost everyday. She eagerly waits, dresses up, cooks, cleans, and looks happy for the forthcoming visit of Pranab. The narrator Usha realizes later that her mother was in love with him. Boudi sticks to Bengali culture without adjusting to the American. She is like a bird trapped in a golden cage of culture and tradition.

Pranab becomes a part of the family. He takes Boudi and Usha for picnic, entertains them, cares and emotionally gets involved with the family members. Pranab meets Deborah, an American girl and falls in love with her. He introduces her to Boudi and Shyamal Da who were like family for him. Boudi who finds solace in the company of Pranab as she loves him feels cheated and terribly hurt and heartbroken. She tries to console herself with the thought that, "In a few weeks, the fun will be over and she'll leave him" (Lahiri: 2008,5). Pranab marrying an American woman was against the cultural norms. His parents were horrified by the thought of their only son marrying an American. As per the tradition they had chosen a wife for him in Calcutta. Pranab was careless and heedless of his parent's disagreement which shows the cultural disintegration.

Deborah tries to be acquainted with the Bengali culture. She attends Bengali gatherings, learns Bengali words like khub bhalo and accha and to pick up certain foods with her fingers. The cultural acquisition is limited as in larger gatherings as they kissed and held hands in front of everyone. Boudi would express her amazement, "He used to be so different. I don't understand how a person can change so suddenly. It's just hell- heaven, the difference" (5). Her regret, sorrow and annoyance is expressed in the words 'hell-heaven'. His bachelorhood was heaven and his decision to marry Deborah would create hell for him. The relation would be doomed. Their marriage was a matter of discussion and gossip amongst the immigrant Indians.

Pranab is invited by Boudi and Syamal Da for a meal before the marriage. The Indians have a tradition of inviting people before marriage to wish and give blessings. Pranab alone was invited and a special meal is prepared for him. The meal and the meeting of Pranab with the family was the only Bengali aspect of the marriage. "It would be the only Bengali aspect of the wedding, the rest of it would be strictly American, with a cake and a minister and Deborah in a long white dress and veil" (8). The marriage tie which is considered sacrosanct in India is gradually slithering away in the name of modernity and the pressure of needs of different cultural backgrounds. Boudi and the other Indian immigrants believe that American girls are not emotional; they are heartbreakers and know not the meaning of true love. Boudi outspokenly mentions, "She will leave him. He is throwing life away" (8). Boudi recollects her memory of Indian marriage but there is no trace of it in Pranab's marriage. In India it's an affair so sacred, so pious that majority of them are invited, with a priest offering worship to the god to bestow upon the newly married couple. A large feast is held and the couple is blessed by the guest too. Pranab had invited only thirty to thirty five people not very much like the Indian marriages. Of all the Bengalis he knew by then, he had invited only the narrator's family. Boudi felt restless and kept complaining about the formality of the proceedings. After the marriage Pranab's frequent visits almost came to an end. In the social gatherings their absence was blamed on Deborah. "Their absences were attributed by my parents and their circle, to Deborah" (9). Boudi's complaints were an outrage of the heartbreak she experienced. Her anger is clearly felt in the lines, " She kept speaking in Bengali, complaining about the formality of the proceedings, and the fact that Pranab kaku, wearing a tuxedo, barely said a word to us because he was too busy leaning over the shoulders of his new American in-laws as he circled the table" (8).

Deborah is blamed for Pranab's behaviour. It is universally accepted that she had stripped him not only of his origins but of his independence as well. Their marriage was invoked as a warning, and as a vindication, that mixed marriages were a doomed enterprise. They brought up their daughters in totally a different way, almost American. Though they were named Srabani and Sabitri they were called Bonny and Sara. Deborah and Pranab arranged a thanksgiving function and all of them were invited. It was a sort of reunion of all the people they had been friendly with. Though the Bengalis have no such function all the Bengalis are invited. After a gap of many years the function takes place and after few days their marriage breaks. She informs Boudi about their divorce. Their separation is the result of his extra-marital affair with a Bengali woman. He is strayed falling in love with a married woman, in the process destroying two families.

Boudi's words at last come true. The story has character who deals with betrayal. Usha is betrayed by a man she wants to marry, Boudi is betrayed by fate, and Deborah is betrayed by Pranab and his parents by him. Siddharth Shanghvi rightly points out, "The characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* are not as lightly drawn as in *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and their true displacement is not of geography but self. She unleashes people caught in states of emotional flux, having migrated from what is conventionally considered morally right or emotionally appropriate" (Shanghvi 10). The story deals with the various themes like cultural clash, extra-marital affairs, isolation, generational rift, immigration and adjustment, rootlessness, and other such things. Pranab fails to find his identity in the world where there is no sense of belongingness. Boudi portrays the trauma of cultural disorientation and displacement suffered by almost all the Indian immigrants. She suffers from cultural introspection and in return is terribly disturbed. Lahiri has given a scandalously brilliant collection and her contribution is definitely noteworthy.

Works Cited:

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